

Teshuvah: USY & Us
Kol Nidre 5782/2021
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Tonight, I'd like to speak with you about an uncomfortable topic. It's uncomfortable for me, and it'll probably be uncomfortable for you. And although it is so very important, it might be too uncomfortable for you, or inappropriate for young children, so I'm giving you a heads up here that I'll be addressing the topic of sexual abuse. If you need to step out or away, please do; and take care of yourself.

Many of us are painfully aware of the scandal surrounding our Conservative youth movement, USY, United Synagogue Youth, and the staffer recently called out for persistent and heartbreaking sexual abuse. You've likely read articles from the Times of Israel blog, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, the Forward; or followed the conversations about these events on social media. Many of us know and love the person, Rabbi Jordan Soffer--the former school rabbi at Carmel Academy--who came forward in a public statement¹ in the Times of Israel last month about the ongoing sexual abuse he--and unfortunately many others--experienced as a USY participant in the METNY, or Metropolitan New York, region, in the 2000s. His brother Lee, who has been part of our Beth El community, was also a victim and has been speaking out along with Rabbi Soffer. Although talking about sexual abuse and misconduct is uncomfortable, and although acknowledging a dark and painful episode in our movement's own youth group is uncomfortable, we do it to honor the victims and to do better going forward.

First, let me tell you what I'm not going to do this evening. I'm not going to recount the details of the abuse. If you've not come across this topic, and want to know more, you can Google it after Yom Kippur concludes. I'm also not going to speak directly about the perpetrator of these abuses, although I hope that he has the support he needs to repent for his sins. Tonight, I want to focus more on the organization and its responsibilities, as a window into our own processes of teshuvah.

This evening, we usher in the most sacred 25 hours of the year. On this occasion of Yom Kippur, we examine our deepest and darkest corners, actively seeking out our misdeeds. Throughout this day, we strive to right the wrongs of the past year--or, in some cases, many years. On Yom Kippur, we commit ourselves to engage in teshuvah, repentance, realignment.

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/eye-on-statute-of-limitations-alleged-victim-of-us-youth-group-leader-speak-s-up/?fbclid=IwAR1p5YjktXmS9mEoImANY2snOL11FJUhdj3l4yipvi5RR38CLZp4dOe0zo>

At its core, teshuvah is about turning away from the sins we've committed. It's about turning *toward* our essential selves, about realigning ourselves as the good people we know we are and want to be. Teshuvah goes right to the core of the human psyche, though: in order to embark on the process of repenting, we must work through all the emotions that come up when we admit to having done wrong. We sweep it under the rug, we deny, we minimize the magnitude, we ignore the impact on others, we get defensive or angry if and when we are confronted. That's a lot of armor to work through.

It's hard enough to work through all these layers when it's just us. It's a whole other thing when wrongdoing takes place in an organization, where so many are affected, and so many are accountable.

Learning of such abuse today--in 2021, 3 full years after the cascade of revelations of the #MeToo movement--we are well versed in what *should have happened* in the early 2000s. Teenager experiences something "off", tells a staff member. The staff member goes directly to the leader of the organization, and the abuser is fired, never to be employed there again. If the behaviors have crossed into the realm of the illegal, the police are called. If there aren't yet policies in place to protect the participants, those are prepared and go into effect immediately; all participants learn how to report any sexual misconduct they might experience in the future; and all staff will now be trained to prevent any future abuse from taking place.

But that's not what happened. Not at that time. What happened was, like in so many other cases... silence. Almost 20 years of deafening silence. And during that time, the victims suffered alone, unheard, not validated. In that time, other participants were abused. In that time, any of their peers who knew about the abuse would have felt uncomfortable themselves, perhaps worried that they might be next. And in that time, any staff member who knew about any of the incidents must have lived with tremendous and deepening guilt.

I wish this were the only incident of sexual abuse within Jewish organizations, but we all know that's not true. The Reform movement has initiated three separate investigations — one each for its rabbinical seminary, rabbinical association and synagogue network — to look at both allegations of abuse and possible points of failure in its policies and systems. And just 2 weeks ago, a survivor came forward anonymously to speak about their treatment after being raped at the Orthodox world's flagship school, Yeshiva University. And our same United Synagogue Youth cut ties with its former long-time director in late 2017 for accusations of sexual misconduct in the 80s. It's so very painful to know of these incidents. And so much worse to imagine what it must be like to be a victim.

And so I've been asking myself over these last few weeks, as I read articles and learned of statements and lawsuits: If this happened to any teen in our congregation--if this happened to my *own child*--what would I feel? What would I expect? And, the Yom Kippur question: how can we do better?

Each time I sat down to try to answer these questions, I found myself in tears. Although my children are still so young, I can already feel the Mama Bear in me roaring to life... in anger, in heartache, in a deep need to protect, in the shock and despair that someone's sweet innocence was stolen away, that choices about their bodies were made by someone else.

What would any of us expect if it was our child who had suffered all those years ago? Yom Kippur hands it to us straight: We'd want complete teshuvah, repentance, from the organization. We'd demand a public acknowledgment of what happened, a formal apology, and an expression of regret at having swept it under the rug for close to two decades. We'd want to know that employees who knew and who should have known no longer work for the organization. And we'd want to know that there was an independent investigation, including a confidential method for other victims to report their experiences. And of course we'd want all the things USY has implemented since 2012: staff trainings, youth protection officers, signed agreements from each participant at every program to refrain from inappropriate behavior.

As Rabbi Soffer noted in his original statement, coming forward is as much about the future participants in USY as it is about his own suffering. Complete teshuvah is rounded out by what the Rambam, Maimonides, called *azivat ha'chet*, leaving the sin behind. And in a situation like this--that means constant vigilance and transparency.

After an initial legal-ese-y statement, USY's senior leadership seems to be on the path of this complete teshuvah, with an independent firm conducting an investigation and managing a confidential hotline. The results remain to be seen. If you need to report anything related to sexual abuse in USY, please contact Worley Conflict Resolution in Boston. If you'd like the direct number for the hotline, please ask me.

10 times throughout this sacred day, we will rise and beat our chests as we say the words "*ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, dibarnu dofi*", "we have trespassed, we have betrayed, we have stolen, we have slandered". We'll say *al chet shechatanu lefanecha*, "for the sin which we have committed before You, God". Year after year, rabbis the world over note that these prayers are written in the plural--*we* have committed X, *we* have done Y. Among these *vidui* litanies, there are certainly things each of us has done, and those stand out to us as we recite them in unison. *For the sin which we have committed before you, God, of disdain*

parents and teachers; for abusing food and drink; for vile speech... I know I'm familiar with those.

But what about the sins less familiar to us as individuals? *We have sinned against You through sexual immorality... through pursuing the impulse to evil...* Where does our responsibility for those sins lie?

Here it is, friends: we must hold ourselves and our communities accountable for the safety of us all. That's easy to say, and so very complicated to do. Here are a few, although nowhere near exhaustive, practical applications for us to consider:

1. First, our organizations--schools, camps, places of employment, shuls... these should and must have written policies in place regarding sexual misconduct, as well as accompanying trainings, at least for the staff. Part of what makes a community safe is having clear and available information about what to do if we are made to feel uncomfortable. Written policies communicate strongly: We believe the statement of the victim; and we are morally and legally bound to put an end to the misconduct. And in our context, I'm talking about any one of us--a staff member, a congregant, a guest; an adult or child; a person of any gender. I'll say candidly, this is an area where our own shul has room to grow--we have a policy in place, but we could do better in studying it and receiving training. I have asked that our leadership work on this issue after the holidays.
2. Individually, we must be vigilant about the red line between friendliness and too much touch, between wanted and unwanted contact. Remember, back before Covid arrived, when shul was a place for hugs, handshakes, kisses on the cheek, arms around shoulders? For the most part, I think that was a good thing, and I do wonder if we'll ever get to return to it. It meant we were comfortable with our fellow community members, that we consider each other part of our extended family. At the same time, I'm 100% certain that there are folks in our community who prefer not to hug, who cringe at the cheek kiss, who shrink away from the arm around the shoulder. And it's each of our responsibility to pay attention to that and respect it. Maybe even ask if it's ok before doing it. If we can notice those subtle cues, we'll be more attuned to reactions to more assertive touch, unintended or intended.
3. Each of us must learn to think of ourselves as a safe haven, and by extension, of our community as a safe place. If someone has experienced an unwanted advance, am I--and are you--a safe person to tell? Can we be trusted to listen, validate, and take action to protect the victim? Will we do that even if it means confronting another member of our community? This Yom Kippur, I ask us all to work toward saying "yes" to these questions.

For the sin of sexual immorality, we commit to taking responsibility for the safety of all who come through our doors.

Before I leave you this evening, I must return to the larger issues of *teshuvah*, repentance. As we've been talking about *chata'im*, sins, elsewhere, I wonder what has come up for you, for each of us? I wonder about the *chata'im* we're not yet thinking about, the *chata'im* we most need to think about, the ones we just want to sweep under the rug and ignore their effect on others in our lives. Who have we hurt this year, and how? Who has hurt us this year, and how? Are we willing to ask forgiveness? To offer it?

Buddhist teacher and practitioner Sharon Salzberg once wrote, "When we open our hearts to pain and suffering, we begin to heal, not because suffering is redemptive but because opening our heart is."

Between each recitation of *Ashamnu* and *Al Chet* on this day, we proclaim: *atah yodea razei olam, v'ta'alumot sitrei kol-chai*, "You know the mysteries of the universe, the deepest secrets of everyone alive... Nothing escapes You; nothing is secret from You"². Perhaps this leap of faith is just what we need to nudge us toward the *teshuvah* we know we must do. Even if it's not clear to all around us, what we've done isn't quite as private as we might have thought. Our Creator knows; and in many cases, so does the person we've hurt. They're just waiting for us to own it.

I hope and pray that this will be a year of taking responsibility--of past abuse within USY, of our community working to make our shul as safe as it is welcoming, and of each of us seeking and giving the forgiveness we so desperately need. May these next 25 hours of prayer and contemplation strengthen our resolve, and may each of us be sealed in *Sefer HaChayim*, the Book of Life. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*.

² Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 265