



# Sexual Trauma and Jewish Spirituality and Religious Life

— HADAR SCHWARTZ, PHD

---

*Hadar Schwartz, PhD is a clinical psychologist in private practice in New York. She also serves as a consultant for Sacred Spaces and chairs the Child Protection Committee at her synagogue, the Conservative Synagogue Adath Israel of Riverdale. Hadar has specialized training in working with survivors of sexual abuse and assault and appreciates opportunities to also be able to work on prevention and education.*

---

Reflecting on the extensive literature on the spiritual and religious impact of sexual trauma on Christian survivors, the author draws conclusions that are applicable to Jewish survivors of such abuse and invites members and leaders in the Jewish community to think widely and specifically about the many ways that Jewish life and community can serve as positive and even healing resources for survivors.

---

The experiences of sexual abuse, assault, and harassment can dramatically affect a survivor's life. These violations of body integrity impact one's sense of self, including one's sexuality; survivors may feel ashamed, shunned, blamed, or judged. Not only can interpersonal trauma impact one's relationship to oneself, but it can disturb connection to community. And because the effects of sexual trauma can be so personal and so profound, they can be experienced as an injury to the soul and as a "crisis of faith." In this article, I will detail the ways in which sexual trauma can be experienced as a spiritual injury and will consider how such trauma may influence a survivor's stance toward religion, with some experiencing alienation and others forming deeper connections.

There has been significant research focusing on just these questions. The research is almost exclusively conducted on religiosity and spirituality in the context of Christianity. Both the terminology of the studies (e.g., focus on personal faith) and the religious affiliation of those sampled are heavily weighted toward traditional Christianity. I will review the research and in so doing, I will attempt to make space for a Jewish perspective that the research has yet to capture.

For many who have experienced trauma, spiritual concerns arise—an association that, at times, can be overlooked by psychological and medical disciplines. Traumatic experiences can lead to a crisis of belief, significance, and meaning; trauma caused by intentional human action, like sexual trauma, can also unleash a crisis of trust, both in other humans and in God, for allowing such actions to occur. The very existential questions that trauma unleashes—belief, meaning, and theodicy—are those with which religion wrestles.

Survivors of sexual violence can feel enraged with God, questioning how a benevolent God could allow such a violation to occur (Lawson, Drebing, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, 1998). Particularly for these individuals, a distancing from God, religion, and spirituality may occur. Survivors have reported leaving their churches, abandoning ritual practice, and distancing themselves from their religious communities (Finklehor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1989; Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993).

Yet, as I read first-hand accounts of survivors, I was struck by how many found comfort in religion and demonstrated increased devotion to the church. When faith in humanity has been shaken, God's omnipresence can be reassuring. As one survivor of a lifetime of abuse described, she was comforted by the knowledge that God is "with you, always, even up to the end" (Knapick, Martsolf, & Draucker, 2008; p. 5). Faith also provided a sense of absolution and redemption, as well as an antidote to the loneliness that many survivors feel. Religion can also provide survivors with the "faith to hold onto life and find meaning and purpose in their lives" (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993, p. 220). Belief instills hope that with God, life could yet improve (Houg, 2008). Finally, the research shows that religion can provide answers to the existential questions raised by trauma by providing a sense of confidence in the possibility of personal growth and resolution (Gall, Basque, Damasceno-Scott, & Vardy, 2007).

As we know, Judaism, like Christianity, provides compelling, thoughtful answers about meaning and purpose, responses that may aid in the process of recovery and healing. Conversations about faith that are grounded in Jewish representations of God may be particularly helpful to Jewish survivors. As described above, a personal, loving relationship with God can be comforting, and though the concept of "God's love" generally has Christian connotations, especially to English speakers, we know that it is also a hallmark of Jewish liturgy.

For example, God's love is on display in *Ahavah Rabbah* ("great love") and *Ahavat Olam* ("eternal love"), passages in the *siddur* (prayerbook) leading up to the *Sh'ma*. In addition, Rabbi Elliot Dorff (2003) notes that Judaism can provide a "source of strength" for survivors by "recognizing that we are all ultimately created in the image of God" (p. 187) and that we all have inherent worth. Drawing on this image of a loving, compassionate God who resides in all human beings—*b'tzelem elokim*—may be comforting for Jewish survivors who seek support and community. Marcia Cohn Spiegel (1996), one of the first Jewish writers to speak about abuse in the Jewish community, suggests that speaking of the God of the *Shekhinah*, a feminine divine presence, rather than the "anthropomorphic God envisioned as father, judge, or ruler"—which for some can be evocative of a powerful male perpetrator—may be more comforting to female survivors who "need a God of immanence, a nurturing, caring, protective deity who is present in our daily lives—a God we can trust in, who helps us to find peace" (p. 126). Both Dorff and Spiegel articulate the importance of making the divine accessible for survivors, and of highlighting a God who cares about our pain and can be a source of nurturance.

When the perpetrator of sexual abuse is a member of the clergy, the spiritual and religious effects are acutely devastating. While this conclusion is likely transferrable regardless of religion, it is worth noting that the studies I reviewed were conducted exclusively with adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse by priests. Among those who as boys were abused by priests, the effects included a distancing from faith and a renunciation of religious identity (Mart, 2004); spiritual distress (Fater & Mullaney, 2000); and decreased trust in clergy, in God, and in religion (Rosetti, 1995). The effects were experienced in their individual, familial, communal, and spiritual dimensions simultaneously.

Among these boys who were abused by priests, confusion and disorientation were common. How could they integrate the image of their perpetrator with the apparent image of a person of religious integrity? These boys feared that they would not be believed, or that they would be punished for questioning the integrity of a cleric. Furthermore, the effects of clergy abuse are uniquely devastating, because such abuse can feel like a betrayal by God, by the religion itself, or even by the entire institution of religion. Religious teachings are upended when the teachers of religious values act in direct opposition to these values. During and after the abuse, many of these boys were plagued by spiritual concerns because, as devout members, they were knowledgeable about the nature of the transgression. They struggled to integrate this betrayal with their former reliance on religion, having previously looked to religion for solace. Within the Catholic Church, where church doctrine identifies premarital sex and homosexuality as sinful, the harm experienced by male victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy was compounded by this sense of sin. In one interview, a survivor poignantly described the predicament felt by such survivors of traditional Christian faith: "he told me that he worries constantly about his sins, fears eternal damnation, and needs desperately to speak to a priest" (Mart, 2004; p. 470).

We can imagine that some of these reactions would likely be experienced by survivors of any faith, and that young boys who are victims of clergy abuse within the Jewish community may also experience spiritual distress and a desire for distance from religion. Yet, given the differences between Jewish and Christian understandings of sin and punishment, we would do well to consider that children in each tradition may experience these traumas in different ways. In particular, given Judaism's intensely communal focus, one might surmise that victims may fear that an admission of abuse would lead either to an ostracization from the community—as it has with some high profile cases within the ultra-Orthodox community (Otterman & Rivera, 2012)—or to a rejection from their family.

While we have seen that some survivors respond to their experiences with distance, others connect more deeply to religion in the aftermath of sexual violence, reporting increased prayer, spirituality, and religious behavior (Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998; Lawson et al., 1998; Shaw, Joseph, & Linley, 2005). As evidenced in the broader religious coping literature, individuals tend to draw more closely on religious resources in times of stress. Spirituality often confers particular benefits on those survivors who seek it out, including increased resilience and well-being (Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998; Valentine & Feinauer, 1993).

Judaism both acknowledges the fact that individuals often draw close to religion in times of great stress and, in many ways, encourages this outcome. For example, the process of *shiva* (the initial, intense period of mourning when community members offer condolences and support to mourners) and of the recitation of the *Kaddish* (a prayer that appears frequently in communal liturgy, can only be recited

when a quorum of ten adults is present, and is sometimes specifically recited by mourners) are both examples of Judaism's recognition that individuals will turn to religion for comfort, solace, and answers in the aftermath of the death of a loved one. Moreover, in mandating these rituals, Judaism is espousing a vision of healing that includes community at its core. There are, of course, differences between the death of a loved one and sexual abuse that likely shape the victim's experience of the value of turning to religion for comfort (especially when a member or leader of the community has perpetrated the abuse).

The strength of an individual's social support network directly mitigates the impact of a traumatic event. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), her seminal text on the experience of trauma, suggests that in the wake of trauma, the community can intervene in two important ways: "recognition" and "restitution." First, it is vital not to describe the survivor's experience as taboo or off-limits, but to publicly acknowledge and accept a survivor. As Herman (1992) writes, "there is no public moment for rape survivors" (p. 74) given that in the aftermath of assault, this crime in particular can often be seen as a private matter. Furthermore, the experience of assault within the Jewish community may result in two forms of shame: individual and communal. The community can struggle with acknowledging this crime for fear that it will "tarnish the reputation of the whole community" ("Training for Clinicians and Care Providers," n.d.). Thus, Herman underscores that public awareness is necessary to heal and to address both the internal and communal shame, and that healing must happen with others present, bearing witness to the pain and trauma.

Certain Jewish communities have already found ways to recognize and ritualize recovery in the aftermath of assault and abuse. Ritualwell (ritualwell.org), an initiative of Reconstructing Judaism, serves as a repository for many of these new and reimagined rituals. For example, immersion in the *mikveh* (the ritual bath), a religious rite of purification and cleansing dating back to the Torah (Leviticus 15) and Temple times, has been reimagined by survivors as a mode of symbolic cleansing, purification, and healing. Rabbi Sue Wasserman and Laura Levitt (1993) describe a *mikveh* ritual that they conceived of and conducted (available on the Ritualwell website). Mayyim Hayyim, a community *mikveh* and education center, also provides resources on the function and value of immersion in the *mikveh* (<https://www.mayyimhayyim.org>). Marcia Cohn Spiegel (1996) and Rachel Adler (1993) elaborate on the connection between *mikveh* and abuse, especially for women.

Ritualwell also includes new rituals to mark the anniversary of a traumatic event or the completion of some emotional work around an experience of assault. Traditional liturgy has been both altered and embraced—rituals include bentsching *gomel* (the blessing recited publicly after having gone through a life-threatening experience) or reciting *shehecheyanu* (a blessing of gratitude for having lived to reach a given milestone or experience). In one iteration, *Eshet Chayil* (Woman of Valor), a poem traditionally recited by the male head of the household to his wife delineating qualities of an ideal Jewish woman, is rewritten and reclaimed as "I am a woman of valor."

In addition to liturgical changes, writers describe changes to Jewish holiday practice for Passover, Sukkot, Rosh Hodesh, and Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur. For example, Cohn Spiegel (2008) acknowledges a possible tension for survivors in the High Holiday literature with its focus on personal forgiveness—"how does one forgive the perpetrator of early childhood sexual abuse, or violence that has left us with [sic]

deeply scarred?"(p. 25)—and suggests that we include the concept of *shleimut* (wholeness) alongside the concept of forgiveness. Through these rituals, clergy, feminist writers, and community members have attempted to adapt the wisdom of the tradition to address the particular pains and traumas of sexual assault survivors. Almost all of these rituals are designed to be performed with others present—whether with a single clergy member or a group of caring community members—to facilitate the process of communal recognition and healing.

The second important role of the community is "restitution." As Herman (1992) explains, the community plays an important role in assigning responsibility. This includes not only avoiding blaming the victim, but also holding the perpetrator, and at times the community, accountable for their actions. Particularly if the perpetrator is a fellow member of the community, this action can be an invaluable display of acknowledgement and care.

Given that spiritual concerns arise for many in the aftermath of sexual trauma, survivors' religious sensibilities may be in a state of flux. In response, some leave religion, due to the pain, judgment, or anger experienced in its midst. For others, an empathic, compelling spiritual response provides a unique comfort in a time of deep distress. As described, this response can include an introduction or reimagining of faith, an invitation from an accessible and inviting community, and a deliberate focus on recognition and restitution. In addition, religious coping, as per Kenneth Pargament (2007), a leading researcher in the field, is about "a search for significance in times of stress" that involves the sacred (p. 90). Coping that is infused with *kedushah* (sacredness) is a powerful psychological response, communicating the sanctity and humanity of all people, especially those who may feel lost, adrift, and broken. As a Jewish community, we have a sacred responsibility to ensure that all members, including survivors of sexual trauma, feel enveloped as members of this *am kadosh*, this sacred people.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways can your community engage survivors of abuse with a focus on "recognition" and "restitution"? Are there prayers, rituals, or holidays that could provide an entry point to engaging those who are looking for healing in community, religion, or faith? (The [ritualwell.org](http://ritualwell.org) website, specifically the section on "Healing from Trauma & Abuse," can provide a good starting point.)
2. Are there prayers, rituals, or holidays that may inadvertently alienate survivors who may seek comfort from a religious community? If nothing comes to mind initially, consider spending a week or longer asking yourself this question as you move through the motions of leading a Jewish life. You and others in your community may want to seek out the input of survivors themselves. If such experiences exist, how might you begin to change the language your community uses and the ceremonies you conduct to foster greater inclusivity and healing?
3. Are there ways that you can engage the broader community in asking and answering these questions, inviting survivors and allies alike to consider thoughtful responses?

## Further readings

- Adler, R. (1997). Themes of Leviticus/Vayikra Rabbah—sexuality and ritual purity: 'In your blood, live': Re-visions of a theology of purity. D. Orenstein & J. Littman (Eds.), *Lifecycles 2: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*, Woodstock, VT. (Original work published Tikkun 8(1), 1993)
- Cohn Spiegel, M. (2008). Forgiveness and the Jewish High Holy Days. *Journal of Religion and Abuse*, 4(4): p. 25.
- Cohn Spiegel, M. (1996). Spirituality for survival: Jewish women healing themselves. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 12(2): 121-137.
- Dorff, E. (2003). The role of rabbis, cantors, and educators in preventing abuse and repairing its consequences. In R. Lev (Ed.), *Shine the Light: Sexual Abuse and Healing in the Jewish Community* (p. 177-189).
- Fater, K., & Mullaney, J.A. (2000). The lived experience of adult male survivors who allege childhood sexual abuse by clergy. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 21(3): 281-295.
- Finkelhor, D., Hotaling, G., Lewis, I., & Smith, C. (1989). Sexual abuse and its relationship to later sexual satisfaction, marital status, religion, and attitudes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 4(4): 379-399.
- Gall, T.L., Basque, V., Damasceno-Scott, M., & Vardy, G. (2007). Spirituality and the current adjustment of adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46(1): 101-117.
- Herman, J.L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—From domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books

- Houg, B.L. (2008). *The role of spirituality in the ongoing recovery process of female sexual abuse survivors* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, Minnesota.
- Kane, D., Cheston, S., & Greer, J. (1993). Perceptions of god by survivors of childhood sexual abuse: An exploratory study in an under-researched area. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 21(3): 228–237.
- Kennedy, J., Davis, R., & Taylor, B. (1998). Changes in spirituality and well-being among victims of sexual abuse. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(2): 322–328.
- Knapik, G.P., Martsof, D.S., & Drauker, C.B. (2008). Being delivered: Spirituality in survivors of sexual violence. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 29(4): 335–350.
- Lawson, R., Drebing, C., Berg, G., Vincelle, A., & Penk, W. (1998). The long term impact of child abuse on religious behavior and spirituality in men. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 22(5): 369–380.
- Levitt, L. & Wasserman, S.A. (1992). A mikvah ceremony for Laura. In E.M. Umansky & D. Ashton (Eds.), *Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality: A Sourcebook* (p. 321–326). Boston: Beacon Press. Retrieved from <https://www.ritualwell.org/ritual/mikveh-ceremony-laura>.
- Mart, E.G. (2004). Victims of abuse by priests: Some preliminary observations. *Pastoral Psychology*, 52(6):465–472.
- Otterman, S., & Rivera, R. (2012). Ultra-Orthodox shun their own for reporting child sexual abuse. *The New York Times*, 9 May 2012. Online. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/10/nyregion/ultra-orthodox-jews-shun-their-own-for-reporting-child-sexual-abuse.html?pagewanted=all>
- Pargament, K.I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Rossetti, S. (1995). The impact of child sexual abuse on attitudes toward God and the Catholic Church. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 19: 1469–1481.
- Shaw, A., Joseph, S., & Linley, P.A. (2007). Religion, spirituality, and posttraumatic growth: a systematic review. *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture*, 8: 1–11.
- Training for clinicians and care providers working with Jewish survivors of abuse. (n.d.). *Mayyim Hayyim*. Retrieved from <https://www.mayyimhayyim.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ClinicianTrainingCurriculum.pdf>
- Valentine, L. and Feinhauer, L.L. (1993). Resilience factors associated with female survivors of childhood sexual abuse. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 21(3): 216–224.

---

This piece is part of the *Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide* that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at [www.jewishspaces.org](http://www.jewishspaces.org).