

The Enemy Within: When Trust is Destroyed

By Tanya Goldfrad

I was raised in a classic “out-of-town” day school. In my home town we weren’t flush with Orthodox Jews, they were few in number, and possibly that’s why each member of the community was valued. One of the many lessons I learned throughout my education was the need for introspection and Yashrus (*literally - straightness or uprightness*). Yashrus like so many words - doesn’t translate into just one word. It’s a concept. It basically conveys the idea that the letter of the law is not enough, that there is the scope and context to consider. There is the spirit of the law. It means that the end doesn’t justify the means. When we aspire to be true servants of God our desires become aligned with His will. And we bring honor to His name, not desecration.

Frequently, throughout history, the Orthodox world has come under attack from dissenters and outsiders, often for purely anti-Semitic reasons. However, many times we have to take a look at ourselves in the mirror and evaluate our actions. Are they congruent with our real job of sharing the Oneness of the King of kings? Are they self-serving? Are they deceptive? The worst situation is when someone clothes themselves in an air of Torah, and uses it to damage others and desecrate the very world of Torah they contrive to represent. But there is something even worse than this: when the very people who should be protecting and defending the victims of abuse, choose to instead champion the perpetrators.

This year reading Parshat VaYishlach was painful as always, when once again Dina’s abduction and rape by Shechem was recounted. I have a few people in my life who have been impacted by sexual assault. There are many triggers they face each day, but usually Dina’s tale is a bitter reminder of the pain. In her weekly Parsha group, a prominent teacher shared a new insight that I thought might help. I was sure of it! But to my surprise, it didn’t. It was met by disgust and outrage. Why? Because someone that week who had wrapped themselves in the mantle of Torah was being charged with multiple counts of sexual misconduct and molestations. A well-respected author of children’s books was accused of sexually molesting boys, girls and married women. He had been seeing these people in the form of a therapist and through his intimate knowledge of them is suspected of this unspeakable crime. What I failed to take into consideration when reaching out to this party was that the pain, although already six years later, was still all too raw. Even after six years of therapy, the wounds of deception and pain were being aggravated once again.

According to the CDC, about 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 13 boys experience sexual abuse at some point in childhood. With 91% of child sexual abuse being perpetrated by someone

the child or child's family knows. Those are the stats. Now we can bury our heads in the sand and say, "Not in our community!" but denial won't stop the problem, it doesn't make it magically go away. Rather, it makes it fester and grow. If you have a family member with asthma, pretending it isn't there won't heal anyone. They will continue to suffer and have their health degrade. Why would anyone think mental illness/sexual assault can simply be hushed up without repercussions? Victims of any crime need to heal. For survivors of sexual assault, the healing is more complicated. It touches their self concept and trust in the outside world. They tend to relive the situation over and over again, asking themselves how they are responsible. Their lives are tainted and impacted on multiple levels. Many of these survivors never heal. Some even become perpetrators themselves. It breeds a cycle of abuse.

Now when you add into the mix that the offender was a parent, or religious leader, a well respected member of the community, or a trusted therapist, the situation becomes volatile. Why? Because of the facade. The acts were perpetrated by taking advantage of their position in others' lives. Then the inherent evil that was committed, continues to pervade. A parent is supposed to be the child's greatest defender and protector. Not the abuser. A spiritual leader is supposed to inspire us to become better servants of God. A pillar of the community is supposed to reinforce the community, not undermine it by feeding off of weak links. A therapist who we trust to help and heal the deepest part of who we are, undermines that very goal when they use their knowledge to hunt their prey and take advantage of them. Each of these four parties has destroyed trust and the bedrock of community. Anyone in the community acting in this way needs to be dealt with as a *michshol larabim* (*obstacle or stumbling block for many*). These accounts of assault don't just affect individuals. They impact families. Many multi-generationally. They shake our trust in our community and its leaders. Undermining trust in our leaders is the last thing a people which wishes to transmit its rich legacy to the next generation can afford to do.

While one accused sexual offender languishes in a coma after an attempt to kill himself, the author/therapist committed suicide and ended his life, proclaiming that he was innocent and a victim of slander. Is it possible? Certainly. But he never allowed for the police investigation to clear his name. He never allowed for his 20 + accusers to face him in court. But this was just wave one of the tsunami. The next was the guilt that he managed to spread on people who had reported his behavior. Then finally, the outlandish defense of community newspapers and Roshei Yeshiva calling on his death as one of a martyr and that he had been wrongly defamed.

I want to know what the long game for these decisions is. Have these Roshei Yeshiva bothered to interview the multiple (20+, not one) victims? Have they looked into how

many marriages were terminated because of the exploits of one possibly insatiable man? How many of the victims (all from the community that endowed him with rockstar status) are no longer religious? Oh, and the worst part of this response is that it simply silences people in the future from coming out and reporting abuse. In one chilling move, perpetrators have been given free rein, reinforcing the practice that when a charge is brought against an abuser, the victim is told that they are the perpetrators and that they are guilty!

One of the defining moments of a community is how we respond to challenges. How we grow and transform, usually together. According to the Israeli board of statistics, happiness and lifespan are greatest in the Ultra-Orthodox communities. Despite potential poverty and fewer luxuries. It has been attributed to the tight and cohesive community life. Sometimes this cohesiveness comes at a cost. People who are fearful of others knowing their troubles, choose to hide them. I can't tell you how often as a pharmacist, I have received requests to put medication in bags before someone sees what is being dispensed. Sometimes this cohesiveness causes issues. We must stop being afraid to ask for help, because it will make us look bad.

This year for Rosh Hashana I prepared simanim for my neighbor and I reached out to another neighbor with a young family, dealing with Corona at the time and I asked, "Should I send up simanim?" She replied, "No need. Everything is under control." Now I know everything is not under control because she has small children in a small apartment and frankly sounds travel. But she would rather I think all was well than receive a few simanim? It's about perception. Why are we so focused on perceptions versus what is best for our families? Why would someone cover up any abuse to protect their family name instead of working hard to get their family helped? This type of thinking empowers perpetrators to feed off of the community. Perpetrators know that this fear of exposure will be enough to dissuade victims from going to authorities and seeking proper help. **That is why it is so essential to change this type of narrow thinking.** A shift needs to take place. Lives shouldn't be ruined because of cancer in the family or someone leaving the fold. Instead, the community needs to come out and be the community that loves and gives support, without recrimination.

We also need to handle problems and challenges like adults. In today's world, secrets are no longer hidden. In my humble opinion, for most cases that is a good thing. One of my favorite teachings from the Ramban focuses on how Avraham was tested 10 times because God was sure of him being able to handle it and that the test would refine Avraham even further. As a community we need to look realistically in the mirror. We need to see and address how we must transform. Our job is to serve the Almighty and ensure the transmission of that service is transferred to the next generation. We know

how to respond to outside challenges. We must learn to respond better to internal ones. Abusing and terrorizing people can't be tolerated. Hushing people up with the threat of "It's Lashon Hara" is evil. Assaulting and manipulating women is very severe. It is a breach of modesty and Arayot (forbidden relationships). How on earth can that be hushed? And what Rabbi would look away from this?

The idea that those who don't follow the party line can be lost to us is incorrect. We are descendants of 12 tribes. Each with their strengths and weaknesses, each with their own color and uniqueness. We are strong enough as a vibrant people to have the variations from within and accept one another, even with our frailties. But we can't tolerate undermining the faith and trust in the community. Undermining the message that no one is above Halacha. We have laws, such as Yichud, that were clearly violated at the very least. Why is that not being addressed? Why instead of embracing the victims and helping them heal is salt being poured into their wounds? How can they heal and ever respect and love Torah if it's used as a weapon to continue manipulating them? No one should be entitled to be above question, even if they have been steeped in Torah learning. Why? Because we have seen that manipulated and corrupted. Offenders need to be tried. Victims need to get the support and love to heal. And we need to build a community with enough self-confidence to differentiate between always being on the defense and looking inward and thinking how we can help build and strengthen the next link in the chain of Sinai. Duplicity undermines that goal. Failing to be trustworthy does as well. Let's change this.