

BEYOND SILENCE

The Board of Rabbis of Northern California, Jewish Learning Works, Shalom Bayit and the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, representing an array of rabbis, educators and other Jewish professionals, have joined together in a campaign known as Beyond Silence Campaign to create, implement and foster a community wide response to abuse in general, and child sexual abuse in particular.

See the Beyond Silence section at <http://www.norcalrabbis.org>.

Na'aseh – We Are Acting

By Hank Berman

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As therapists we often consider the context of whatever concern is being presented by our client. One question that I have considered for myself when working with 'survivors' of child sexual abuse (and, on few occasions with perpetrators) is 'what circumstances could have lessened the severity of the damage done?' I kept returning to the element of 'safety' provided by an informed and compassionate community. Compassion cannot manifest without hearing the voices of those in need of help. For the survivor, we know the cost she or he must pay when silence seems the best option. We know also that this mantle of silence is fueled by shame and the anticipation of shame. Months and years of suppression often foster behaviors that only compound the suffering. In many instances this framework can produce another generation of perpetrators. It is never easy to look into the 'heart of darkness.' However, because silence colludes with suffering, we have no choice.

When we hear the voices of the abused, our compassion can begin to move into action. The cycles of abuse can cease and healing can begin. Perhaps it would be best to offer a composite of the voices often heard in child sexual abuse. The perpetrator forges a series of deceptions, both to himself/herself and to the ones he or she molests. He may tell himself that he is only expressing affection or that he is 'entitled to receive what his spouse is denying him.' He may construct the most painful deception to the survivor, "I am doing this because I love you." Threats, both explicit and implicit, are often utilized to ensure the silence of the survivor. "You mustn't tell anyone or it will destroy our family." The manipulative constructs are too numerous to list, but they all serve to forge a protective wall around the perpetrator and make internal conflicts of the survivor more acute.

What of the friends and relatives of the violator and of the survivor? This group can be called 'the knowers' and I have heard such loquutions as "it should stay in the family, it's not up to me to tell anyone." Friends might rationalize their silence with philosophical tropes such as "you don't interfere in someone else's marriage (family)"

Fear can shape our reticence to speak about what we know: "I was afraid I'd be sued for slander." Of course, one false belief relates to how talking about this might have negative effects on our community: "You know how our enemies would smear all of us with this story?"

Perhaps the most painful voice comes from the survivors and we must recognize that, for them, talking about what happened, however liberating we believe it to be, resurrects the pain of the abuse. Survivors are often led to the belief that they are responsible for the abuse. "He never forced me, I had a choice." "I was afraid that my father would go to jail and I couldn't see hurting him." "I felt like he trusted me to keep the secret." "No one would believe me." Whatever the locution, the silence is always based on fear, shame and guilt.

Once we become aware of the devastating effects of our silence, we must find the courage to dismantle the lies and deceptions that maintain its dark and silent shadow. If we decide to speak out about incest and child sexual abuse, we are living our most important value: the protection of children. As those interested in healing, we cannot overlook the necessity of healing the perpetrator. Without any sense that there will be the safety of a compassionate listener, the perpetrator remains a prisoner of his or her dark impulses. By our willingness to also listen to their voices, we can make it less onerous for them to seek help.

Therapists have noted that those who are victimized have a greater potential to become perpetrators themselves. How can we expect those impacted to speak if we ourselves refuse to hear their voices? How wonderful if our willingness to listen could help prevent this violence from affecting future generations? We study the movement of light into darkness to be better able to bring the light of compassionate healing to the dark places in our souls. Listening to the voices of those who yearn for our acknowledgement and protection can only hasten the bringing of the light.

Local Contacts for Support Related to Sexual Abuse

Parents Place, a Division of Jewish Family & Children's Services: 415-359-2443

Jewish Family Services of Silicon Valley: 408-357-7425

Jewish Family & Children's Services of the East Bay: Rikki Sudikoff 510-704-7475

Bay Area Jewish Healing Center: Rabbi Eric Weiss 415-750-4199

Shalom Bayit: Lisa Kahn Tietz 510-451-SAFE

Greater Bay Area Child Abuse Prevention Council Coalition: 1-888-904-2272

Contact your local Child Protective Services Hotline by calling Child Help: 1-800-4-A-CHILD

RAINN, the National Sexual Abuse Hotline: 1-800-656-HOPE