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WAGZ

# Out of the shadows

A look at the people and the organizations  
breaking the taboo of speaking about  
sexual abuse in the ultra-Orthodox  
and religious communities

COVER

# The Silence breakers

More and more victims and communal organizations are lifting the veil of silence over the issue of sexual abuse in religious communities, but are they loud enough to stop the sexual predators?

IN RECENT years, organizations are making efforts to lift the veil of secrecy on sexual abuse in the religious sector. (Illustrative/Ronen Zvulun/Reuters)

• ORIT ARFA  
Photos by SHARON ALTSCHUL

**M**ina Karp can't really remember exactly how old she was when her life changed forever. She must have been six years old, she told the *Magazine*, in her first interview with the press. She had been living in Jerusalem's haredi (ultra-Orthodox) neighborhood of Sanhedria. Her mother agreed to let her go to synagogue on her own. The young Karp was excited because there was an *aufruf* in which a bridegroom is called to the Torah for a Shabbat celebration.

During the celebration, a young haredi man, about 15 or 16 years old, motioned to her and asked her if she wanted to help make "goody bags" and get some candy. Of course she did.

"I found myself going after him, and we went quite a ways, and I didn't understand why we walked so far.... He took me to a dark storage room, and he took off my stockings – because I was haredi – and the 'touching' [of his and her genitals] began. That's when something else in my life began."

What began were years of confusion, shame, guilt, helplessness, even more incidents of abuse by others, and, until recently... silence. She never told her mother, out of fear that her naive, conservative mother would yell at her or brush it off; nor did she tell anyone in her community. She kept it in, not really understanding the exact psychological gravity of such an event until she became an adult.

"I thought that talking about it would be part of my redemption," the 28-year-old said of her recent decision to speak out.

Karp eventually married and, together, she and her husband left the haredi fold, but the healing process consumes her daily. Living a new life in Ashkelon, Karp hasn't followed efforts in the haredi world, and in the religious Jewish world in general, to prevent what she considers "soul murder."

The last few years have seen an increasing number of efforts – some organized, and some grassroots – to lift the veil of silence over a topic fraught with fear, shame and stigma among both victims and religious community leaders.

HIGH-PROFILE cases involving rabbinic figures across all Jewish denominations in the US and Israel in the last few years have catapulted the problem into the public eye.

There's the case of Rabbi Mordechai (Moti) Elon, once a leading figure in the religious-Zionist world, convicted of sexually assaulting a boy in 2013.

There's the "mikve rabbi," Rabbi Barry Freundel of Washington, DC, who last year was convicted on 52 counts of voyeurism for planting video cameras

to peep at female congregants as they immersed themselves in the ritual bath, naked.

There's the case of the "sauna rabbi," Rabbi Jonathan Rosenblatt of Riverdale Jewish Center, who made headlines when *The New York Times* reported on allegations that he would invite young men to sit with him in the sauna and talk about life, naked. He has maintained his pulpit, to controversy.

The *Times* recently reopened the case of Marc Gafni, once a shining figure in the Jewish renewal movement, who has, to the chagrin of Jewish leaders who have recently come out with a petition against him, restarted his educational activities amid looming accusations of sexually inappropriate relationships with congregants.

Among members of the Jewish community, the general reaction has largely been disgust; still, the cult of personality surrounding some of these rabbis, often described as charismatic and brilliant, has given them license to persist in their work in Jewish education.

IN 2011, New York-based psychologist, researcher and author Dr. Michael Salamon came out with the book *Abuse in the Jewish Community: Religious and Communal Factors that Undermine Apprehension of Offenders and the Treatment of Victims* (Urim Publications) to both community praise and "hate mail." He felt compelled to write the book after his private practice in the Five Towns in New York received many victims of abuse from Jewish and Catholic communities alike.

Statistics estimate that generally one in four women and one in five to six men are sexually abused by the time they reach the age of 18. How religious communities figure into this statistic is difficult to determine because victims are often nervous to come forward.

"People don't believe that others will believe that what they're saying is the truth," Salamon said in a telephone interview from his office.

He offered three major reasons drawn from Jewish tradition as to why Orthodox Jewish communities – victims and leaders alike – tend to be discreet about incidents of abuse: *mesira*, a term used to describe informing on religious Jews to secular authorities; the prohibition against *lashon hara*, talebearing; and *hillel Hashem*, desecrating God's name by portraying Jews in a negative light.

Salamon believes that sexual abuse is so egregious as to justify the common term "soul murder" to describe it.

"You can manipulate a person to the point that they don't feel like they have any control of their body or parts of their body. They feel violated. That's something that can impact them the rest of their lives. It's a major trauma."

The gravity of sexual abuse, he believes, should trump concerns over *mesira*

and *hillel Hashem*, so that incidents should be reported to secular authorities.

"There's nobody in a local community who's trained in evaluation and investigation, only properly trained police know what they're doing," he said.

SALAMON WAS among the speakers at the second annual international conference of "Shedding Light on the Darkness of Abuse," held in December at the Ramada in Jerusalem by the Tahel Crisis Center for Religious Women and Children. It brought together rabbis, educators and therapists from all over the world for panels, lectures and practical workshops aimed at preparing Jewish community leaders to understand how to prevent and grapple with cases of sexual abuse and domestic violence.

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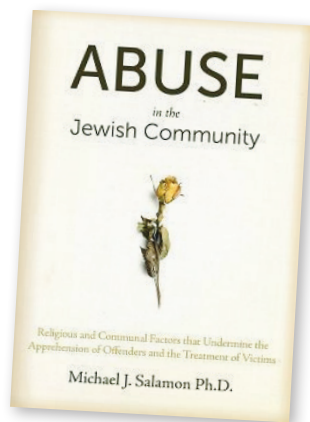
"We're seeing a lot of different types of communities getting involved today, even ultra, ultra-Orthodox," Debbie Gross, founder of Tahel, told the *Magazine* on the first day of the conference. "It's not just modern rabbis getting involved today. It's a plague. It's a virus, and they have to deal with it."

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**PARTICIPANTS AT** the second annual international conference organized by Tahel, the Crisis Center for Religious Women and Children.



**PSYCHOLOGIST AND** Author  
Dr. Michael Salamon.



**'YOU CAN'T** hide behind Judaism,'  
Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau told the crowd.



**DEBBIE GROSS** is the founder of Tahel.

every community realizes that it has to monitor the area of sexual abuse," said Gross.

Two similar conferences aimed at the haredi community have also been held in recent months, one geared for rabbis and another toward "rebbezins" – their wives. Another conference geared to the haredi press is forthcoming to give journalists the tools for raising the sensitive issue among their religious readers.

AVIGAYIL KARLINSKY, a grassroots haredi activist behind the "Lo Lishtok" ("Thou Shalt Not Be Silent") Facebook page, believes conferences like these are signs of a breakthrough. The "Lo

Lishtok" page was an outgrowth of the attention she gave the issue on her personal Facebook page, in which she compared a rapist to a terrorist, triggering responses from haredi victims of rape.

"People started to write to me personally about what they experienced, and they cried to me," Karlinsky told the *Magazine* in a telephone interview. Soon enough, her personal page became a forum for discussion on the issue, but as complaints surfaced against posting "smut," she decided, along with Yaakov Matan, Rachel Roshgold and Tzviki Fleishman, to create an official, social media platform for the airing of anonymous stories of abuse in the

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*– Debbie Gross,  
founder of Tahel*



**INTERVIEWEES BELIEVE** a lot more has to be done, to stop sexual predators, who take advantage of their authority.



**INCREASED SUPERVISION** in religious communities and honest discussion in schools and within families can help curb abuse, says Salamon.

haredi world and for providing useful information on the topic. It garnered 1,000 members within the first week, and within a few months it grew to over 3,000 members.

"It felt good for them to finally speak about something that was a secret in their heart," said Karlinsky.

Today, she and her team provide emotional support to victims of abuse, referring them to organizations and individuals that could provide them with professional guidance and advice. In one instance, with rabbinic approval, she referred a woman who was serially raped to a haredi contact in the police, after the rabbi whom she had approached didn't take action. However, Karlinsky has stated that, in many cases, rabbis will handle cases far more effectively than the police.

In the religious-Zionist world, the Takana forum was founded 11 years ago after complaints women had lodged of sexual harassment and abuse were rebuffed by community leaders.

"When they tried to pass this along to other people, they felt attacked," said Yehudit Shilat, the director of the non-profit.

Takana has created a model where victims (men, women and children) of some type of sexual abuse could discreetly have their complaints heard and investigated.

The Takana forum seeks to handle complaints through community channels and with the cooperation of the accused. Generally, women often shy away from going to the police, out of fear of causing turmoil within the community.

"We prefer to deal with problems through cooperation because we're not a court and we have no real authority to force someone to accept our decisions, so we work with the cooperation of those who cause harm," said Shilat.

Takana's main goal is to ensure that abusers are robbed of their ability to cause harm, usually by having them step down from their positions and agreeing not to engage in any type of ac-



**'THERE'S A** long way to go, but it's starting,' says grassroots haredi activist Avigayil Karlinsky.

tivity, from teaching to counseling, that opens the door to abuse.

Only if the accused refuses to cooperate or breaks the agreement does the Takana forum release the name, as a public service, as was the case with Elon (who, nevertheless, is reportedly continuing to teach Torah).

*'There's got to be an honest approach to this so that children know how to deal with this and parents know how to deal with it, clearly'*

– Michael Salamon, psychologist

All complaints are taken seriously and as truthful at face value. "It's hard to tell such a story," Shilat said. "Why would anyone want to lie?"

SOME PEOPLE interviewed believe a lot more has to be done, particularly to stop sexual predators who take advantage of their authority and reputation to harass, manipulate and sexually abuse women and eventually destroy families.

One Orthodox man who has been following cases of sexual abuse within the religious community was very eager to speak to a reporter, anonymously, and to name names of alleged abusers who he claims are not being properly investigated, although liability for defamation limits the press from airing allegations against specific people.

"I would love to destroy these people," the man said, clearly frustrated. He named an American rabbi in Telz Stone who he said manipulated a woman who sought his counsel into an inappropriate relationship. He accused another rabbi of having men rape his wife in his presence.

Their abuse, he said, goes unchecked in large part because women feel embarrassed, shy and scared to come forward, and community leaders are reluctant to question the image of their respected rabbinic leaders.

Daniella Shulman, a woman in her 30s who now lives in New York and who works with organizations preventing child abuse, agreed, for the first

time, to publicly go on record about her experience with an Orthodox rabbi who she said manipulated her into an inappropriate sexual and emotional relationship. She hopes coming out will inspire other women to do the same and to contact her if they experienced something similar.

The incident occurred while she was a student at Michlalah College for Women in Jerusalem's Bayit Vegan neighborhood. At the time, she had questions about Judaism, and he offered to provide answers. Today, she is on a crusade to out the Beit Shemesh resident so that he stops hurting others; he continues to travel abroad teaching Torah.

"In short, what he does is that he creates very close relationships with girls and eventually creates a segue into an inappropriate physical relationship from a strong emotional dependency," Shulman told the *Magazine*. "He creates absolute trust on the part of young, vulnerable girls, oftentimes in the specific cases when they're already

being 'pure' or 'virginal' or, worse, that the victim was somehow complicit, and therefore the victim is to blame," Salamon explained.

WHILE SALAMON believes more can still be done to stop sexual abuse in Jewish communities, he has noticed positive change and improvement in the last four years, particularly in the United States, although the problem cuts across Jewish communities around the globe.

Only recently, he said, are Jewish community leaders creating a language, protocol and forum for communities to discuss sexual abuse, entering territory left unexplored even by the talmudic sages.

"If you want to get really into the history of it, you go back to the Gemara," he said. "The Talmud says there was a story about a teacher doing inappropriate things, and it's only the later commentators that spoke about their inappropriate things as being sexually related."

At the Tahel conference, Chief Rabbi David Lau took a proud, principled and firm stance against any type of abuse and any type of justification for it. "You can't hide behind Judaism, which really teaches the opposite," he told the crowd of over 500.

It's natural, Salamon said, that sexual predators seek positions of authority over women and/or children, such as teacher, coach or therapist.

As for children, he believes increased supervision, particularly in very religious communities, will curb incidents of abuse, along with open, honest discussion in schools and within families.

As an example of community naiveté, he offered the story of a religious minor who once spoke to her parents about the bus driver touching her "cookies," and her parents realized only later that "cookies" referred to her privates.

"There's got to be an honest approach to this so that children know how to deal with this and parents know how to deal with it, clearly," Salamon said.

Karp, now a mother, said she makes an effort to discuss, as best and as appropriately as possible, "the birds and the bees" with her girls, an informal education that might have given her the knowledge and strength to do what she should have done in that storage room over 20 years ago – to scream "No!" and run away.

Karlinsky is optimistic that real change is on the horizon. She cited a rigorous teacher training program to be launched in the ultra-Orthodox community of Betar Illit as an example of thoughtful, dedicated effort being made not only to overcome the plague but to even set an example on how to vanquish it.

"There's a long way to go, but it's starting," said Karlinsky. "If it continues like this, there will even be lower statistics in the haredi population than in the general population." ■