

Yitzchak Blau is Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshivat Orayta and teaches at Midreshet Lindenbaum. He is the author of *Fresh Fruit and Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggadah* and associate editor of *Tradition*.

## GUEST EDITOR INTRODUCTION

**A** *shamnu*. The discussion should begin with a frank admission. Orthodoxy has not responded well to the problem of rabbinic sexual abusers and there have been far too many cases of abuse in our community. We have unsuccessfully tried to handle the problem internally without going to authorities. We have refused to accept the guilt of significant rabbinic figures and have not offered victims the support and trust they desperately need. We have found it easier to stand on the side and not speak out to prevent future harm.

Of course, we are not alone in this predicament. Parallel stories exist in the Catholic Church, more liberal Jewish circles, fancy private schools, youth sports leagues, and more. Sexual harassment and the abusive use of power have been prevalent in the news media and in Hollywood. Apparently, these problems reflect challenges inherent in the human condition. Yet this conclusion offers meager comfort. It is far more productive to ask how we can improve and which hurdles are specific to our religious community rather than to engage in comparative moral mathematics. The Talmudic idea that a person should focus on his own flaws before those of others (*Bava Batra* 60b) applies on a communal level as well.

Nor should we fear that such admission will harm our stature and drive people away. A responsum of R. Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg (*Seridei Eish* 2:157) illustrates this quite powerfully. The old *minhag* in Finland was to recite kiddush in shul on Friday night. During the second World War, they stopped this custom due to an absence of kosher wine. After the war, the community wanted to restore the old practice but the rabbi thought it halakhically preferable not to resume the custom since no one eats their Friday night meal in shul and therefore the *berakha* may serve no purpose. The rabbi wrote to R. Weinberg who sided with the community. R. Weinberg assures the rabbi not to worry about losing his stature if he concedes that the community was correct; on the contrary, rabbis who admit they were wrong only enhance their stature. Admitting failure to adequately confront abuse is obviously much more difficult but also far more significant.

Though communal responses have improved as awareness of this problem has grown, much work remains to be done. We should realize the dangers of rationalizations based on ends justify the means arguments. Even a highly successful educator cannot continue to teach if he acts inappropriately with students. Furthermore, this problem should goad us towards rethinking our educational priorities. A well-known yeshiva high school administrator identified charisma as the essential trait he looks for when hiring teachers. I would suggest that honesty, decency, kindness, erudition, and intelligence all come before charisma. While we clearly do not suspect all charismatic teachers of mistreating students, granting more value to other qualities creates a healthier educational atmosphere. When we notice charisma turning manipulative, warning lights should flash on even absent accusations of abuse.

The trait of courage, crucial for adhering to any ideal, must receive greater emphasis in our communal discourse. It is often easier to look the other way, especially if the accused has many ardent followers and raising the alarm will make one unpopular. Another problematic strategy is to remove the person from your school or shul but do nothing to prevent him from accosting students or congregants in another environment. Indeed, several of the most prominent abusers hurt students in more than one educational context; sometimes, they simply moved countries and started again with new victims.

We hope that this volume of *Tradition* will help provide guidance and inspire communities to adopt policies for preventing abuse and for addressing accusations. The six essays deal with a range of issues. Rabbi Yosef Blau and Dr. Shira Berkovits provide an overview of the challenges our community faces in confronting these problems. Rabbi David Brofsky discusses the pertinent halakhic questions regarding *mesira* and *leshon ha-ra*. Dr. Erica Brown utilizes Biblical narrative to demonstrate the guilt of enablers. Rabbi Mark Dratch analyzes the conundrum of reinstating a rabbi who has sinned. In an essay which presents an approach which will be novel to American readers, Professor Yedidya Stern explores the logic of Forum Takana, an institution established in Israel to address sexual abuse in the Religious Zionist world. Prof. Stern raises several potential objections against Forum Takana while arguing for its necessity. However, we were not able to include articles on every angle of abuse. For example, the interested reader might consult the different opinions of Dr. Joel Wolowelsky and R. Dratch in the journal *Hakirah* about mourning an abusive parent.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Joel Wolowelsky, "Mourning Abusive Parents," *Hakirah* 9 (Winter, 2010), and Mark Dratch, "Honoring Abusive Parents," *Hakirah* 12 (Fall, 2011).

## *TRADITION*

I thank Rabbi Shalom Carmy for allowing me to guest-edit this important symposium, Rabbi Jeffrey Saks for his helpful editorial efforts, and Rabbi Yamin Levy for his assistance.