

Photo by: Marc Israel Sellem

Class shows haredi readiness to tackle sex abuse

By RUTH EGLASH
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Course launched recently to train haredi counselors to work with sexually abused kids shows openness to once taboo issue.

A course launched last month to train haredi (ultra- Orthodox) male counselors how to work with sexually abused children in their community indicates a new willingness to address an issue that was once considered taboo.

The course, which is being run by the Jerusalem-based Haruv Institute for some 20 male social workers, therapists and psychologists from the haredi world, teaches participants how to work with ultra- Orthodox children who struggle to speak out about what has happened to them because of the Jewish tenet of lashon hara (the prohibition against speaking badly about others), unconditional respect for their elders and lack of appropriate vocabulary.

"The whole approach to this is different for haredim than for secular people," said Tali Shlomi, director of Knowledge, Technology and Resources at Haruv, which was established four years ago to provide professionals with the training and tools to deal with sexual abuse and neglect.

"There is a lot of sensitivity around this topic and often, the children do not even have the words to explain what has happened to them," she said.

Shlomi, who coordinates all of Haruv's courses for the haredi community, explained that while a secular child might be able to describe to their parent that someone has carried out sexual acts on them, for a haredi child it is much more complex.

"These children have a deep conflict in talking about what has happened to them," she observed, adding that the fact Haruv succeeded in finding 20 ultra-Orthodox men to take the course indicates a shift in attitudes in the community.

"It is the result of other changes that have taken place in the community over the past 10 years, including an increase in haredim in the workplace and the

discourse around military service,” said Shlomi, who has already run two previous courses for haredi female professionals and those graduates now work with child victims of sexual abuse. “The community is much more open and willing to confront this issue.”

While the course for male professionals is still in its early days, Shlomi said that there is already a waiting list of more than 40 women who want to take this training course in the future.

“Those that I interviewed for the course said that they felt a responsibility to be ambassadors in their community and really want to tackle this issue,” she said, highlighting that for cultural and religious reasons, women counselors in the haredi community are not able to work with boys over the age of 11 and men stop direct interaction with girls when they are still very young.

There is a severe lack of specially trained ultra-Orthodox counselors available in general to work with victims of sexual abuse from within that community, she said.

Although Shlomi could not provide exact figures on the number of cases of sexual abuse within the haredi community – those reported are likely only the tip of the iceberg – she did point to the recent exposure of a serial pedophile operating in a Jerusalem neighborhood and other incidents that have meant the community can no longer ignore the subject.

“There is no doubt that there has been an increase in awareness among the haredim and their response has been a willingness to confront the problem,” she stated.

Data provided by the Magen child protection agency located in Beit Shemesh, another city with a large haredi population, confirms Shlomi’s analysis.

The organization, which runs a hotline for families and victims to report cases of neglect and sexual abuse, notes that since starting its work in Beit Shemesh nearly two years ago there have been reports from more than 100 families – 95 percent of them describing themselves as ultra-Orthodox – of abuse against their children.

Already some 40 men have been identified from these reports as being a danger to children, with 15 men already arrested for their crimes.

“We are seeing a significant change in attitudes just in a year and a half of Magen’s awareness raising and community programs,” commented David Morris, executive director of Magen. “The quantity and frequency of parents and kids now coming to Magen and to the state authorities has been increasing each month.”

He added: “We are pleased that Magen is already trusted by members of the public, and within the haredi community in particular, with these most sensitive and important matters – and we admire the courage of parents who are increasingly open to improving the safety of their children, and to responsibly addressing this risk in our community.”