

***“Asseh Lecha Rav”:
A Journey Through Clergy Abuse***

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Several years ago I thought I met the Rabbi of my dreams. He identified as Orthodox and also purported a deep spiritual life. He appeared warm and accepting and he seemed to understand my struggle to figure out how I can blend Judaism with the needs of my personal spirituality. When I read one of his books, I was completely entranced – his words represented the Jewish practice of my heart. The textual sources that he referred to were some of my favorite passages and teachings. I had to connect with him, to learn with him. At that time I was struggling between two seemingly opposing Jewish worlds – a traditional Orthodox path and the unbounded creative Renewal path. My practice and observance challenged both worlds that they *could* authentically be integrated within me. I believed that his acceptance of me would mean that I was on the correct Jewish path – his approval would mean divine approval. After all, he is a Rabbi, and is in tune with what G-d wants.

I wrote him a long letter, sharing my life story and my current struggles and I waited anxiously and excitedly for a response. At first I received a letter from his wife, who told me that the Rabbi was busy traveling but would get back to me later that month. Finally, after much waiting for this sacred connection, I received an email from the Rabbi himself. It was a very brief email, though, for me, concentrated with meaning and understanding. The Rabbi invited me to come learn with him in a Jewish camp and potentially to join his ordination program.

Fast forward about 2 years later, I am living and working in a community center in Israel, of which my Rabbi is the director and lead teacher. I was living a paradise picture of existence. The house was on a road that overlooked the Mediterranean Sea, with a small brick oven bakery and locally supplied produce vendor right down the road. Students from all walks of life visited daily to learn Torah from the Rabbi. On Friday nights we would conduct dynamic and ecstatic services with over 100

Israelis – singing and dancing, laughing and crying. I was loved and supported by this community. I grew in my ability to have presence in a group and to be a community facilitator. While my relationship with the community members was nurturing, I began to have serious doubts about my Rabbi's behavior.

First there was the emphasis on secrecy in the community. The Rabbi taught that as a spiritual community we should restrain from *Lashon Harah* (Speaking about Others). While this is a valuable ethic to have within any community, I later realized that the Rabbi used this teaching to ultimately discourage members of the community to talk about their relationship with him. The degree of secrecy felt like a dark shroud, where I was cautious to share valid concerns fearing that he would find out. The Rabbi always seemed to find out what was said between community members where he was concerned. Some of the loyal members of the community were used like spies, where he might ask seemingly benign or playful questions about what someone said. He desired to know everything that occurred between community members – whether platonic, professional, or romantic.

Second, the Rabbi always put his vision first, regardless of how this might impact the well-being of those around him. I was able to see now how the Rabbi used tactics of manipulation to coax people to work for him. Even if these relationships turned sour, the Rabbi seemed to be unrelenting. This involved bartering a community member's technical services for a conversion to Judaism that would never come, and sustaining a toxic working relationship with a community member that involved frequent shouting matches. Additionally, the Rabbi showed no concern for his own well-being. He seemed to work constantly through the night, obsessively checking e-mail and working on publications. On several nights I would be woken up in the middle of the night because he needed another phone when his cordless phone would lose power.

Related to this last point, the Rabbi seemed to try to usurp power from other community leaders by openly disrespecting them in front of their community members. For example, when an elderly Eastern meditation teacher came to our community center for a debate, the Rabbi made him wait more

than a hour before greeting him. He was not necessarily doing anything of dire importance, simply working on emails and publications. When confronted by the teacher's students about his behavior the Rabbi casually dismissed their concerns. On another similar occasion the Rabbi was angry that another community leader was given the same kind of chair that he sat on because it made them look like equals. At the same meeting he accused the entire community of acting selfishly because their spiritual practice involved meditation. The Rabbi claimed that this practice did nothing for the benefit of the Jewish people and was thus an improper focus for their community.

The last point of major concern for me was that the Rabbi's past was littered with accusations of sexual misconduct. The Rabbi mostly denied that the stories were true and tried to discredit them by defaming the people that told these stories. On a few occasions, the Rabbi was unable to counter the claims and admitted to his wrong doings, though shifted the blame to the victim. He often talked about the danger of getting stuck in the role of victim. I now speculate that his rants against victimization was his way of minimizing the hurt he had caused other people.

With much trepidation and uncertainty, I decided to leave the community. The Rabbi expressed a lot of anger about my decision. He scolded, "What about me?" It was hearing this response that convinced me that I had made the right decision. As a sincere and caring teacher the Rabbi should have been more attuned to my pain and concern rather than solely focusing on how this would effect his work. About one month after I left, the news broke that the Rabbi was sexually engaged with many of his female students. Finally, the silence was broken and his sexual escapades were revealed. The Rabbi, facing legal charges, decided to flee to the United States.

There was much concern for the women that the Rabbi had hurt by the larger Jewish communities that supported him over the years. Their stories were documented and the Rabbi was banned from teaching in most of the Jewish world. Though I was not manipulated into having sex with the Rabbi, I experienced psychological manipulation and after-effects from my contact with the Rabbi.

As I spent time away from the community, I slowly became aware that I was being controlled by my teacher. The Rabbi would read my e-mails and respond to them as if he were me. I learned to talk like him and think like him and took on his work ethic, working many days from 8am to midnight. I think it was my need for attention and love that was the tool he used to keep me engaged in his vision. And, of course the fact that I admired his deep teachings and stated relationship to Judaism. Towards the end of my term working with him, I increasingly second-guessed my own thoughts and concerns about him. I was not able to trust my own power of reason when it concluded that my hero was a dangerous person. I began to discredit my mind in order to stay in his favor and not to rock the boat of my own fantasy. Luckily, I had a conversation with a friend who broke through and gave me permission to listen to my gut and heart.

The most noticeable after-effect was that I became seriously weary of most Rabbis and secular teachers, especially charismatic leaders in positions of power. I shut myself off from school professors and neighborhood Rabbis that might have been positive influences on my path. I was left completely to my own devices when it came to making spiritual and religious decisions. Though, I am ultimately grateful for the lesson learned, namely, that I need to be my own Rabbi, it came at a price of my trust for others.

I decided to write this article for two reasons. The first is that I felt neglected from the lifting up and healing that was extended to the sexual victims of the Rabbi. The message I received was that since the women were physically manipulated they experienced the brunt of his ill-will. Thus, no one reached out to me to help me heal from the psychological and emotional damage that I suffered through. Second, when I shared this story with some friends, they failed to see what was really wrong in the situation. "If the sex was consensual between two adults, what is the big deal?" I am writing this to educate the public to the emotional and psychological trauma that is caused by clergy abuse and manipulation, even in the absence of sex, and to affirm that the abuse of power through dishonesty,

secrecy, and manipulation was the true crime. The luring of multiple women into sexual relationships under false pretenses was a heinous symptom, while the root of the problem was the insatiable quench for power.

It has been important for me to reflect on how I approach clergy. What do I look for as a consumer of spiritual guidance in a teacher? I have come up with a short list of items that have stemmed from contemplating my experience and short-sightedness with my Rabbi.

1. *The allure of secrecy and the inner circle.* As stated above an ethic of not speaking about other people is a positive community practice. It makes sense that in spiritual work, one should be mindful of one's judgments of others and that an effort is sometimes needed to protect the private life of others by not divulging personal information. Leading with that caveat, it is also important that there should not be a sense that the community leader is being protected by an inner circle. A leader's time and attention should not be bought with favors, and access to spiritual teachings and rituals should also never be made a commodity. The leader should rely on strict personal boundaries to ensure equal treatment of anyone seeking guidance. And related to this, is that the teacher should be aware that he or she cannot be the guide of everyone who knocks. Humility should be shown in sometimes saying, "No, I can't help."
2. *Honest inquiry into relationships.* Righteous relationships, whether platonic, romantic, or sexual, are a challenge to any human being. A spiritual teacher need not be perfect in relationships, namely because, who can really set the standard for perfection. Whether the Rabbi is in a magnanimous marriage or in an open-relationship with community members is not the point. Politics aside, what is most important is that the teacher own up to his or her way of life. Straight, gay, or bisexual, the leader's personal life should not be locked in an impenetrable closet. As we learn from the Talmud, "*Gam ze Torah!*" (This too is Torah) The spiritual guide teaches through the way he or she lives his or her life, including who and how many he or she

takes to bed. As a good friend reminded me, heterosexual monogamy is also a statement of sexual activity and sexual preference. Your teacher should not be afraid to struggle openly with relationships and be truthful about their relationship ethics.

3. *Beware of the littered past.* Any person who is honest with themselves will find some interaction where they regret their behavior. Most people become aware of, admit to, and take responsibility for their faults. In Judaism, we strongly believe in *Teshuvah* (repentance) – the ability for an individual to make up for their deeds by learning from the past and acting differently in the future. Obviously, community leaders too are privy to wrongdoing and repentance. There should be room for Rabbis to make mistakes and be forgiven by the larger community. Thus, a teacher who has engaged in sexual misconduct in the past and other abuses of power can change and should be supported by the larger community to engage in the personal and public work of change. Keeping the idea of *Teshuvah* in mind, an student should pay attention to the negative stories and rumors that might be floating around about their teacher. As an informed consumer a student should feel comfortable to ask a teacher about their past. It is important to know if rumors are true or not. If they are not true, then it is important to know why the rumors exist. If the stories of abuses of power are true, then a teacher should be able to map out their process of change. A Rabbi's personal transformation is a rich tool that a student should have access to – “*Gam Ze Torah!*” What should not happen is that rumors are simply ignored with naivete, nor should they become part of the teacher's secret vault.

Through my journey of being sucked in by charisma and subsequently jaded to trust any similar teacher, I have come to believe that having a mentor is necessary along the spiritual path and the selection of a teacher should be done with great discernment and caution. You might even say that choosing a Rabbi is in itself a spiritual challenge. We must reach a place of inner confidence to be open to truly knowing the potential teacher as an equal first, and then we make a choice to humble ourselves

as students with an awareness that our teacher too is flawed. We have to be ready to learn equally from our teachers' strengths and fallacies.

Perhaps this is a deeper understanding to the Jewish adage, “*Asseh Lecha Rav,*” (*Make for yourself a teacher.*) The term *Rav* can mean teacher or greater. Thus, the phrase can be translated as, *Make to yourself greater*, meaning, create a relationship for yourself where you hold someone as greater than you are. In conclusion, the student should always be in control of this power dynamic. He or she chooses to see the teacher as greater in some way, and simultaneously evaluates the relationship because the student is inspired by the teacher towards greater authentic living.

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Dr. Zvi Bellin holds a Ph.D. in Pastoral Counseling/Counselor Education from Loyola University in Maryland. His research interests include a narrative approach to exploring personal meaning and the emphasis on “meaning through being” in one's life. Dr. Bellin interned at Elat Chayyim 10 years ago, sparking a journey of self-exploration of religious integration of Jewish Orthodoxy and Renewal. His main work in the Jewish community is through *Nehirim: GLBT Jewish Culture and Spirituality*, where he serves as the Engagement Associate, a retreat director, and workshop facilitator. Dr. Bellin coordinates independent learning programs and contemplative Shabbat retreats. For more information please see, www.meaningthroughbeing.com .