

Sex Abuse On The Radar

by Judy Klitsner

The Jewish Week - May 7, 2003

With many accusations against rabbis, authorities and the religious establishment are slowly coming to grips with the problem.

Jerusalem — There is a growing public awareness in Israel of sexual abuse by rabbis, in part because of so many new cases being reported, including accusations against the recently elected Ashkenazic chief rabbi.

Unfortunately, these charges have come out in the press instead of being dealt with in a systematic and sensitive manner within the religious system. This points to the overall failure of the religious establishment to monitor itself and to take decisive action when complaints are brought.

As a result, the public is reading about it, becoming angry and increasingly aware of the need for some kind of action.

For years following the abuse I suffered at the hands of Rabbi Baruch Lanner, I tried in many ways to persuade religious leaders to stop his progress. When he was finally exposed and deposed (only because of the press), I began receiving calls from many quarters about abuses by other rabbis. I tried to help minimize the damage these rabbis could do by calling whomever I knew to put pressure on institutions that hired or promoted offending rabbis.

There were a few of us out there, people with extra sensitivity to this issue, and we learned to enlist each other's help whenever needed. Sometimes we succeeded; often we didn't.

I was greatly disturbed that an issue as serious as this was being addressed in this ad hoc way. Where were our leaders? Why was this not an issue of concern to all?

I finally decided to look for ways to address the problem in a more structured way. The immediate impetus was an expose some months ago in the Israeli daily Maariv on Rav Aviner, the revered chief rabbi of Beit El and a central figure in the religious Zionist camp — "the rabbi's rabbi," the "holy of holies," as he has been called by his followers.

In the expose, two women accused the rabbi of creating emotionally intimate relationships with them. These relationships included his expressions of his love for them during regular late-night phone conversations, extracting details from them of their sexuality and promoting an unhealthy emotional dependence on him.

The women claimed they reported these problems to the highest echelons in the rabbinic establishment and were either passed along to other rabbis or told to keep silent and destroy any correspondence they had from the rabbi.

In response, the rabbinic establishment displayed a nearly unprecedented show of unity: on the very day the article appeared, my children (along with thousands of other children) returned from school with a letter signed by dozens of respected rabbis denouncing the "lies" that were reported by allegedly unstable, delusional women. Instead of calling for some kind of investigation, the community rallied around Rav Aviner and against his accusers.

Believing there had to be some way to defend these women and others like them, or at least to give them a chance to be heard seriously, I contacted the organization Kolech, a group of Orthodox feminists led by Chana Kehat, a religious scholar and activist. Fortuitously, I found that the group was beginning to organize itself around this issue. While discussing strategies for addressing the problem as a whole, a new case presented itself that put Kolech in the eye of the storm.

Several women called Kolech to complain about Rabbi Yitzchak Cohen, a former head of, and later a lecturer in, the midrasha at Bar-Ilan University, who they claimed sexually harassed them when they were students at the university some years ago. Despite strong pressure against Kehat, who was accused of pursuing a "feminist" agenda, the university appointed a committee, headed by a rabbi, which heard testimony from several women in the presence of the accused rabbi. In the end, the unambiguous ruling was to dismiss Rabbi Cohen.

He is still fighting the decision and claims openly that he is the victim of a slander campaign by the "feminists." Rabbi Cohen says the feminists want to push rabbis out of their positions so they can replace them. The Bar-Ilan commission found no basis to his arguments and ruled that Kolech was operating entirely in good faith.

While I found the charge about feminists repugnant, it is fair to ask why we are practically alone in seeking to stop this terrible phenomenon, with the help of the press.

I can say from firsthand experience that these women do not relish this type of activity and in fact would much prefer to be working on positive reforms in the religious world. There is a palpable sense of distaste, yet a solemn duty to follow up on complaints that no one else wants to touch. This is a job that rabbis should be doing themselves but are not, for various reasons (collegiality, politics, fear of airing dirty linen in public, not wanting to deal with "unsavory" topics, etc.)

The Knesset, to its credit, recently held a special session, chaired by Gila Finkelstein, on the question of sexual harassment in the religious community. Many educators, including heads of prominent institutions of Torah learning for women, were in attendance as speakers addressed a number of issues, including the need for acceptable guidelines in conduct between rabbis and students.

Partly as a result of all this, I have been working for a long time toward constructing a rabbinical ethics committee. It would follow the precedent of other professional ethics committees, such as those of doctors, psychologists and university professors, setting down clear sets of norms and guidelines for acceptable behavior. The committee would hear and investigate complaints in a sensitive and thorough manner, reach conclusions and act on them.

We are in the process of bringing together various women's organizations in the hope of getting a broad spectrum of leaders to support the plan. We then have to find rabbis who will agree to serve at the head of such a committee, to give it the religious stamp of approval. So far the rabbis we have approached are reluctant to be actively involved, but they recognize the need for such a committee.

Though there are signs that the community and its leadership are beginning to face the severity and widespread nature of the problem, clearly there is much work yet to be done. n

Judy Klitsner is an instructor of Bible at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.

'War in the religious world'

by Ariella Ringel-Hoffman

YNET News.com - July 4, 2006

Not only did Dr. Kahat dare to set up a religious-feminist organization, she also brought to expulsion of a rabbi from the Bar Ilan University, after a student complained of sexual harassment. Then Kahat was fired

At first glance, the case is a simple one: A wronged employee is suing to retain her job. However, the burning issue of a woman's place within Orthodox society lies directly beneath the surface. Dr. Chana Kahat of Gush Etzion, a lecturer at the Orot Yisrael Academic College in Elkana and founding director of the feminist Kolech organization, sits serenely at the eye of the storm, which has divided her friends, colleagues and neighbors.

For now, the labor court has accepted Kahat's arguments, and her dismissal has been stayed.

The controversy began in 2002, four years after Kahat founded Kolech in order to promote women's rights in the national-religious world. At that time, a Bar Ilan University student complained to Kolech that one of her rabbis had sexually molested her.

"I was broken, and I cried day and night," the student, who wishes to remain anonymous, says. "I had reached out for help, and I was thrown into a deep, dark pit. I had never touched a man before that, and no man had ever touched me."

Ricki Shapiro, Kolech's attorney, claims that the organization offered to hush up the student's accusations as long as the rabbi agreed to leave the university. According to Shapiro, the rabbi did not respond, and the story hit the fan.

Before long, the rabbi's lawyer sent Kahat a letter threatening to sue her for libel. In addition, he enlisted a long list of public figures, professors and rabbis, including Rabbi Neriah Gutal, a personal friend of the Bar Ilan rabbi.

Meanwhile, the university appointed law professor Yaffa Zilbershatz to investigate the charges. Based on Zilbershatz's suggestions, a committee, headed by Rabbi Yuval Cherlow, a leader of the religious-Zionist community, was formed. The committee recommended that the accused rabbi be dismissed, and the university acted accordingly.

Vengeance?

Some time later, Gutal was hired as dean of the Orot Yisrael College, where Kahat had been teaching for twelve years. Kahat's apprehensions that Gutal would use the opportunity to

settle old scores were quickly realized. Immediately, her weekly teaching hours were decreased, and then, in March, she was informed that she was likely to be dismissed.

Kahat, who had just received a twelve-month grant from the Avichai Foundation in recognition of her contributions to Israeli society, decided to take a yearlong unpaid vacation. Her intention, she explains, was to give everyone a chance to cool off.

In January 2005, Kahat notified Orot Yisrael that she intended to return in the fall. Two months later, she had still not heard from the college, and she requested a clarification. Kahat was told that Gutal intended to make every effort to fire her, and the dean himself, she claims, confirmed this statement in March.

Sigal Pa'il, Kahat's attorney, filed an injunction and began legal proceedings. "This was a political dismissal," she insists.

In response, Moshe Lador, Gutal's lawyer who refutes Pa'il's charges, issued the following statement: "The fact that the petitioner teaches in the college is uncomfortable for a portion of the students. Should the petitioner remain on staff, we are concerned that the college's image will be harmed and that potential students will elect to study at other academic institutions. It is likely that students' rabbis and fathers will forbid them from attending courses given by the petitioner or even the college where the petitioner teaches."

'I am not settling old scores'

Lador claims that the number of registered students was already small. However, during the court hearing, Pa'il proved that this was emphatically not the case. In addition, she showed that the reason only a few students had registered for Kahat's courses was that Gutal had played around with the schedule.

Nevertheless, Gutal maintains that the attempted dismissal was not meant to be a payback for the Bar Ilan incident. "I am not settling old scores," he counters.

Kahat laments that her initial victory in court cost her dearly. "The message for women is: Next time, don't confront a rabbi, because if you do, you'll pay a price. Over the years, I have lost many good friends. Neighbors who were like family no longer speak to me. This is a war in the religious world."