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Raising awareness of child sexual abuse in Jewish communities

By MANNY WAKS
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It is essential that we, as citizens of the global Jewish community, educate ourselves on the plight of victims of child sexual abuse, as well as institutional cover-ups that have occurred (and are still occurring) within our communities.

This week I will travel to Israel to attend the inaugural international conference on child sexual abuse within the global Jewish community, sponsored by the Haruv Institute and Magen.

This is a remarkable event for me, one I could not have envisaged when in mid- 2011 I finally shared publicly my personal story of child sexual abuse at Melbourne, Australia's Yeshivah Center, where I, as a child, studied and prayed as a member of a very large, insular Chabad- Lubavitch family and community.

Coincidentally this conference takes place in the country where I became determined to finally take a public stand on this issue. At the time I was undertaking the Nahum Goldmann Fellowship, and one morning in Jerusalem, as I read an online article in a major Melbourne newspaper that reported an ongoing police investigation into child sexual abuse, I knew I had to act.

I understood there would be significant ramifications, though as most decisions of this sort tend to unfold, I could not have foreseen the extent of the fallout, including the severity of the backlash against myself and my family. My decision, which I do not resile from for one moment, marked the beginning of a long personal and professional journey. I certainly now arrive in Israel a far more mature spokesperson for victims of child sexual abuse, and a very long way from the silenced 18-year-old who left Australia in 1994 to join a combat unit of the IDF.

This inaugural conference stands as a milestone in the significant progress that has taken place over the past few years within the global Jewish community on issues related to the controversial and sensitive topic of child sexual abuse.

While many are still yet to fully grasp the crisis we are facing – indeed some remain in remarkable denial, both regarding the abuse and subsequent cover-ups – it is now clear to most people, especially professional advocacy and support groups, that this is a communal crisis affecting the global Jewish community, and it must be confronted.

It is reputedly accepted that one in three to four girls and one in five to six boys experience some form of sexual abuse before they turn 18, and sadly it can be credibly argued that the incidence may be even higher within some segments of the Jewish community. For

example, in the ultra-Orthodox community, large family sizes, the taboo nature of sexual matters and certain rituals like daily use of the mikveh by males, create an environment that offers opportunity for abuse. This is reinforced by a strictly hierarchical communal structure that in practice ensures the silence of victims, thereby making repeat offenses all the more likely.

Despite the preponderance of recent cases of abuse within the institutions of ultra-Orthodoxy, which has regularly featured in global media, these crimes are committed throughout our community, in fact most commonly within families.

In the vast majority of cases, victims of child sexual abuse know and respect their perpetrators.

A number of organizations dedicated to this issue have been created in recent years. In Australia, I founded Tzedek in 2012. In South Africa, Kidsafe SA was established in 2013. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, Migdal Emunah was founded in 2013, and in Israel of course there is Magen. In the US, Jewish Community Watch was established in 2011, though it was recently forced to close due to lack of financial support. And there are others.

It is essential that we, as citizens of the global Jewish community, educate ourselves on the plight of victims of child sexual abuse, as well as institutional cover-ups that have occurred (and are still occurring) within our communities.

Understanding and acknowledging the past will help ensure we are better equipped to mitigate risks and is critical to achieving the cultural change we so desperately require.

The fact that the issue of child sexual abuse in Jewish communities has now become part of public discourse has generated much-needed awareness and has empowered parents, guardians, schools and others who are in regular contact with children to better address the issue of child sexual abuse. Importantly, it has empowered victims and given them a long awaited sense of acknowledgment.

However there is a very long way to go.

There needs to be a continued investment – moral, financial and religious – in the organizations dedicated to this issue and the work we have ahead of us to address and rectify past wrongs, find justice and educate the next generation.

Jewish groups, secular and religious, need to actively encourage and empower victims to disclose their abuse in a safe and supportive environment. It is important to note that tragically, it takes on average 25 years for victims to disclose their abuse, after decades of trauma and isolation.

In Australia the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, a government-sponsored inquiry with wide judicial powers, has been established at a federal level. Thus far it must be considered a success, and a model governmental approach to address institutional child sexual abuse. I look forward to attending this conference where the issue of child sexual abuse within the global Jewish community can be discussed openly with the urgency and legitimacy it deserves, for the benefit of past and present victims, and to ensure we are better equipped to create a safer future.

Enough! No more silence.

The author is the founder & CEO of Tzedek and has held numerous senior leadership positions within the Australian Jewish community.