

# To Forgive or to Shun

By [Justin Clark](#)

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**Two Sundays ago**, while having coffee with an Irvine woman he'd recently met on the Internet, Rabbi Juda Heschel made the inevitable disclosure. He recounted the felony that, seven years ago, destroyed his marriage, estranged his children, forced his synagogue to fire him and sent him to federal prison.

He is a registered sex offender, and he told his date, heart banging in his chest.

As an Orthodox Jew, Heschel wasn't accustomed to going to confession. Seven years ago, he was a highly respected rabbi at Mount Freedom Jewish Center, an Orthodox synagogue in Randolph Township, New Jersey. But he was also a lifelong porn addict, and his addiction peaked after he was shown how to use the synagogue's computer. Two weeks before the High Holy Days, the synagogue's computer technician discovered two pictures of child pornography that Heschel had viewed on an adult Web site. By enlarging the images, Heschel had unwittingly downloaded them to his Web browser's temporary-file cache.

It was 2000, Heschel says, explaining why the synagogue's elders went directly to the FBI. "That was during the height of the lawsuits against the Catholic Church."

Heschel's nine months at Fort Dix Federal Correctional Institution, one of which he spent in solitary confinement, were only the beginning of his downward spiral. Seven years after those fateful mouse clicks to illegally download child porn, Heschel has abandoned his last name (Heschel is his middle name) and lives an impoverished life in a tiny Venice apartment, decorated with the pictures of his three children who live on the East Coast. In Los Angeles, his potential employers and landlords usually assume that "registered sex offender" means rapist or child molester. He has been denied jobs and turned down for apartments. One of the most difficult moments came when a Los Angeles synagogue initially told him he was no longer welcome—even as a congregant.

As Los Angeles Archbishop Roger M. Mahony becomes embroiled in new claims that he knew about and failed to stop sexual abuse by a California priest, a number of high-profile sex scandals involving rabbis here and elsewhere have created a simmering fear among believers.

"We in the Jewish community are recognizing that we aren't immune from these problems," says Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, executive vice president of The Board of Rabbis of Southern California—one of the area's two main rabbinical bodies, along with the Rabbinical Council of California. "For too many years I've heard Jewish people say this is not our problem, it just affects other faiths and denominations. We're seeing otherwise."

**Diamond was horrified**, for instance, to see his close colleague Rabbi David Kaye ensnared last year on *Dateline NBC's* "To Catch a Predator." (Kaye was sentenced to six and a half years in prison for attempting to seduce an actor who, working with *Dateline*, posed as a 13-year-old boy.) Around the same time, the principal of one of Los Angeles' most popular Jewish schools, Rabbi Aron Tendler, stepped down amid allegations that he had sexually abused teenage girls. A few months later, Rabbi Mordechai Gafni, a popular leader in the Jewish Renewal movement, lost his chair at Los Angeles' Stephen S. Wise Temple Elementary School after confessing to molesting several of his former female students.

Diamond says all of these episodes left him "very, very pained." He isn't alone. A growing concern about unreported sex abuse and what to do with offenders when they're caught or come forward

has reshaped alliances within the local Jewish community and created bickering behind closed doors.

So discovered prominent Rabbinical Council member Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein last month, after he hosted a seminar dealing with the growing number of sex-abuse allegations surfacing on Jewish blogs. Adlerstein said he felt torn between the need to listen to victims and his colleagues' concern that the Internet has simply created a venue for *l'shon hara*, or anonymous slander.

But he found even bringing up the subject at all was tricky. Says Adlerstein, "I immediately got flak from colleagues asking me, 'Why are you talking about the stuff when you know it's going to get distorted?'"

The discussion has led to some positive results. In 2002, when Heschel began speaking about his struggle to overcome porn addiction and re-enter society after prison, he and Diamond helped organize a five-part seminar on the problem of sexual addiction among the clergy. It was the first time in years, says Diamond, that leaders of the historically estranged Board of Rabbis and Rabbinical Council found themselves sitting down at the same table.

Heschel says the discussion was especially needed in the Orthodox community, where the topic is dealt with less openly because of the shame attached to it. To rectify that, Heschel organized a 12-step group for addicted rabbis at the local rehabilitation center Beit T'Shuvah in Culver City, where he voluntarily resided before his sentencing and stint at Fort Dix.

Soon after, the Aleinu Family Resource Center — the primary family-advocacy group for Orthodox Jews — convinced 21 of 26 local Los Angeles yeshivas to agree to guidelines that encourage the reporting of sexual abuse by rabbis. (Council director Deborah Fox declined to identify the nonparticipating yeshivas to the *L.A. Weekly*, but calls their refusal to sign the guidelines an example of the lingering resistance to addressing the subject of sex abuse.)

Dealing with sex-abuse allegations can be even trickier than preventing the abuse in the first place. Like priests, rabbis suspected of sexual abuse have been shuffled from one temple to another. Unlike priests, however, rabbis cannot be defrocked, which poses a tricky question that Jews must face: how to deal with the fallen.

For its part, Diamond's organization will soon send a team of chaplains to serve Jewish patients at the 1,500-bed Coalinga State Hospital, a recently constructed facility for sexually violent predators. California's first new mental hospital in 50 years focuses not on curing its patients but preventing relapses — a more realistic goal, practitioners say. At the same time, Diamond admits, nonviolent turnaround cases like Heschel's present an equally serious dilemma: After seven years of seeking treatment, telling his story and raising awareness about sex offenses, should Heschel be allowed in the pulpit?

Beit T'Shuvah's founder, Mark Borowitz, doesn't hesitate. He says that the Torah commands believers to forgive those who make a genuine *t'shuvah*, or repentance, through admitting to their crimes and ensuring the crime will not happen again. In practice, that means rehabilitation programs such as 12-step, through which Borowitz himself, a former convict and author of a best-selling addiction memoir, *The Holy Thief*, says he found salvation.

But salvation, in a religious sense, is one thing. In a medical sense, it means something else. "We don't say that word in 12-step programs," says Borowitz, when asked if Heschel is "cured." "We say recovered."

**Still, not everyone** is comfortable with phrases like "recovered" as applied to child-porn felons like Heschel, and other sex offenders. Vicki Polin, a trained social worker who runs a Jewish version of a sex-offender registry, The Awareness Center, raised the alarm after discovering in December that Heschel had started an Internet-based addiction-counseling service.

“Allowing [Heschel] to provide counseling to others with sex addictions is totally inappropriate,” Polin posted on her Web site in December. “To allow him to advertise in *Los Angeles Jewish Journal* is horrifying.”

Heschel is obviously torn about whether to defend himself, reasoning that the community itself must decide if he should be forgiven, or simply resign himself to the unlikelihood that he will find universal acceptance.

“Had I robbed a bank or been guilty of second-degree murder, I would have served my sentence, been on probation, and then been free,” says Heschel in a rare moment of frustration. “My reality is that having viewed these images of child pornography, I am considered a sex offender for life.”

That is why Heschel offers his services discreetly over the phone, mostly to Orthodox Jews on the East Coast who have also suffered from Internet porn addiction. Heschel says that if his callers weren't allowed to remain anonymous — he knows them only by their client number — most would never come forward at all. Borowitz credits Heschel with bringing nearly two dozen individuals into Beit T'Shuvah's Sex Addicts Anonymous program.

“As with alcohol or drug addiction,” Borowitz says, “the best sexual-addiction counselors are those who are in recovery themselves.”

Nevertheless, Heschel says he misses having the rabbi's pulpit, and regularly sends out his résumé — without success. “When I send my résumés, it's my curiosity,” he says. “Is this group willing to accept someone who has made genuine *ishuvah*?”

After much agonizing, the synagogue where he worships decided to do just that, and allowed him to become an elder. For Heschel, it was a moment of bliss.

And what about his recent date over coffee?

“I was surprised at how empathetic she was,” Heschel says, turning upbeat. “It turned out to be a five-hour date.”