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The Human Spirit: Not in my school

By BARBARA SOFER
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Once upon a time, I was roommates at an educational conference with psychologist Debbie Gross. As her phone rang every half-hour, day and night, I felt a growing panic. Gross heads the Crisis Center for Religious Women, an organization that raises awareness, suggests means of protection and offers healing help for those who have been sexually abused. Every call was about a different case of sexual abuse in the religious community, each one worse than the last.

From December 1 to 3, the Crisis Center for Religious Women is hosting an international conference called The Jewish Community Confronts Violence and Abuse, to be held at Jerusalem's Ramada Hotel. This couldn't have taken place a decade ago. Sign up today.

Just to give you a sense of the content, in one time slot you have a choice among: 1. Collaborative treatment approach to incest; 2. Preventing child sexual abuse in the religious community; 3. Community programs to combat domestic violence; 4. Spiritual abuse; and 5. Trauma therapy.

Spiritual abuse is a new category, says Gross. It's about women whose husbands' increased religiosity isn't about getting closer to the Creator, but controlling their wives' behavior and isolating them. Sound familiar? Gross founded the Crisis Center for Religious Women in her Har Nof kitchen over two decades ago, following a number of cases of sexual abuse. Israel's first rape crisis centers opened in the late 1970s, but Jerusalem's women believed they, their husbands and their children needed guidance that would suit their religious lifestyle. Attitudes towards modesty, relationships with religious authorities and community attitudes were different. Even talking about sex was different.

But most of all, there was that pervasive myth that such perversity didn't exist in the idealized religious community.

Not in my community. Not in my school.

That fantasy seems to have been debunked. Among those who will open the December conference will be Mayor Nir Barkat and Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi David Lau. Attending will be rabbis Abraham Twerski, David Cohen and Yosef Blau, who have been mavericks in confronting these dark subjects. Dr. James M. Cantor and Linda Graham will bring international expertise from outside the Jewish community, and educators are flying in from everywhere in the Jewish world. That, my friends, is the good news.

Inside or outside the Jewish world, violence and abuse is a frightening problem.

We all know that. But for those of us who are living our lives within the observant Jewish community, there is the widespread belief that observing Torah Judaism should restrain even those with indecent desires, and that the modesty and greater supervision of activities should provide some protection.

I asked Gross if we're fooling ourselves – if just the opposite is true. Are we providing increased opportunities for perverts, or just talking about this subject for later application in the general community? "The incidence of sexual abuse within the religious community is about the same as in general society, but the situation should be better," she said.

But for religious boys, it's worse. The abuse of boys is equal to the abuse of girls, because they spend so

much more time alone with men. Male perpetrators – in case you're embarrassed to ask – make up between 95 and 97 percent of the abusers, depending on whose statistics you look at.

Nearly 90% of the complainants know their abusers. These are not strangers lurking outside the corner store; they're teachers, counselors, even fathers. Almost half of those who phone report rape or attempted rape. One quarter are suffering from incest.

Most of the victims are under 18, but there's a session at the December conference on abuse of the elderly as well.

Okay – full disclosure – this subject makes me sick and angry. I'm happy to see Yehudit Sidikman, who founded the self-defense school El Halev, on the podium.

Says Gross: "The recent publicized horror stories – the boy killed in Brooklyn... the exposure of abusive rabbis and teachers in the Diaspora and Israel – have alarmed many members of the community. But still, with this awareness, the feeling persists that it can't happen right in my neighborhood; not in my kids' school.

"We have to provide the best protection we can with courses in safety, making clear the difference between sharing secrets and evil talk, and the availability of help."

Educating the public and those in positions to change policy is critical, says Gross.

"Many rabbis think that if a perpetrator has expressed regret and verbalized repentance, then placed in the same situation he won't do it again. But they don't understand that abuse and pedophilia are addictions."

The issue of trusted religious leaders going unpunished and even holding revered positions is a terrible burden for those they have molested. The public relations needs of religious communities often trump the air and light of exposure.

The good news is that many institutions are beginning to take the need for safety seriously. More girls' high schools and colleges are bringing in lecturers and providing trained monitors who will deal with incidents sensitively and swiftly, says Gross. She is receiving many requests to write protocols for these schools.

Rain or shine, volunteers from the center will escort victims to the police. "The Israel Police have made great strides in understanding the problem and treating victims with dignity," she says.

The court system and social workers, however, have a long way to go, she notes.

The trend of giving fathers – even abusive fathers – more time with their children is problematic. "I get many calls from mothers who have divorced their sexually abusive husbands, and then find that their sons and daughters have to sleep at his home without any supervision. Because some women used fear of sexual abuse as a means to discredit their ex-husbands, judges tend to wave away these complaints – particularly when social workers are liberal to fathers."

Since Gross opened the hotline, there have been over 80,000 calls. Remember that you don't have to give your name to talk to someone, or even to come in and see a counselor. That makes the process much easier for those who are embarrassed, ashamed and afraid to call.

You are simply listed as Esther or Haim Cohen.

Take Esther Cohen, No. 50,000. She is 24 years old, raped by a friend of the family at 15. No one knows. No one understands why she won't agree to any of the matches proposed by her family or a matchmaker. It's her deep, dark secret, and it's destroying her life.

Or Esther Cohen No. 70,000, who was fondled by her older brother starting at age six. Today she's 19, doing national service, and she can't get over it. Her brother is married, with beautiful children she adores.

Should she cause bedlam in the family by bringing up this unpleasantness? Esther Cohen No. 50,000 needed legal advice and counseling. She received it at the center.

Esther Cohen No. 70,000 heard a lecture by Gross as part of her national service. She has also received counseling. She wrote a letter to her brother, who – it turns out – was also burdened by this childhood expression of sexuality. He undertook to stay away from the family home while she went to therapy.

He also went for therapy which involved his wife. Today the family is united in its healing, and they can go forward together, wiser and still loving.

Esther Cohen No. 50,000 called Gross from the delivery room – where she gave birth to a beautiful little girl. She was able to put her life together.

But for each of these happy endings, there are so many cases of abuse that could have been avoided, and could have been treated.

We owe Esther and Haim better than that.

The conference is open to all, and offers simultaneous translation in Hebrew and English.

The author is a Jerusalem writer who focuses on the wondrous stories of modern Israel. She serves as the Israel director of public relations for Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America. The views in her columns are her own.

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