



## *The Awareness Center, Inc.*

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### **"I Don't Believe You!"**

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"I don't believe you" are words that can destroy a 'neshema' (soul).

What would it be like for someone who survived the terrorist attacks on September 11th to disclose their experience to a trusted friend, only to be told: "No, we don't believe you, this couldn't have happened, you must be making this up..."

We all know that words can hurt, but we may not truly understand that telling someone who was victimized that their story is unbelievable can be incredibly damaging.

It's not uncommon for The Awareness Center to receive letters from rabbis and other community leaders, stating how various individuals from their community had come up to them and disclosed childhood secrets. These community leaders would discuss in their letters how they felt to have had good relationships with these survivors up until the point of disclosure, but now feel that things have changed. "Why?" You may wonder. "What happened?" The rabbis' response to those individuals who came to see them was that they didn't believe they'd really been abused; that the problems they had in their lives must have been caused by some other problems. The survivors reached out to their rabbis with a gesture of trust, only to have their painful, personal disclosure dismissed and or discounted.

Such a disheartening exchange holds every potential for changing the relationships between a rabbi and members of his community. Not only is the survivor placed in a position to not trust the rabbi to be there for him/her in time of need; the rabbi himself might from then on view this person as unreliable and unstable, maybe even as potentially disruptive as a potential source of 'Lashon Hara' (*derogatory speech, that is true*). Disclosures of abuse are extremely uncomfortable to listen to. They change our perception of people we thought highly

of and believed to be wholesome; into incomprehensible perpetrators. They threaten our vision of the Jewish community is immune to such atrocities. However, as tempting as automatic denial of the authenticity of abuse disclosures might be; applying it without due cause short-changes everyone. By categorically denying stories of abuse, rabbis do not only unintentionally deny survivors the help they need in order to heal, they may also deny the perpetrators the help they need so they can stop abusing. Statistics show that sexual offenders often commit an average of seventy offenses by the time they are caught.

Unless an individual has had specialized training in the area of childhood molestation (and even then only under very specific circumstances), saying "I don't believe you" to someone who shares their trauma with you can be and often is perceived as yet another form of abuse. As betrayal. It is extremely hard for a survivor to disclose his/her stories. Experiences of sexual victimization are deeply private matters that often carry a significant amount of confusion and shame. What does a survivor have to gain from such disclosure? More times than not, there is a lot more to lose than gain. In fact, often times people disclose in spite of knowing that their disclosure may stigmatize them, but do so anyway in order to help save others from going through similar ordeals. If asked, most survivors of childhood abuse state that they would rather not expose themselves and would rather have the whole thing go away; would rather not remember that it even happened. Naturally they often do yearn for understanding and validation--who would not?--and this yearning can at times be why people share their stories. However, sadly and all too often, survivors' fears that those they disclosed to would not look at them in the same light ever again, do indeed manifest. People who disclose stories of childhood sexual abuse all too frequently end up being seen as mentally ill and manipulative, rather than as survivors of trauma who may be dealing with symptoms of post-

traumatic-stress.

It is true that there is often little or no proof that what people claim happened to them actually did--by definition sexual abuse tends to happen in private. At the same time, there is often little or no proof that it did not. Of course it is far more comfortable to believe that things didn't happen and to hold on to the conviction that no one in your community is so corrupted that they would hurt a child this way. However, sexual abuse does happen. What if the stories you hear are true? How does one prove a memory when the only other witness to the event was the offender, who clearly has a vested interest in denying that it ever took place? What are you to do? How are you to decide what to believe?

It is important to remember that it is not your job to prove or disprove what you are hearing--this is what law enforcement and the judicial systems are for. When someone trusts you enough to disclose a deep dark secret of an experience as painful and devastating as childhood sexual abuse; all you are called to do is to listen, then help the survivor live the most productive, happy life possible. When you are chosen to bear witness to their stories, you are summoned to help them heal their "neshema"--their spirit, their very soul. You are not called to serve as judge and jury, but are rather given an opportunity to help reverse some of the damage that comes with sexual crimes, by helping the survivor see that he/she are good and worthwhile individuals. You can help them see that their experiences did not alter their birthright as a part of 'Bnei-Israel' and that you--the person they look up to--are there for them. That all is not lost.

Each state has laws regarding mandated reporting to authorities when one becomes aware of possible abuse ("possible" being the operative word: all you need is the suspicion that abuse may have taken place, then it is up to the authorities to look into whether it is true). If you aren't already familiar with the laws in your state, call Child Protection Services and find out what they are and if you are a mandated reporter. By listening to a disclosure, even by reporting suspected abuse, you are not proving that what the survivor told you is true or not true. What you are saying to him/her is: "I respect you and your feelings enough to not dismiss you or shame you by letting my discomfort and my hope that it isn't true to come in the way of what you need, the protection that you, too, deserve."

Child abuse is a devastating reality, but it does not

need to be a part of our communities' future. By listening to people in your community and allowing those who were hurt to speak up and be heard, you can help the Jewish community as a whole take a big step toward healing. Take people's disclosure to you as a proof of their trust in you as a competent, compassionate, knowledgeable person; and suspend your personal judgment regarding the factual truth in their stories. According to both the Jewish and Secular law "one is innocent until proven guilty." This should include the survivor who discloses a story of abuse, not only the alleged offenders... Until and if their claim is disproved, saying to a survivor: "I don't believe you," deprives them of the same leeway we rush to give the accused.

Many sexually abused children are told by their perpetrators: "Don't tell, because no one would believe you, because I'll say you are lying and they'll believe me, not you." Let's not make these words come true.



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