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Behind yeshiva walls: The hidden sexual abuse in haredi communities - opinion

It seems that every time a new scandal erupts, the deep fracture within the haredi community is exposed once again.

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HAREDI YESHIVA students
(photo credit: YAAKOV COHEN/FLASH90)

By PRIEL FITOUSSI
JULY 16, 2025 08:38
Updated: JULY 16, 2025 14:04

Approximately one in five men and boys in Israel experiences [sexual abuse](#) in childhood, with some 63% of children treated belonging to the [haredi](#) (ultra-Orthodox) community, according to a study by the Ne'emanei Torah Va'Avodah movement using data from the Welfare Ministry.

Paradoxically, in a society that seems to protect its own, the danger happens behind closed doors, in yeshivot, mikvehs, synagogues, and other exclusively male spaces where men ostensibly have nothing to fear.

While daughters in the community are heavily guarded, the boys are left less protected, with the abuse they endure buried in silence, and the victims become invisible.

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Most do not find the courage to speak until an average of 20 years has passed. Only then are they able to overcome the fear of lashon hara (gossip), of becoming the subject of rumors, or of destroying the reputation of the abuser, who is often a figure of authority like a rabbi, educator, or

"community policeman" like [Chaim Rotter](#) from the "Shomrim" organization, who was supposed to protect but instead became the perpetrator.

It seems that every time a new scandal erupts, from the cases of Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, Chaim Walder, Yaakov Stern, and now Rotter, the deep fracture within the haredi community is once again exposed. A community in which widespread [sexual abuse](#) has taken place for years under a veil of secrecy, while at the same time, strong communal mechanisms suppress and sweep things under the rug, all in the name of "honoring the Torah" and keeping "dirty laundry inside the home."

Haredi children return to school amid the coronavirus crisis (credit: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM)

Sexual abuse of religious men is not just a physical violation; it is a spiritual one that tears apart the victim's inner world. Unlike in the general public, victims in the Haredi community feel a triple betrayal: spiritual or communal leaders are the ones who betray and harm them. The father did not see or protect. God did not guard me. And the abuser, often a father figure or authority in the victim's life, exploited and shed their blood.

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The shame and guilt wrap the physical trauma in deep spiritual pain, sometimes leading to abandonment of religious identity or severing ties with the community. Many speak of despair, suicidal thoughts, and above all, a sense that there is no place and no one to talk to.

The national helpline for haredi men

The national helpline for boys and men from the haredi sector who have been sexually abused was founded for this exact reason: to offer a safe and discreet place for victims to be heard.

The line is staffed by volunteers who share the values, cultural language, and faith of the callers. They undergo thorough training that enables them to conduct complex conversations and provide services from the support center, including assistance sessions, accompaniment through criminal and legal proceedings, referrals to individual or group therapy, and assistance in exercising their rights.

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Often, the challenge is not just to listen, but to hold the pain without being overwhelmed by it. Each story reveals a reality in which an entire world is quietly crying out for help, against a community that sometimes doesn't want to hear, and a broader society that doesn't always understand.

As long as those in power are sometimes also the perpetrators, our responsibility is to be their voice, to remind everyone that they deserve validation, protection, and healing.

This silence has already claimed too many victims. Now is the moment to choose not to remain silent, but to stand with them, to see them, and to begin to repair.

For confidential assistance

02-5328000 | Sunday–Thursday, 8 p.m.–11 p.m.

1203 | The national helpline for men who have experienced sexual assault (available 24/7)

The author is the Coordinator of the Hotline for Men from the Religious–Haredi Sector Affected by Sexual Abuse, part of the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel.

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