

Preventing Clergy Sexual Abuse

By Rabbi Ellen Lewis

Clergy sexual abuse is a problem that just will not go away. The news media inform us that Vatican officials had failed to report sex abuse charges properly and had moved priests rather than disciplining them. The Catholic Church suspends a local pastor for allowing a priest with a history of groping boys to attend a church-sponsored family festival. A rabbi allegedly took nearly half a million dollars from synagogue funds and congregants to hide an illicit relationship with a teenage boy. The problem of clergy who commit sexual abuse crosses denominations, geography and social class. The Rev. Marie Fortune reports:

Research on sexual involvement between clergy and congregants is sparse, but research and media reports of charges and civil or criminal actions suggest that between 10 and 20 percent of clergy violate sexual boundaries in their professional relationships. Although the vast majority of pastoral offenders in reported cases are heterosexual males and the vast majority of victims are heterosexual females, neither gender nor sexual orientation excludes anyone from the risk of offending (clergy) or from the possibility of being taken advantage of (congregants/clients) in the pastoral or counseling relationship.¹

1 Marie Fortune, "Sexual Abuse by Religious Leaders." *When Pastors Prey: Overcoming Clergy Sexual Abuse of Women*, ed. Valli Boobal Batchelor (World Council of Churches: Geneva, Switzerland, 2013) 15.

Reading about these cases, we respond with surprise and revulsion. Each time, we express shock that someone in a position of religious authority can violate the trust we place in him or her. Each time, we rightly call for swift exposure, condemnation and punishment, but all that is after the fact. While there are no quick fixes, there are steps we can take to make clergy safe for those they serve.

What makes clergy unsafe? In my experience as a rabbi and therapist who works with clergy, clergy are no different from other abusers in motive, just in opportunity. Although we might resist admitting it, we possess all the same human weaknesses as everyone else. We are insecure, desirous of being loved, anxious about doing the right thing, depressed about the state of the world, over-worked, confused about power and unclear about personal and professional boundaries. It isn't that we don't possess intellectual knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. What we often lack is emotional self-awareness and the usual outlets for talking.

It seems counterintuitive to think of clergy as people with no opportunity to talk. We commonly joke about clergy whose sermons drone on endlessly. Clergy talk all the time in all kinds of settings: from the pulpit, in the classroom, on television, in boardrooms and in hospital rooms. We speak as experts in those contexts. People look to us for words of truth and solace in hard times. We struggle to find just the right word in the right moment. But whom can we trust with our own deepest fears and doubts? We who live with this dilemma are a paranoid lot; we know we need to share our personal stories, but if we confide in a board member, we can't be sure our intimate details won't become grist for the congregational mill. And how can we be sure that that very act of confidence does not, in itself, constitute a boundary violation? And so we face the challenge of where to find friends if not within the community to which we are devoted day and night.

To further complicate the picture, people unknowingly project their own fantasies onto us. When I first started out in the congregational rabbinate over thirty years ago, one of my senior rabbis liked to repeat a story he thought was funny but couldn't explain. Every time he visited congregants in the hospital, he would walk into one patient's room and the patient would greet him by saying, "Rabbi, you look wonderful—so rested and relaxed. You

must have had a great summer vacation.” Then he would walk into the room of the next congregant, who would say, “Rabbi, you look terrible—so drawn and gaunt and tired. Didn’t you get to take a vacation this summer?” People see us the way they need to see us based on their own personal history and psychology.

We clergy sometimes become confused by these projections. If someone in our office or in the hospital room confesses their love for us, how do we understand and receive that love? We need to acquire the skills to distinguish what we psychoanalysts call transference love from true interpersonal love lest our own loneliness and lack of emotional self-awareness lead us to look for love in all the wrong places. We fall victim to our own needs. That is how easy it can be for those who trust us to become the victims of our darker impulses. The clergy role itself invites our entrance into this dangerous arena. “The clergy role is *sui generis* for it is the only profession that wraps personal identity, professional identity and religious all in the same package.”² The daily emotional demands alone can be dizzying. We spend the day switching emotional gears, moving from counseling a premarital couple to teaching seventh graders to consoling a bereaved family. Our own needs can get lost in the congregational shuffle.

And then there is the loneliness. Members of the clergy often enter the profession because they consider themselves to be people persons and yet end up feeling lonely and isolated. As Mark Brouwer writes:

It’s ironic that pastors, who talk the most about the need for community, experience it the least. Our days and nights are filled with calls, meetings, and interactions with people. But despite lots of people contact, we have few trusted peers. We have too many relationships and too few friends.³

He goes on to point out the dangers of this kind of isolation: isolated leaders are more susceptible to feelings of sadness and loneliness, anxiety and stress, discouragement, temptation, and doing stupid things. We clergy, the very people who listen to the feelings of others and counsel them in an attempt to prevent them from

2 Lloyd G. Rediger, *Beyond the Scandals: a Guide to Healthy Sexuality for Clergy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) 22.

3 Mark Brouwer, “The Friendless Pastor,” *Christianity Today* online, Accessed March 25, 2014.

doing stupid things, often are unaware that we are subject to those same feelings and temptations. Our isolation encourages an even greater danger of acting inappropriately. At times, we grandiosely and piously convince ourselves that we should be above having these feelings. Yet feelings do not just go away, however we might wish it; there are consequences to having no healthy outlet for their expression. Some of us are inclined to act in. We overeat, don't exercise, don't sleep enough, swallow feelings, and are susceptible to stress-related disease. We only hurt our families and ourselves. Others of us act out. We run from our feelings into the embrace of drugs, alcohol, and worst of all, vulnerable parishioners. The cycle becomes addictive. When you don't know what you feel, you are more likely to act on impulse. When you act on impulse, you avoid experiencing uncomfortable feelings. And that is what gets us into trouble. We lose sight of the difference between a loving relationship and an abusive one.

People often assume that those of us who enter the rabbinate do so because we love people. We're the only ones who know the complicated truth, that we enter the rabbinate because we love people who can then drive us to distraction. It's ironic in a way; it's not until we enter the rabbinate that we discover that the rabbinate is a great place for avoiding intimacy. Rabbi James Bleiberg makes the case that our entrance into the rabbinate and its conflicts is not an accidental one. "Broadly speaking, clergy lurch toward maturity driven by a deep hunger for connection with others. This movement is balanced by a strong aversion to uncomfortable intimacies rooted in our earliest experiences."⁴ He offers an analogy that he frames as a contemporary *mashal*:

To what is the inner life of the rabbi similar? It is like someone who is afraid of the water. At times, this person will carefully enter a pool or lake but prefers to venture no farther than knee deep. Avoiding water or making special accommodations to feel safe in the water becomes an underlying postulate of life. When choosing a profession, this person selects a field

4 Rabbi James Bleiberg, "A Pathway to Wisdom: Three Stages in the Development of Clergy," *Congregations* (Alban Institute, January/February 2002, Number 1) 1.

that on the surface appears to eschew water entirely. But incredibly, a part of the person's job description turns out to include serving as a lifeguard!⁵

We rabbis are not immune to the deepest of human paradoxes, that what we want is also what we fear. The problem is that rabbis cannot feel whole when they are confused about intimacy. We all think we want it, but we unconsciously do things to sabotage our getting it for reasons that are quite individual. And if we are confused about intimacy, that confusion can lead us to look for love in all the wrong places. In an extreme case, that confusion can lead us to act sexually inappropriately with congregants because we are not clear on the difference between their need for our rabbinic love and our own needs for gratification. At those times, we must exercise enormous self-discipline. As Marie Fortune writes, "Even if it is the congregant who sexualizes the relationship, it is still the religious leader's responsibility to maintain the boundaries of the pastoral relationship and not pursue a sexual relationship."⁶ We have to get our personal intimate needs met, but not from our profession. Our profession may bring us satisfaction and a sense of professional achievement. The appropriate way for a congregation to show its love is to pay us well and treat us well; it is important for congregations to do their own emotional work so that they can treat each other and their clergy in healthy ways. The appropriate way for clergy to love congregants is for us to take care of ourselves so that we can do our job.

Clergy need to talk, not just in sanctuaries or classrooms, but in environments where we can feel safe, with professional supervisors who understand the sacredness of the task. Supervision isn't a place where someone gives you answers and tells you what to do; it is a process of emotional education and self-discovery that requires an ongoing commitment. It can be a therapeutic experience, and it can supplement personal therapy. Among its benefits are the following:

1. Setting aside and protecting one hour a week is a great accomplishment for any rabbi. An enforced way of taking care

5 Rabbi James Bleiberg, "The Seasons of a Rabbi's Life: A Psychological Portrait," (*CCAR Journal*, Winter 1999) 3-4.

6 Marie Fortune, 19.

of yourself emotionally, it is an hour that is all yours. Once you get into the habit of doing something that is good for you, you might go on and do something else that is good for you.

2. It is important for the rabbi to get the view from the other side of the couch. It makes you more aware of how your congregants or clients experience coming to you for help. Rabbis need to have the experience of being listened to in order to listen well to others.
3. It supports your being helpful and compassionate without taking on other people's problems as your own.
4. The very contract of a supervisory relationship requires the setting of boundaries—when do we meet, where do we meet, for how long do we meet, how much do I pay, what if I cancel at the last minute, can I call between sessions. If you experience how someone else handles setting boundaries, it will help you figure out how to do so with others.
5. Talking in supervision and therapy makes people less likely to act out. Acting out can range from yelling at a recalcitrant bar mitzvah kid to going home to kick the dog to violating sexual or financial norms. Acting out happens when you have reached your breaking point and rarely results in anything constructive.
6. Talking helps you to become aware of all your feelings, including feelings you might not have been aware you had. It can help you tolerate feelings you might not like having. If you can tolerate your feelings, it goes a long way towards helping others to tolerate theirs. Even better, if you can learn to enjoy all your feelings, it will help others to enjoy theirs.
7. Being in charge of everything is vastly overrated. Rabbis have to have something they are not in charge of. Even Moses figured out that he couldn't be in charge of everything all the time. In supervision, someone else is in charge. We all have to have a place where we can regress and act like a baby without there being any adverse consequences. Your supervisor's sole job is to help you get what you want irrespective of the supervisor's needs.
8. Working in any group, whether congregational, Hillel, organizational, chaplaincy or anything else, recreates the emotional environment of a family and raises whatever old feelings you have about being part of a family. It is important to

get some distance from these feelings so that you can evaluate whether you are reacting appropriately to a situation in the present or to your old family in the past.

9. The rabbinate is a hard job. We are surrounded every day by people who hate us for no apparent reason and who love us for no apparent reason. Supervision helps.
10. If we expect our congregants, clients and coworkers to grow, we have to grow as well. Spiritual leadership demands continual transformation.

Putting feelings into words on a regular basis builds the emotional resiliency necessary to be a whole person whose internal security allows us to be safe with those we serve. It allows clergy to enjoy the satisfactions of an engaging and meaningful profession while enabling our constituents to benefit from our efforts.

It is important for our seminaries to train clergy in the ethics, texts and homiletics of our respective traditions. It is more important that our seminaries offer instruction about the nature of sexual boundaries and the right codes of conduct. It is that much more important for our institutions to encourage students to develop good mental health habits while in training in order for therapy and professional supervision to develop into a habit. And it is most important for clergy working in schools, hospitals, synagogues, churches and mosques to be in ongoing therapy and supervision, mandated and funded by those very institutions. To be sure, we cannot prevent all abuse. We can, however, do a better job at making clergy safe.

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