

VAAD HARABBONIM
RABBINICAL COUNCIL OF GREATER BALTIMORE
April 11, 2007

Abuse in Our Community

There is no subject more painful for us to discuss than the issue of sexual abuse within our community. Yet at this point we believe it is the subject most necessary to address. We must acknowledge that this horrible form of abuse exists — and has existed for generations — in our community as well. This issue must be confronted directly and we believe that this discussion can be a first step towards the necessary and achievable goal of ridding our community of this scourge.

We feel it essential to discuss this matter directly with you, as the greatest allies of the abuser are ignorance and silence. The abuser preys on people who cannot understand that what he is doing to them is so very wrong. And the abuser thrives in an environment where he is confident that his victims will not report what they have experienced or where their reports of abuse will not be taken seriously. We therefore urge you to discuss this matter in a sensitive and non-alarming manner with your children so that they will clearly understand that they should forcefully refuse and immediately report inappropriate touch. They need to know that should, Heaven forbid, something like this ever occur to them, they will have somewhere to turn. And if they turn to you, you must respond compassionately, deliberately and with competent rabbinic and/or professional guidance, understanding that the thoughtful measure of your response will have enormous impact on your child's future.

We feel additionally compelled to discuss this issue openly in order to assist — in some small way — in the healing of survivors. Abuse often creates terrible confusion in the minds of its victims who may not understand the terrible wrong they have experienced, or who may blame themselves for the abuse. Addressing the issue clearly and definitively allows survivors of abuse to see that our contempt is reserved for those who violated them, whereas they — the survivors — are so richly deserving of our compassion and our respect.

We cannot speak with certainty to the prevalence of abuse in our community. It is clear however that any single abuser will often have many victims. Those who abuse within the family — and this horror absolutely does happen — often victimize numerous family members. A coach, camp counselor, teacher, principal or rabbi who abuses his charges throughout his career has had the opportunity to abuse hundreds of children. We can say without question that across the nation we have had prolific abusers in these positions, and consequently, we have hundreds of survivors in our communities.

The damage that abuse can cause is devastating and potentially life altering: it commonly ruins an individual's sense of self, their ability to trust others, and their ability to engage in a healthy intimate relationship. Furthermore, there is a growing consensus amongst mental health professionals serving the observant community that many of our "teens-at-risk" issues were generated by incidents of abuse. The risks of suicide, alcohol and drug abuse and other self-destructive behaviors are all increased dramatically by abuse.

As such it is already well established by our own *Poskim* that an abuser is to be considered a *Rodef* (literally, a pursuer), effectively poised to destroy innocent lives and, therefore, virtually all means may be used to stop him and bring him to justice. Communities and day schools — with

the blessing of *Gedolei Yisroel* — have encouraged and facilitated the reporting of these crimes to the local authorities, who are most equipped to investigate and prosecute these complex claims.

In the past, many mistakes were made in handling these situations. Abusers were often not recognized for what they were, as it was too difficult to believe that otherwise good people could do such things, nor was it sufficiently appreciated what damage such acts could cause. It was often thought that if the abuser was spoken to or warned, and perhaps moved to a different environment, he would never do these things again. In responding this way many terrible mistakes were made and tragic consequences resulted. We have seen too often the immediate or eventual failure of these “behind-the-scenes agreements” to keep the perpetrators away from others. Naïveté and a lack of understanding of the insidious nature of these perpetrators have allowed the toll of victims to rise. These failures haunt us — but they also motivate us to respond more effectively and wisely in the future.

An abuser is not simply a lustful person, plagued by a *Taavah* — a desire — that can be addressed with sincere *Teshuva*. He has a severe illness, that may be incurable, and that is at best enormously difficult to manage. Publicizing his status as an abuser — while causing enormous damage to his own family — may be the only way to truly protect the community from him.

Can we produce the same result — safety for the community — without going public? We do not know if we can. We do know that we as rabbis are not qualified to manage the behavior of such a person such that we can confidently say that he poses no threat to his community. Understanding, treating and managing this illness is a highly complex field that we are not properly trained in. There are specialized professionals in this area whose experience and expertise we must call upon to guide us. They — as experts in this most complex field — may consider specific situations to be safely manageable using a professionally designed — and consistently and vigilantly guided — protocol for the individual abuser. But in many cases the most effective method to protect the community will be in publicizing the abuser’s identity. In all situations we must be mindful that our obligation to protect future potential victims of sexual abuse is paramount.

A final word about false accusations: We are very sensitive about the possibility of false accusations which, themselves, cause enormous pain and damage. This obliges us, therefore, to ensure at the outset that claims and counterclaims are investigated objectively and fairly by those most trained and equipped to do so.

The issues discussed here are most complex and very painful. But they must be discussed and this problem must be addressed.

Allow us to summarize with a few action points.

1. We must educate our children about inappropriate touch, so that they will clearly understand that they should forcefully refuse and immediately report inappropriate touch.
2. Credible concerns of abuse must be reported to the authorities who have the expertise, experience and wisdom to thoroughly and responsibly investigate them. We — as Rabbonim — are committed to facilitating and supporting this process.
3. We must have — and we are in the process of developing — a clear approach to protecting our community, both here and elsewhere, from established or strongly suspected abusers. This approach could possibly include a professionally designed — and consistently and vigilantly guided — management protocol for the individual. Many situations will require the drastic step of publicizing the identity and the dangers posed by the perpetrator.

Effective action can really go a long way. If we can begin to approach this issue wisely and

confidently we can create a climate where abuse would rarely occur and where, if it does happen, it would always be addressed promptly.

We pray that Hashem spare us such tragedies in the future, and that He grant us the wisdom and the courage to responsibly address the threats we currently face.

Signed

Rabbi Elan Adler, Moses Montefiore Anshe Emunah Hebrew Congregation

Rabbi Reuben Arie, Ohr HaMizrach Congregation

Rabbi Menachem Goldberger, Congregation Tiferes Yisroel

Rabbi Emanuel Goldfeiz, Congregation Beit Yaakov

Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb, Cong. Shmorei Emunah

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, Bnai Jacob Shaarei Zion

Rabbi Dovid Heber, KAYTT and Star-K

Rabbi Moshe Heinemann, Agudath Israel of Baltimore and Star-K

Rabbi Yaakov Hopfer, Sheiris Yisroel

Rabbi Shmuel Kaplan, Chabad Lubavitch of Baltimore

Rabbi Nesanel Kostelitz, Machzikei Torah Congregation (Sternhill's) / Community Kollel

Rabbi Chaim Landau, Ner Tamid

Rabbi Elchonon Lisbon, Bais Lubavitch

Rabbi Sheftel Neuberger, Ner Israel Rabbinical College

Rabbi Gavriel Newman, Beth Jacob Congregation (merging with Beth Tfiloh

Rabbi Shlomo Salfer, Winands Road Synagogue Center

Rabbi Jonathan Seidemann, Kehilath B'nai Torah

Rabbi Simcha Shafran, Adath Yeshurun and Secretary of Bais Din of Baltimore

Rabbi Mordechai Shuchatowitz, Agudath Israel of Greenspring and Av Beis Din of Baltimore

Rabbi Shmuel Silber, Suburban Orthodox

Rabbi Amrom Taub, Arugas Habosem Congregation

Rabbi Y. Zvi Weiss, Bais Haknesses of Baltimore

Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg, Beth Tfiloh

Additional signatures will be appended later, as not all of the Rabbis available during the Pesach season.

