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Sex and the synagogue

Liz Porter

He seduced vulnerable women who came to him for spiritual enlightenment. Now Rabbi Hershy Worch is the one being exposed and shamed.

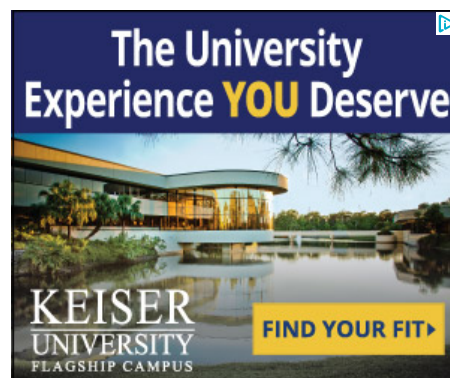
RABBI Hershy Worch did not look like a serial seducer. Short, fat and married, he favoured the white silk stockings, knee breeches and big fur hat – or "shtreimel" – worn by ultra-Orthodox Jews on the Sabbath.

But the rabbi could sing magnificently – and played a mean guitar. He was also an inspiring teacher of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical doctrine famously studied by Madonna. Talented and charismatic, despite his homely looks, the "singing rabbi" attracted crowds of students of both sexes.

Women predominated because Worch specialised in teaching female students the Talmud – Jewish commentaries traditionally taught to men.

The English-born rabbi came to Melbourne from the United States in 1995 as a 41-year-old chaplain and mentor for Jewish students at Victorian university campuses. Now a new book by one of his former students, Melbourne writer Yvonne Fein, paints him as a manipulative seducer, a man who made sexual advances to his most vulnerable students and was psychologically abusive to many others.

The Torn Messiah is a novel, not a memoir or a work of investigative journalism, but it is an open secret in the Jewish community that it is a thinly disguised account of the effects of the maverick rabbi's sexual escapades.



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The main character is "Rabbi Reuven Klein", not Hershy Worch. Meanwhile, Fein herself, the editor of the 1990s Jewish magazine *Generations*, appears in the novel as Freddie Rose, editor of the magazine *Diaspora Dreaming*. Its headquarters are downstairs from Rabbi Klein's office - just as *Generations* was downstairs from Rabbi Worch's office - and its location is "Ben Gurion House" in Kooyong Road, Caulfield, easily identifiable as the Beth Weizmann centre, a few blocks away on Hawthorn Road - the setting for many of Worch's classes.

HaMakom, the "alternative" orthodox synagogue Worch established, appears in the novel as "HaDrasha". The fictional Rabbi Klein has sexual relations with three of his students and tries to seduce others.

Fein openly admits that much of the novel's content is based on Worch. She made her fictional Rabbi Klein a "composite character", based on Worch and several other rabbis, because she feared she was unable to make a "short, fat and ugly" rabbi into a credible fictional seducer.



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She wrote the story as a novel, she says, mainly to protect the identities of other women involved. Fein says her fictional rabbi and the real Rabbi Worch both played on the emotions of a group of young adults who were all children or grandchildren of Holocaust survivors.

"We were all consenting, tertiary-educated adults. But, in some sense, we were all damaged," Fein says. "(Jewish) Melbourne is still, in many ways, a Holocaust town. We were all looking for a way to be Jewish that was not defined by Holocaust suffering or by loyalty to Israel ... We wanted to find another way. And he came with another way."

Fein says she and others were vulnerable to someone who could teach Hebrew biblical texts "without butchering it".

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Women came to study early and late, and were often alone with the rabbi. It was then, Fein says, that he made sexual advances that several did not resist – but which later led to anger and distress.

Worch left Melbourne in 1997 because the Hillel Foundation – the Jewish student support organisation employing him – had run out of money to pay his salary. But in 2004 a few of Worch's former Melbourne students were contacted by a representative of the Baltimore-based Awareness Centre – a Jewish organisation specialising in helping sex abuse victims.

These women wrote a long, anonymous statement accusing the rabbi of "predatory" and "manipulative" behaviour and it was added to the Baltimore website's "Case of Rabbi Hershy Worch" listing.

The entry on Worch runs to several pages, noting his alleged 1998 dismissal from an Illinois teaching post and referring to allegations made against him in Chicago in 2004. It also alludes to complaints about him to the Rabbinical Council of America and the Chicago Rabbinical Council.

According to the Melbourne women's statement, Worch "proactively sought 'romantic' and sexual relationships with many, many women, specifically targeting those who were emotionally vulnerable and fostering acute dependency. He consistently used his role as counsellor to make sexual advances towards those who came to him in need.

"He had 'romantic' sexual relationships with married and unmarried women who ranged in age from 20 to 50."

The statement also says that his inappropriate behaviour towards female students included "physical sexual interactions", "predatory behaviour in the pursuit of women – late-night phone calls and invitations to teach women privately" and "using the teaching of Torah (bible) as a tool of seduction".

Worch, now 54, has married a third time since leaving Melbourne and lives in California where he runs online Kabbalah and Jewish scripture classes. Responding to *The Sunday Age's* questions by email, he said he couldn't talk about what was in a book he hadn't read. But, he added: "I, myself, am looking for a publisher for my novel, *The Inner Shikseh*, about a Hasidic rabbi who meets and ministers to the needs of kinky Jews, sabbath-observant queers, sadists and masochists, bondage freaks, masters and slaves, pain-givers and pain-cravers, humiliation artists and a plethora of other taboo-breakers."

He parried repeated requests to comment on the allegations about his time in Melbourne posted on the Baltimore website. "When a lady of quality ... chooses to divulge a sexual liaison, it's dashed bad form then to approach the man for corroboration," he wrote.

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to share my sense of excitement and discovery with them about the Torah ... I found Melbourne brimming with impassioned and enthused people of all ages and every possible religious persuasion, starving for someone to give them access to ancient Hebrew and Aramaic texts."

On his own Live Journal blog, the rabbi has twice posted denials of the website's allegations against him. In 2006, he wrote of being "accused in the media, anonymously, of criminal and contemptible offences. Most specifically it was alleged that I use cult-like and manipulative, mind-controlling behaviours to entice women to my home where I assault them. The attack was an outright slander, a lie without one iota of truth in it."

Fein is adamant that Worch's actions, though not illegal, were exploitative and abusive, in that he took advantage of the power imbalance between rabbi and congregant. They were also a serious breach of Halacha (Jewish law), which forbids a rabbi from having illicit sexual liaisons.

Sam Lipski, editor of the *Jewish News* when Worch was in Melbourne, says that at the time of his sudden departure in 1997 no allegations of impropriety had come to the newspaper's attention.

At the time, influential businessman, rabbi and former Melbourne Football Club president Joseph Gutnick had offered to re-fund Hillel, the organisation that had been paying Worch, if it got rid of the radical rabbi. Gutnick had strongly objected to remarks he regarded as pro-Palestinian that Worch had made at a student meeting hosted by the businessman.

Several years passed before the first accounts of alleged sexual improprieties began to filter in from the US. Joseph Gutnick heard them, and also read testimonies from American and Australian women who reported inappropriate sexual overtures from Worch. The reports confirmed his opinion of the rabbi, Gutnick says now.

"He is a low-life and a heretic. What upsets me is that he uses religion to abuse women. There are numerous women who have suffered at his hands," Gutnick says.

So why didn't the Melbourne women complain to rabbinical authorities when Worch was here?

According to Fein, conversation about alleged impropriety began after the rabbi's sudden departure, when his shocked students gathered to "debrief".

Fein herself was only "intellectually seduced" by Worch, she says, meaning she did not sleep with him. But she was shattered that she had been manipulated by a religious leader.

"I was too ashamed to approach anyone official," she says. "Anyway

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Another former student of Worch says the rabbi used his own vulnerability as a seduction technique. "He was clearly a damaged person," she says.

"He made inappropriate suggestions to me but I just ignored them." She still feels uncomfortable about her "complicity" with Worch's manipulative ways.

But Worch still has his supporters in Melbourne. Another former female student says she went to many group classes and never witnessed any hint of anything untoward.

"I had respect for what he taught us," she says. "If some women had a problem with him, they should have complained at the time."

At the time, says Fein, any Australian woman considering making allegations of abuse to rabbinical authorities would have first thought of the now notorious case of New York's Rabbi Baruch Lanner. In 1989, some of his congregants complained to a "beth din," or tribunal of rabbis, that Lanner had sexually abused teenagers. But they were not believed. They were not vindicated until 2000, when a Jewish newspaper's reports on the claims sparked a police investigation - and eventually a jail sentence for Lanner.

It is a poorly kept secret in the Jewish community that Lanner came to Melbourne in 1990 to be interviewed for a position as headmaster of a Jewish school. The interview was quietly cancelled after some calls to New York.

THE Torn Messiah took Fein more than five years to write. It took a further year to find a publisher.

"It took me a long time to get over (the Worch era)."

Jewish communities in Australia, says Fein, have been slow even to admit the possibility of clerical abuse.

She points to the secrecy surrounding sexual abuse claims against the principal of the Adass Israel Girls School in Elsternwick. The school board paid for the principal, Malka Leifer, to return to Israel, sacking her after investigating alleged sexual offences.

But Rabbi Meir Kluwgant, president of the Rabbinical Council of Victoria, says that his organisation is now facing up to the issue and has arranged for a small group of professional legal and psychological advisers to offer confidential advice and support to abuse victims.

In the past few months, the council has been investigating - or attempting to investigate - claims of "inappropriate physical contact" as well as "improper financial transactions" by a "trusted" religious official in the Jewish community.

In a front-page article in the Australian Jewish News in late March,

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information, he says, but nobody was prepared to sign a statement.

Kluwgant says confidential advice and assistance will also be offered to any former congregants of Worch who want to come forward.

"There has been a shift in the rabbinate towards addressing the issue (of clerical abuse) openly and frankly and publicly," he says.

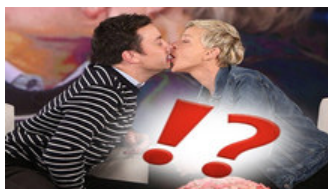
But Jewish Community Council of Victoria president Anton Block says there is still "not enough openness" in dealing with sex abuse thoroughly and publicly because of fear of fostering anti-semitism. Like any other community, the Jewish community does not like bad news published about itself.

"But we have the added concern that, when messages like this get out, it adds ammunition to those who want to hurt us and say 'look at the Jews'."

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