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## She told the police she was abused. Her friends made her pay the price.

Sex-crime victim tells how community snubbed her for taking case to court

By [Anna Sheinman](#), July 18, 2013

A young Orthodox woman who was sexually abused as a child has broken her silence to talk about the despair of being betrayed by her own community.

After years of suffering at the hands of a long-time family friend, Yehudis Goldsobel finally reached out for help. But after reporting the crimes to the police, rabbis refused to acknowledge her suffering, her family were driven from their synagoue, and kosher shops refused to serve them.

Now, as father-of-six Menachem Mendel Levy, 41, begins a three-year jail term for two counts of sexual assault, his victim, now 27, has waived her legal right to anonymity to speak out in a bid to encourage other victims to come forward.



**Defiant:** Yehudis Goldsobel refused to be silenced — even waiving her right to anonymity to speak out

"Since the sentencing the reaction from the community has been really upsetting. I've had people closing doors, I've had people stop talking to me.

"I think some people thought it was contagious, going to the police," she said.

"Members of my family have been requested to not return to the synagogue, other members threatened to leave if we continued to attend. We have been asked not to enter certain shops for fear they might lose customers.

"Other members of the community have said the reaction is my punishment from God for being what they see as less Orthodox."

Levy, who Yehudis's mother described as "like a brother", used to come to the family home in Edgware to babysit, help Yehudis do her homework and take her on drives in his car.

It was on these trips, including a visit to Homebase and a drive to a Chanukah party, that the abuse began.

Giving evidence in court, she said that he would abuse her at any time and any place, including on a plane to Israel when they were surrounded by family members, and in the back of a Royal Mail van he had access to.

She said the assaults escalated into continuing rape.

The first trial ended in deadlock when the jury could not reach a decision, but Levy was convicted at the retrial of sexual assault, although he was acquitted of rape.

Levy argued that their sexual contact was a consenting extra-marital affair which began when she was over 16. The jury were shown a birthday card she had written to him after she had said the abuse began.

"When the card was produced, I actually vomited. The fact that he still had it made me sick, I couldn't bear it. I didn't want to touch it.

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"The first trial was horrific," she said. "It was like being in a boxing ring, someone punching and pounding."

I've had people closing doors.  
My family has been asked not  
to go to shul

The sentencing hearing was attended by a large number of men from the community in north-west London.

Rabbi Chaim Rapoport, who until last year held the medical ethics portfolio on the Chief Rabbi's cabinet, gave evidence as a character witness for Levy, calling him the "embodiment of repentance", despite the fact that Levy pleaded not guilty and is appealing against both his jail sentence and his conviction.

When the rabbi was asked what Levy was repenting, he said it was the breach of trust, and added that in Jewish law: "The age 15, 16, 16 and a half would be seen as somewhat arbitrary".

Ironically, Rabbi Rapoport is one of the people Yehudis went to for support when she first decided to reveal the abuse.

Speaking of his comments to the court, she said: "I was mortified. I was embarrassed to be Jewish. It was the last straw for me."

Contacted this week, Rabbi Rapoport declined to comment.

For Yehudis, the process of coming to terms with her experience has left deep scars.

"I've gone through every possible emotion. When I first understood what had happened I was in shock and denial. It was too much to even begin to process.

"It's pathetic that I didn't know what sexual abuse was. I didn't know what rape was. When he started doing things to me, I didn't know they were sexual.

"When he contacted me and tried to rationalise it as a meaningful relationship, when he said he had cared for me, it was worse than disgust. It was so arrogant, so selfish.

"I had, maybe naively, always thought the first thing he would say to me would be an apology. Then I got angry. The rabbis did nothing to help, I was in despair.

"I was a little lost sheep knocking on doors. Your whole life you are told if you are ever in trouble you turn to the rabbis and here they were turning away from me.

"When I finally told the police I was so relieved, it was like leaving a pile of bricks at the door.

"The conviction was a relief, it was over. It just meant that somebody else believed me. I had been living in a world where nobody else wanted to acknowledge it."

She said that she still suffered nightmarish memories of the abuse.

"I do get flashbacks, at the most inconvenient moments, like when you're driving at 70 on the motorway. But they are getting less.

"Some things do still trigger. Feelings, smells... when I see a red van my heart switches in my stomach and I just freeze. It could be just a few moments, or it could ruin the rest of my day."

Sitting at a table in the window of a coffee bar in Edgware, she acknowledges that the effects of the trial process will live with her forever.

"You become desensitised. I can talk about sexual abuse for hours, which isn't normal," she says.

"It felt like being stripped bare to your insides. I felt very vulnerable and exposed, always looking over my shoulder.

"It's a lonely procedure, it's very foreign. There was no step by step. I didn't know what I was allowed to say and what I wasn't. You needed a life translator. I couldn't think what the secular words were."

The turning point for her came when the police team dealing with her case decided to take a course of Jewish education.

"The police were trying hard to learn," she said, "I felt they were on my side."

Because of her experience, Yehudis has created a charity, Migdal Emunah, to help victims of sexual abuse in the Orthodox Jewish community.

It counsels those who have suffered abuse and holds their hand through the police and court process.

"It started because I started talking about my story," she said.

"It's been amazing. The best part of it is that victims realise they're not alone. They all speak the same language and can share their experiences."

Her charity now has five counsellors, who meet clients privately and in groups. All the counsellors are Jewish, because, she says: "My view is 'let's fix it from within'".

Clients pay what they can afford — the charity is currently supporting between 20 and 30 people.

"It's a horrible messy process," she said, "but I'd like to think we can help with the feeling of being alone."

Migdal Emunah's next step is education. "Things like 'this is my body', 'no means no', and appropriate touch," Yehudis explains.

She describes a book that every Orthodox girl in her community receives at 10 or 11, with a purple coloured jacket, which describes things like the menstrual cycle, but not sex, rape, or abuse.

"There needs to be a new purple book," she says.

She does not feel that abuse is more widespread in the Orthodox community than in the wider community, but she says: "We just don't deal with it. We victimise the victim."

After the years of suffering, she says she has now found her purpose in life.

"The abuse took my teenage years away from me. There's nothing I can do to change the past, but it makes me all the more determined to have a full life, to not live in the shadow of his abuse.

"It motivates me, it makes it all the more important to shout from the rooftops, so no one else will have to go through what I did."

And what are her goals, ultimately? "Breaking the silence, educating, creating awareness."

She laughs. "There's a lot to do."

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