

Orthodox Jews struggle with sexual abuse

Nicole Neroulias Religion News Service | Mar. 12, 2009

NEW YORK -- In the wake of the sex abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic Church, members of other faiths began reconsidering how they handle allegations against clergy, teachers and youth leaders.

For Orthodox Jews, whose communal life is shaped by religious courts and a desire to avoid bad publicity, abuse often went unreported -- a situation that has slowly started to change -- much to Rabbi Yosef Blau's relief.

Blau, 70, Yeshiva University's spiritual adviser, has worked with The Awareness Center, a Jewish coalition against sexual abuse. He spoke about recent allegations against several Brooklyn rabbis, and the community's struggles to understand that such matters require outside investigators.

Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: How did you become an advocate for Jewish sex abuse victims?

A: About 20 years ago, Rabbi Baruch Lanner, a very successful head of an Orthodox youth movement, was accused of misconduct. The community set up a rabbinical court, and I was one of the people chosen to be on it. It was a disaster.

We put a 10-year limit on accusations, simply because we thought it was impractical to deal with everything, not realizing this eliminated all the people who had become adults, who had gotten help and were able to step forward. I was naive, we didn't know enough about these things back then.

Q: How would you have handled the situation now?

A: I would go to the appropriate state authorities and the police and give support to the victims. But, this is still not a community that thinks of going to the police. There's a history around the world of anti-Semitism, so Jews learned not to trust the secular authorities. It became taboo to report on problems to the outside world. Rabbinical courts are just not prepared to deal with this kind of thing.

Q: Why not?

Criminal sexual abuse may not fit descriptions of sins in Jewish law -- the age of consent in traditional Jewish law is 12 for a girl, 13 for a boy. You need two witnesses, who have to be adult males -- but, no abuser does it with an audience. These courts have no access to police, fingerprints or DNA evidence; there's no mechanism to punish perjury. And, if someone is found guilty, there is no effective way of removing the dangerous criminal from society.

Q: How does the Jewish scandal compare to the Catholic scandal?

In religious communities, there's a great trust in authority, especially in the ultra-Orthodox community. If there's a scandal, if an authority figure says, 'I've taken care of it privately,' no one does anything. But, the Jewish community is not centrally controlled -- if someone gets fired from one place, they can get hired somewhere else, they can go to Israel -- so that's a big difference.

Q: In Brooklyn, one ultra-Orthodox rabbi is still teaching as the community considers abuse allegations against him, and another is defending himself against criminal charges that he raped his own daughter.

Do you see any progress being made through these cases?

The two cases illustrate the present inconsistency; one is being tried in court and the other is being protected by his insular community that refuses to believe that one of their rabbis could be a predator. Of course, it's a particularly shocking and upsetting situation where a person of such religious stature, who is respected and trusted in the community, turns to take advantage of people in that community. As the community's awareness is growing, I think there will be a change in response.

Q: Has it gotten any easier for devout Jews to report abuse?

There has been some change in training rabbinical students to recognize abuse, but it's going to take a while for them to become the actual leaders in the communities. In the meantime, with blogs, people can anonymously tell their stories, and as more cases come out, denial becomes less feasible, and the outrage in the community has begun to come out.

Q: What more needs to be done?

Our obligation is to protect children. The leadership must acknowledge the seriousness of the problem, and the community must encourage victims to go to the secular authorities and stop stigmatizing them. We have to find a way of breaking the taboo, and that is the process that's going on now, slowly and often in very frustrating fashion. But, I'm always an optimist that it's going to change.

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