What Abuse in the Jewish Community Means to Me



Phone Call

“Do you have time to discuss something later?” the email asked.

I often get calls or emails about the podcast. Depending on the neighborhood I can usually approximate what the call will be about. Judging from this caller’s neighborhood, I thought I was about to be yelled at. Maybe I said something wrong. Probably the long intros. Or maybe I said something offensive. Or heretical. I’d find out later that night.

Yes, I replied, ready for my classic weaving in and out of fraught theological traffic.

“So, I think 18Forty needs to talk about rabbinic abuse in the Jewish community.”

Not what I was expecting.

The caller told me a story. She began asking a rabbi questions, sometimes she would text them. And slowly she noticed the responses and exchanges encroaching onto uncomfortable boundaries. She reported the rabbi to some of her colleagues and they, as far as she knows, took care of the matter. They have not been in touch since.

She called because she had been thinking more and more about this since the headlines regarding Chaim Walder subsumed our communal attention. She, however, wasn’t focusing on Walder but her own past, her own experiences, her own trauma.

It’s not a subject I was particularly eager to talk about. There are organizations and individuals whose expertise is specifically in this area. Why enter into a conversation where the stakes are so high, I asked myself.

Goldilocks

Discussing abuse can feel like a Goldilocks issue.

If you say too much, people pigeon-hole you as a “one of the advocates,” a cynical way of dismissing the very real and important work that advocates in the area of sexual abuse within the Jewish community have done to highlight and educate about this issue. But our communal attention can sometimes be fickle and impatient—stay too long on any specific issue and all of the sudden some members can dismiss cries as white noise, “it’s all they ever talk about.” The boy who cried wolf is a story about false alarms. At times, our community uses the frame of The Boy Who Cried Wolf Too Often; yes, the threat is real, but can’t we just talk about something else for once? This was my nagging concern about saying too much on this subject.

Then there’s saying too little. You need to call out specific people in power, but you are still associated with others who are associated with handling this poorly. Not saying enough or even saying anything can summon the beacon light of scrutability on yourself. Wouldn’t it be easier to just talk about Biblical Criticism again?

But talking about uncomfortable issues is part of what we do at 18Forty. We address points of dissonance and undoubtedly there is a very real dissonance created when we discover that people we admire—people who possess religious authority—were involved in abuse. It erodes our confidence in leadership, it can create enduring cynicism for how we look at rabbinic leaders, and makes us question the very institutions that are positions to preserve religious identity and community.

So we are going to talk about it. And I hope, with God’s help, it is constructive in some way for our community.

My Dissertation

On December 1, 2021, I defended my dissertation. Those who have been listening to the podcast for long enough know that I am fascinated by dissertation subjects. I ask each of our guests, “If someone gave you a great deal of money,” for some reason I always salivate when I say the words great deal of money, “to go on a sabbatical and go back to school and get a PhD, what would the subject and title of your PhD be.” The reason the questions fascinates me so much is because I struggled a great deal to figure out what my dissertation should be about. When I began the program, I had no idea what I would write about. I was in my mid-twenties and I felt like a failure. Half the reason I began a PhD was in the hopes that the three letters it provided would also offer that intrinsic sense of self-worth I was severely lacking. As I’ve come to discover, that is an awful reason to get a PhD. But that’s a big part of why I started. I finished for a different reason. During the program I began to become enthralled with the notion of sin and failure. It was midway through my PhD when I began writing my book, *Sin a gogue: Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought*. My friends in other PhD programs were stunned. You’re never going to finish if you write a book. To this day I joke, if you want to write a book fast, enroll in a PhD program and you’ll start writing something else just to procrastinate writing your actual dissertation. My book discussed the ways in which sin and failures shape individual religious lives. As I wrapped up writing my book, I realized I now had my dissertation topic. My book was about failure’s effect on individual religious development, my PhD would discuss failure’s effect on communal/institutional religious development. More precisely, I explored how religious affiliation impacts institutional responses following religious leadership crises. What do religious institutions say, how do they communicate, when their religious leader is found to be an abuser? What should they say?

> … when they [boundaries] are breached, we need to all roll up our sleeves and work together to repair them.

My dissertation—entitled *When God Is At Stake: Crisis Communications following Religious Leadership Crises*—focuses on how religious organizations communicate with stakeholders following rabbinic scandal. I examined different organizations, all within the Orthodox Jewish community, and analyzed who represented the organization, what they said and to whom they spoke in the aftermath of a rabbinic scandal. All of the cases used involved sexual scandal.

There was also something deeply personal about the subject for me. A rabbi I grew up with, a rabbi I admired, was removed from his position after decades of service due to sexual impropriety. I still don't know all the details but I know he was removed swiftly from any rabbinic roles and the communal rabbis banded together quite forcefully to ensure he didn't take any position elsewhere. But those who grew up with him were left in many ways bereft. It was never really spoken about and it felt, to me at least, like a death without any mourning rituals. It spared many from a more public *chilul Hashem*, but it left me wondering and wanting for more. Of course, there's a cost to not addressing rabbinic failure, but there's also a cost to addressing it. When rabbinic faith crumbles, don't we need help piecing it back together? My concern is that as a community, we have watched this happen so many times that we've stopped rebuilding our faith in leadership as sturdily as it was before. There's a subtle cynicism that creeps in and perhaps whispers, "hope this rabbinic faith lasts." If rabbis disappoint you enough times, you stop investing in sturdy, lasting materials when you rebuild your faith in rabbinic leadership.

Social media has changed the way we both discover and respond to instances of abuse in the Jewish community. We are exposed to much more, we can more easily hold others accountable, but at times conversations around such serious topics can devolve and distract. So I didn't weigh in much about Walder as it unfolded. In all honesty, I never read or owned any of his books and he didn't occupy a place in my life. I also paused sharing because of the attention his suicide was getting, a subject to which I am wary about casually bringing focus. Instead, I shared my own bibliography from my dissertation—the teachers who helped me educate myself with frameworks and theories to better understand the roots of this issue.

You can access my bibliography here, or see some of my favorite books on the topic here.

Some Basic Ideas that Bear Repeating

I hope that my dissertation will begin to carve out a new area of crisis communications that focus specifically on religious institutions. There is plenty of literature about how politicians, CEOs, and non-profit managers should handle crises, but not enough that explore the specific contours of religious organizations. Though most people are not crisis managers and most people will never be responsible for crafting a response for a religious institution following a crisis involving religious leadership, I think there are a few basic, even simple, takeaways that are worth sharing with a wider audience.

- **Cultivate and Trust Your Intuition:** Part of living in a religious community is developing a sense of reverence for our leaders. That is a wonderful characteristic, but it cannot come at the expense of cultivating and trusting your own intuition for what is appropriate. Much of abuse begins with the subtle erosion of boundaries. If someone ever feels that encroachment,

they should speak up, loudly, and distance themselves from such a person. It doesn't matter what their reputation is; if you feel your boundaries being encroached upon, don't dismiss that feeling. Too often we do. As a teacher this is something I am especially mindful of. You see how easy it can be to be overbearing, manipulative, how your own self-esteem can get wrapped in the way your students feel about you. Teachers and students need healthy boundaries and students should be reminded that their intuition or feelings of discomfort, if ever present, should not be ignored.

In an article entitled, "Another Scandal: Let's Not Miss the Point this Time," Mrs. Shayna Goldberg wrote the following powerful paragraph in the aftermath of a rabbinic scandal:

> I want to talk about teachers who use fear and guilt frequently and indiscriminately in order to motivate and inspire. Teachers who deliberately try to alienate their students from everything they come from—their parents, families, homes, previous schools, communities, shuls, and even shul rabbis. Teachers who break students down so that they can recreate them in their own images. Teachers who cultivate groupies and are dependent on their students for self-esteem. Teachers who lack real relationships with their own peers because they are "so devoted" to their talmidim and talmidot. Teachers who teach students not to trust themselves, not to rely on their instincts, and not to listen to their inner voices.

- **Just Because You Were Never in the Headlines Doesn't Mean You Have Never Experienced Abuse**. There are many forms that abusive relationships can take. Not all are criminal, not all are sensational, but in the context of religious life, they can be traumatic. Make sure the role models and relationships you surround yourself with are nourishing your religious life. And if there are any existing or lingering unhealthy relationships with religious role models in your life, please allow yourself to address them—don't accept it as normal. It's not. And you don't deserve it.

- **The Cost to Secondary Victims:** Most discussions of abuse focus on primary victims—people who have been directly subject to abuse. Hugh Turpin is a scholar who studied the effect of the abuse scandal in the Catholic Church on secondary people—people within the religious community whose faith has eroded as a result of disappointment in religious leaders. The erosion of faith in religious leadership can have a very serious impact on people's mental health and overall lives. So much of our religious lives are shaped though mimesis, or role modeling. We look up to our leaders as aspirational role models. Turpin calls this "credibility enhancing displays" when someone else's sacrifice and commitment helps bolster our own. But when we see hypocrisy within religious leaders, it can create a credibility undermining display, or what Turpin calls a CRUD, that erodes our own sense of confidence and meaning in our religious commitments and practices. It is important for our community to understand the wider effect that instances of abuse can have on people's commitment—even those who have

never been directly subject to abuse. If we don't address such issues as a community, we may face more broad and dire fallout as a result of failed religious leadership.

- **Don't Weaponize *Lashon Hara* to Prevent People From Speaking Out:** My dear friend—and former guest on 18Forty—Rabbi Daniel Feldman literally wrote the book on *lashon hara*. It is a tour de force, discussing the prohibition in the modern era. Following the Walder scandal, he published a piece addressing how the prohibition of *lashon hara* is often misrepresented to prevent people from speaking out against abuse. In his article, entitled "Lashon Hara and Abuse Cover Ups," he writes:

  > Nonetheless, one thing is clear: The precious value of lashon hara was never intended to allow evil to flourish, or to silence the oppressed. It is, by design, coupled in the Torah with the imperative to save the vulnerable. It is more protective, not less: a mandate to save body and soul, mind and psyche at once, to value all the components of humanity together. A false piety that allows suffering to exist through silence or inaction betrays the values of lashon hara more than any harsh words ever could.

Before you silence someone under the guise of your misunderstanding of a serious prohibition, make sure you really understand what *lashon hara* is meant to protect.

- **Don't Lose Your Capacity to Experience Reverence:** I don't take all rabbis seriously. Working for Jewish organizations and studying religious crisis and failure has certainly taken its toll. I also read the headlines. But I won't allow my capacity to believe in righteousness to be completely eviscerated. Cynicism is a dangerous feeling. It can erode our capacity to form trusting relationships and undermine our nourishing religious life. I don't blame anyone for becoming cynical, Lord knows we all have our reasons. Find ideas and people you can continue to believe in. Not a belief like in a deity or that any individual is perfect, but a belief that holiness and sincerity can be found and embodied in this world—not by many, but by some. Rabbi Yitzchok Breitowitz wrote a moving reflection for *Jewish Action*, entitled "When Leaders Fail: Healing From Rabbinic Scandal," following a rabbinic scandal. The entire essay is worth reading. He rightfully and eloquently highlights the dangers of enduring cynicism:

> We live in the era of the fallen hero—indeed the tragic hero who is destroyed by the fatal flaw that lies within. In all walks of life, people whom we admired have disappointed us with their failures and weaknesses. We have become disillusioned and cynical. Unfortunately, even within the Torah camp, leaders in whom we placed our trust have betrayed us. And while the overwhelming majority of rabbis, teachers and spiritual mentors perform their tasks with integrity and commitment—and we should never make the mistake of condemning the many because of the sins of the few—many of us have lost faith in the very people who are supposed to inspire us in our faith. We see them engulfed in sexual scandals, child abuse, political intrigue, bribery and fraud. Some are accused of direct wrongdoing, others of cover-up and dissembling. Many have lost faith not only in those who are supposed to transmit Torah but, to some degree, in the goodness and morality of the Torah itself. God's name and His glory quite literally have been besmirched, the very definition of chillul Hashem.
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> In some ways, this cynicism and loss of faith may be a greater tragedy than even the very real pain suffered by innocent victims (a pain that I certainly do not want to minimize in any way). The tragedy of cynicism presupposes that everything is tainted. Nothing good is real. No one is sincere. Everything is a gimmick. Everyone is a charlatan and a faker. And what is the use of pretending otherwise? These attitudes suck up hope the way a fire sucks up oxygen. They destroy spiritual strivings. They destroy hope for the future. They engender passivity and bitterness and ultimately become a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeatism and hopelessness.

I don't want to allow that to happen to me and I don't want it to happen to our community. That does **not** mean we stay silent and it doesn't mean we don't speak up when we see something wrong. It means that we are careful about who we prop us as role models, we are careful about what types of behavior and stories we valorize, and we ensure that even with all of the ugliness in the world we still grab hold of some small space where we can experience sincerity and holiness.

In his final episode of *The Tonight Show*, Conan O'Brien shared a similar sentiment:

> "Please do not be cynical. I hate cynicism – it's my least favorite quality, and it doesn't lead anywhere. Nobody in life gets exactly what they thought they were going to get. But if you work really hard and you're kind, amazing things will happen."

That Phone Call

And this brings me back to the phone call I began with. When I started this topic, I reached out again to this individual and asked her if she would agree to be interviewed. She was never in a headline and her experience with abuse was far more ambiguous than most of the others that get attention. But that is why I wanted to speak with her. She lived in the gray—that murky area of clear disappointment and boundary crossing, but ambiguous enough that it never became criminal. It was an experience that I think far too many may have had themselves.

For a host of reasons, she graciously declined. But she did send me an email with a short reflection. Her phone call gave me the impetus and resolve to discuss this topic here, so I think it is only appropriate that I end this reflection with her words:

> I am eternally grateful to the mentor I told my story to who said to me, "you need to bring this to someone's attention. I believe you. And I am going to them with you."
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> That made all the difference. Because it meant that after carrying this unspeakable burden alone for too long, I finally wasn't alone. Yes, I had to open up to another person, and a rabbi at that. But this time, because you came with me, I didn't need to risk the rabbi not believing me. Or not understanding the import of what I was saying. Or not taking responsibility for it.
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> So I will say this: yes, 100%, believe us! But It's not enough to just believe us. We need you to put your money where your mouth is. To put your own reputation at stake in order to fix what's wrong in our community.
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> Is it uncomfortable? Absolutely it is. But sometimes discomfort is a price we must pay to uphold the foundations of our value system and of our community.
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> *"Asu siyag laTorah:"* make fences around the Torah. Boundaries protect the Torah and the individuals who uphold it. We must all work to construct and maintain these boundaries. And when they are breached, we need to all roll up our sleeves and work together to repair them.
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> Our communal safety depends on it.