1 Judaism

Our Revolt-ing Women: Bringing Women Together to Highlight Abuse in Jewish Communities Today

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Introduction

On a subject as vital and vast as "Judaism and Abuse," we ask ourselves the following questions: what can we, together, uniquely contribute to this growing field of scholarship? What power do our combined voices yield?

Significant scholarship exists on the experience of abuse. We, however, seek to explore the silencing that happens to women. We seek to demonstrate that power and liberation emerge when women come together, across and through differences, addressing the dark corners and rotten structures of our sacred texts and textual traditions upon which our institutions stand. A missing edge of our religious spaces is thus born and reclaimed – one of wild, fierce sisterhood. We write, together, for ourselves, for Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah (our "revolt-ing" women whose stories we will explore), and for all those seeking comfort and justice after abuse *and* those who need to be discomforted in order to "let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5:24). We believe work such as this has the potential to expose the darkest elements in our communities. By "airing our collective dirty laundry," past and present, we know the changes needed for safer communities will follow and communal cleansing will be possible.[1]

There is little scholarly work from the perspectives of British Jewish communities on abuse. Reasons for this lacuna include the concern that if negative attention is drawn to the Jewish community antisemitism will be stoked, alongside the myth that abuse does not happen within our communities (see Sztokman, 2019a). Elana Sztokman's response is succinct: "[abuse] is not *just* a Jewish thing, but it definitely *is* a Jewish thing" (2022: 214). When Jewish women raise their voices externally, we are often told that change must come from the inside and insiders. Whilst we are on the inside, by virtue of speaking

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out, we then are designated as outsiders and become trapped and isolated. Further, it often seems that women are *only* allowed to speak when they talk about their victimhood, but *not* when they seek to make changes to community structures and lead systemic change.

Given our different backgrounds, we can speak to how abuse manifests in the various British Jewish communities of which we are part.[2] We testify that abuse is a reality in diverse religious Jewish contexts, and that the more it is ignored, the further harm will spread.[3] We seek to show that much of the abuse uncovered in our communities is possible because of the inbuilt structures, ideologies, leadership models, processes (or lack of them), and the underpinning theology grounded in unchallenged, selective, interpretative traditions of our sacred texts.[4] As Audre Lorde writes, quoting poet Kamlamu ya Salaam, "as long as male domination exists, rape will exist" (2019: 113).

Our *Chavruta*: women going out together

This paper is a record, in some ways, of our continued conversations over the years, in an informal and stop-start feminist *chavruta* (learning partnership). In choosing to struggle within our tradition, we note Rabbi Sheila Shulman's z'l[5] critique that "I [a radical feminist lesbian], and others like me, do not yet exist fully as persons, not in Judaism, not in the world at large" (2005: 82). Or, as Clare Hedwat writes, "The Jewish woman is vulnerable because she is invisible in a way the Jewish man is not. The Jewish woman is unequal in a way the Jewish man is not" (2018). How domination and the inferiority of women manifest may look different in various communities but it exists nevertheless.

Our *chavruta* means we must, out of necessity and desire, however dangerous, step out together in the hope that others will follow. With our informal, critical, and emotional *chavruta*, we recognise the reality of the Talmudic phrase *chavruta o mituta* ("*chavruta* or death") (b.*Ta'anit* 23a), as without women coming together, abuse named, and justice done, we and our communities die.[6]

Our *chavruta* began with a question posed by Yehudis (an accidental activist, living within her *charedi*[7] community) to Robyn (who was finding her way as the first female rabbi of a Manchester community) when Robyn was on a panel session at Manchester Limmud[8] in 2018. Yehudis, sitting at the back, asked a searing question of institutional religious, political, and lay leaders from Manchester: "What are you going to do to make sure the abuse that happened to me does not happen again in this community?"[9] Her question brought the hidden darkness to the fore, and awoke something in Robyn. Our conversations continue, following the curves of our experiences over these years and before.

Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah: Yehudis and Robyn

We join forces with three biblical women – Batsheva, Rizpah, and Dinah – to explore abuse within our texts and our communities and to create a sisterhood. We did not choose these three women; they chose us. Their stories came before ours. We call these women, "Our Revolt-ing Women," to name the way in which they have been made "revolting" through interpretation and to honour their stories by creating the conditions for a revolution.

We recognise that the call of *lech lecha* (Gen 12:1), which Abraham heard, to "go out into the world, and act in it," is generally within our sacred texts reserved for men (Shulman, 2005: 83). This is in contrast to the description of Sarah when angels visit Abraham and ask where she is. "There, in the tent," he replies (Gen 18:9). The angels' expectation that Sarah be present when she is not suggests that in a perfect Godly world she, and her sisters, are out in the world and acting in it. Therefore, we intentionally come together here as a female collective with our shared stories of abuse. We name the reality of the harm caused when women go out together, and also the power, necessity, and potential creative force born of women's collective agency. Our questions are, "who keeps her in the tent? who keeps us in the tent?"

Not only are our synagogues and institutions grounded in and organised around Torah (both architecturally and otherwise), but much of our world, secular and religious, is shaped by this foundational text. And this text is violent: as David Clines points out, "on average, there are more than six instances of violence on every page of the Hebrew Bible" (2020: 24). We are choosing to listen (and not just "hear") the women's voices through text, rather than boycotting the texts as sites of violence.

Moreover, the pain, destruction, and harm perpetrated in our religious spaces is supported by text, if not directly, then at least tacitly: "there is violence both *in the text* and in the outworking *of the text*" (Stiebert, 2020: 21). It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to speak the language of our oppressors in order to engage in discussion and move forward. Not to adopt their positions or condone harm but to be able to challenge and bring everyone along and into redemption. Lorde's words ring in our ears – "*for the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*" (2018: 19, italics original) so we must go further with these texts and with our activism. We face these violent texts and the violence that flows through them and into members of our communities and find power in the diverse, connected community we create through the process. As Lorde writes, "it is this real connection which is so feared by a patriarchal world. Only within a patriarchal structure is maternity the only social power open to women" (2018: 17).

Neither of us would go as far as Amy Kalmanofsky's assumption that "feminist biblical scholarship can help individuals encounter these texts and *work to heal individuals who have suffered sexual violation*" (2017: 15, emphasis added). Indeed, this line of thinking risks replicating the abusive,

patriarchal structures we are attempting to address, by putting the onus on women to rectify harm by healing, yet without addressing the reality of ongoing harm. In contrast, we are not seeking to heal women by encountering text. We seek to offer women the opportunity to orient themselves within the violence, to have a clearer view of what has happened to them and the women they walk with. Healing is individual and private and not for us to demand. We do not expect women who have been cut down, spied on, violated, raped, or abused, to heal themselves in isolation. How could this be possible without stepping back to understand the power structures, creating a sisterhood, reducing loneliness, and insisting on active deconstruction of harmful power dynamics (historical and current). As Johanna Stiebert writes, "understanding and then detoxifying the power dynamics in, and influence of, biblical texts plays a part in dismantling rape cultures" (2020: 1). Or, as Phyllis Trible writes:

> As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance.
>
> (1984: 3)

We echo Martin Luther King's demand that the white moderate must not "paternalistically … set the timetable for another [wo]man's freedom" (1963). It is not on the women to come together, when conditions make it so difficult to do so. The responsibility lies on us all to make gathering possible. For us, it is *chavruta o mituta.* For us. We have come together and found comfort in sisterhood. For us, there is an urgency in our call outwards and upwards. We seek repentance and change; sisterhood and community.

Introducing Batsheva

We meet Batsheva in the context of war "when kings go out [to battle]" (2 Sam 11:1). A time of male agency – the ability to go out – the need to conquer territory and cement power and authority.[10] David, whose name translates as "beloved," stays behind as he sends his men off to fight his war. A favoured and charismatic, absent leader, left with power to use and time to fill. We read that late in the afternoon he "rose from his couch" (2 Sam 11:2) or, as the movement could imply, he became aroused.[11] Symbolically, this couch and then the roof of the royal palace, where David strolls, represents the hotel room, the rabbi's office – any space where male power and authority lies.[12] As Barbara Thiede succinctly says of biblical male characters, "Men help plan rape, they enable rape, and they watch rape," just as David is with at least one of his servants as he watches Batsheva wash (2022: 2, 57). We note the instances of *washing* and *purification* which occur in the text (vv.4, 8) and

which pertain solely to the victim: she alone must wash, be seen to be pure, and has the weight of expectation upon her.

Gazing down from his powerful vantage point, David sees Batsheva, described, typically, only in terms of her beauty (v.2). The text reports, "David sent messengers to fetch her; she came to him and he lay with her" (v.4). Again, the sending of messengers draws on the long history of male power, collusion, and authority in biblical texts.[13] There is no record here of either mutual desire or Batsheva's consent, and it is hard not to agree with David Clines' conclusion that this act is "essentially an expression of royal power, and … much more like rape than love" (2009 [1995]: 225–226).[14] David's attitude is not a relic of biblical times. Donald Trump said:

> I did try and fuck her. She was married….Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything…Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.
>
> (*New York Times*, 2016)

Whether Donald Trump or King David are speaking, the power of office seems to include access to women's bodies.[15]

Batsheva is silent, trapped in the gaze and fancy of the king with nowhere to hide and no protection, not even from her married status. The text, and everyone who reads it, becomes a party to her objectification. Our worry is that as the text facilitates the objectification of women it also endorses the continued male gaze. Yehudis experienced the same – being watched as she washed by a man who later served time in prison for his offences. As we continue to use a "bifocal reading strategy, with one eye on ancient texts and the other on contemporary contexts" (Stiebert, 2020: 1) we think, also, of the victims/survivors of Barry Freundel, a rabbi who, from his high vantage point of power, secretly video-recorded dozens of women using the *mikveh* (ritual bath) (Boorstein and Alexander, 2020).[16] All these are examples of male voyeurs and actors using women as their play-things and fancies.

In this text, the same verb ("send") is repeated, drawing our attention to the movement and stark contrasts in the behaviour of the characters. David is the main actor in these verses, sending servants, messengers, soldiers, and notes, whilst staying on his couch, safe and horny, whilst everyone else runs around doing his bidding. In verse 5, the movement of the text changes as Batsheva *sends* a message: "she sent word to David." This is not the sending of violence, or David's sending for Batsheva (v.27) to become his wife, but a sending of word, of protest, perhaps.[17] Along with Uriah's acts of integrity, which serve to heighten David's unethical behaviour, we find glimpses of critique of David's actions.

The story ends with rebuke: "But God was displeased with what David had done" (v.27). What is not clear is *what* is displeasing – the rape, the taking of another man's wife, the killing of Uriah, the misuse of power?

What *is* clear is that rabbinic interpretation and, therefore, the stories we have been told, clear David of any serious charge: "Anyone who says that David sinned [with Batsheva] is nothing other than mistaken" (b.*Shabbat* 56a). The Babylonian Talmud in *Sanhedrin* 107a concludes that Batsheva was, in fact, destined for David from the days of creation and David simply took her too early – that was his sin. Many Jewish spaces would reel from calling King David a rapist, and others are keen to sanitise his behaviour as being "not nearly as bad as it seemed" (Rosenfeld, 2016). In the words of Thiede, "men are not only entitled to perform any act of violence that assures them power, *they have to do so* if their aim is to rule. No restrictions apply" (2022: 13). The text seems to support this contention by relating David's behaviour as his own, rather than as an act of his office: he is referred to as David, rather than King David. In separating the two, the text colludes with the idea that men who behave like this can (and maybe even should) retain their office, as we see with the Talmudic teachings above.

We sing *David Melech Yisrael*, "David is the King of Israel," with our children. His star hangs from our necklaces, we sing his compositions, re-tell the tales of how he defeated Goliath. We have cried and comforted ourselves with David's words in the Psalms. It is an extra violation to hear and understand the impact of the actions of our heroes within our texts and our synagogues. As with the discussions on whether we should continue to sing the songs of Shlomo Carlebach, given reports and allegations of his abusive actions (Blustain, 1998; Imhoff, 2016), we are left asking, "why do we never talk of David's abuse? What does it mean for us, as a holy people, that our beloved was an abuser?" The very basis of our founding stories feels shaky; we are left with no doubt that our acceptance or our denial of David's actions lead to acceptance and denial of abuse within our walls now.

Introducing Rizpah

Alongside Batsheva, we meet Rizpah, another wife (or, technically, secondary wife) of a king, this time King Saul. Rather than the context of war, we are in a time of famine (2 Sam 21:1). We hear again of David trying to settle and win conflicts and to get God on his side. To provide the necessary honour in a conflict with the Gibeonites, David agrees to execute the sons and grandsons of Saul, born to Rizpah and Merav. Again, David does not follow the ethical rules of engagement and leaves their corpses hanging, even though "an impaled body is an affront to God" (Deut 21:23).

We read that Rizpah takes sackcloth, stretches out her hand with an imagined deliberate, slow action, and lays it on a rock (v.10). Like Batsheva (2 Sam 11:26), Rizpah laments. She defends the bodies of her sons from beasts and prey – she is a protector, a silent warrior.

Again reminiscent of the tale of Batsheva, David is told and informed of a woman. But this time the movement and momentum comes *from the woman* – the messengers go from Rizpah to the king. She has rattled the world around her enough that David is told of what Rizpah has done. David is now compelled to act and buries the seven sons and goes further in restoring honour to Saul and Jonathan by finally burying their bones. God then responds to the plea of the land and the famine is lifted. Without a pause, we read that war again breaks out and the cycle of conflict is resumed (v.15).

The tale of Rizpah interrupts the flow of conflict. With her deliberate, silent, intense, and powerful protest, she calls attention to the failures of the king. She holds him accountable and calls into question the morality of his (in)actions. A woman who has suffered the fate of being a *pilegesh*,[18] raped by Avner (2 Sam 3:7), raped by David (12:8), publicly raped by Absalom on the same rooftop where David spied upon Batsheva (16:22), traumatised by the death of her sons, Rizpah acts through her grief. We too cry tears for all of our grief, Rizpah's grief, and the pain inflicted on women throughout time and across the globe. We cry tears of anger for the lack of accountability for the abusive actions of those in our community.

We need not look far for more instances of when abuse is either ignored, or abusers are not held accountable, given the culture of synagogues and other institutions, as well as the knee-jerk concern to protect rabbis. The reality of abuse in our supposedly holy spaces is slowly being unearthed and belated ethics codes and safeguarding processes for clergy are being implemented. Core institutions, such as the Central Conference of American Rabbis, have undertaken an important, honest, and searing review of their ethics processes after extensive abuse was uncovered in rabbinic seminaries (Alcalaw, 2021). Comparable work is only in the beginning stages here in the UK, with an ethics code and committee just being set up for progressive rabbis (Sherwood, 2020).[19] To our knowledge, there is still no such system for Orthodox rabbis, despite calls for the urgent organisation of one (Greenberg, 2019).

As already discussed through the story of Batsheva, there are many reasons for this painful reality. Sztokman helpfully talks about the "culture of exception" within religious institutions where those with a greater number of years of membership or with certain titles are revered and above reproach (2022: 258). There is a sense that "trouble-makers" like Rizpah draw attention to a community that likes to hide, given the real risk of antisemitism and long history of trauma. What Rizpah enables us to see is that we cannot risk falling from our own ideals of justice and the rule of law.

Shulman was clear that alongside sacred texts of oppression runs a stream of righteousness within our tradition which is ours to amplify (2007: 32). We are now called to join Rizpah and her quiet, moving, and solitary protest against injustice by leaders and institutions. We wonder why more of us have not met Rizpah. Who is hiding her story from us? We are angered

that Rizpah's dignity in the face of indignity was never deemed important enough to teach.

But now that we have met her, we choose to tell her story and, also, to draw attention to what was done to her, rather than only focus on the impact the men around her imagined her to have. We do not believe the men's story about how much destructive power she has – the ability to hold back the rains – which would make us complicit in their deliberate distortion of the devious, esoteric, dangerous power that women hold. Men often seem to ascribe power to women that they do not *fargin*[20] in any practical sense. Instead, we are listening, and we hear her story: that she cannot save her sons – all she can do is silently protest their deaths.

We are concerned that if we focus on Rizpah's agency, we veer into the murky waters of situational ethics, often employed to restrict critique of the lack of women's rights within conservative non-western cultures (Fletcher, 2022). Seeing ourselves as Rizpah, we demand that she and all other Rizpahs are seen fully and enfolded into the feminist project. The focus must remain on breaking down the barriers to equal distribution of power between sexes which was denied to her. Whilst we can celebrate her individual action of rebellion, our focus must not shift from a commitment to destroying patriarchal power and how it manifests in our unaccountable rabbinic structures and institutions.

We should not settle for glimmers of agency shown by a desperate Rizpah, prostrate in mourning over the dead bodies of her sons. We should instead notice and interrogate the brutal games played by the men around her and walk with her in her grief. We imagine her leaving her sons' finally buried bones and walking away, together.

Introducing Dinah

Dinah is introduced in relation to her family members – she is the daughter of Leah, borne to Jacob (Gen 34:1). Untypically, Dinah went out. As Shulman comments, "Women in the *Tanakh*, or in rabbinic texts, certainly don't go out into the world *together*, with the memorable exception of Ruth and Naomi" (2005: 83). Furthermore, in her going out, she seeks to visit "the daughters of the land." Rashi, a medieval commentator, in trying to explain why Leah is mentioned in Dinah's lineage (another peculiarity), explains that Leah too was fond of "going out" (Genesis Rabbah 80:1, Gen 30:16). The midrash quotes the proverb, "like mother, like daughter" (see Ezek 16:44).[21] How curious. How can we explain this lineage of women who like to go out? Who are the daughters of the land and what were they doing? The midrash appears to conclude the two women went out as harlots – for what else, in their imagination, could they possibly be? Whatever the women were doing, it was disrupted in the most violent of ways.

Shechem is introduced by aligning him with the establishment – "son of Hamor the Hivite, chief of the country" (Gen 34:2). It is clear already where the power lies. We then read, "he saw her, took her, and lay with her and raped her" (34:2).[22] Not one act of sexual violence but many. Even Rashi, concise as always, notes that "lay with her," means "naturally (vaginally)" and "he raped her" means, "unnaturally (anally)." The mediaeval commentator Ibn Ezra comments that Dinah was a virgin. Upon reading these commentaries, we weep.

At v.3, we read that Shechem's "soul cleaved to Dinah." After the assaults, he is obsessed – with her, with the violence. Now Dinah is only referred to as "daughter of Jacob," her link to her mother and her freedom are severed. We are told Shechem "loved" Dinah and then spoke to her heart (v.3). This pattern of abuse and then the show of affection is a familiar one. Shechem's true nature is shown when he demands from his father, "Get me this girl as a wife" (v.4). This girl – how old was she? Presumably, very young. Yehudis was taught Dinah was just 8 years old.

What follows is a story of male revenge and deception. Dinah is silenced, forgotten, as her brothers plot revenge. Jacob, hearing what happened to his daughter, is silent (v.5). We are told the rage felt by Dinah's brothers was because Shechem "had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter – a thing not to be done" (v.7). We are struck by the phrase "Jacob's daughter." Here is the outrage, that another man's property was defiled – a breakdown in the natural order of things.

Many verses later, after the negotiations and the subsequent massacre, we read with horror that Dinah had remained at her rapist's house during this time (v.26). Her family finally walk out with their "defiled" sister and all of the town's booty, *including* more women. We can thus be sure that the wellbeing of women is not at the heart of this tale. In answering their father's concern about a counter revenge attack, Dinah's brothers say, "should our sister be treated like a whore?" (v.31). A familiar, painful trope as the abused becomes implicated (cf. Deut 22:23–27).

It is clear to us that Dinah's story is one that is far from victim-centred but, instead, victim-blaming. Dinah's sexual abuse, rape, and kidnap is a tale of defending male honour, of stopping your women going out, lest they fall foul of the male gaze. We can hear the undercurrent and chatter of "she was asking for it," and "her dress was too short." The obsession with women's bodies and the apparent freedom with which they are spoken about and to, including in religious communities, is chilling.

When Nechemya Weberman,[23] an unqualified counsellor in the Satmar community,[24] was finally reported to the police for sexually assaulting his teenaged female client, the Satmar Rebbe, Aaron Teitelbaum, railed at his followers, "Has our sister become a whore?!" (Yarrow, 2013). In modern-day Monsey (a hamlet of New York state with well over 100 synagogues), the dishonour is not in a sister being sexually abused, it is in the publicity that she

causes by reporting abuse to the police! The imperative is to try and prevent a conviction. Despite later, in 2013, being sentenced to 103 years in prison, Weberman still receives support from the Satmar establishment (Henry, 2022).[25]

The cycle of abuse flows, from the sexual assault, perpetrated by Weberman whilst he was "treating" a teenager, to the Satmar Rebbe's indignation at her reporting her abuse to the police, to the objectification and sexual harassment described to the "Task Force on the Experience of Women in the Rabbinate" of the Central Conference of American Rabbis who collected testimonies from female rabbis (CCAR, 2023). The anonymous testimonies included in the published handout by CCAR included offensive comments from unnamed individuals such as, "Don't be nervous about this service. At least you *look* beautiful," to "Hey sexy! I've always wanted to kiss a rabbi" (Pass, 2023).[26]

Seeing the matriarchal line, from Leah to Dinah, trampled upon in the most violent of ways, with the honour of Jacob's tribe being upheld, we also recognise the power dynamic inherent in the Torah. As Hedwat powerfully writes, "the Jewish institutional world suffers a sickness of ingrained, unethical gender and power relations. And power, not sex, lies at the heart of #MeToo" (2018). The issues of power and gender start and end with the texts of sexual violence in our sacred scriptures and seep into all that we do in our religious, holy places. As Hedwat continues, "For if a woman is inferior, it's not a jump to denigrate her. It's not much more of a leap to assault her, either" (2018). Additionally, if we seek to protect an accuser's reputation in preference to seeking justice for those abused, we fail.

It is vital for us to name that it is Dinah's brothers who seek to take revenge. No legal authority is called upon, as is typical in today's religious spaces. A literature review on sexual abuse in Orthodox Jewish communities (one of the only such scholarly works) shows that concepts such as *mesira* (the act of turning over a fellow Jew to the authorities); *lashon hara* (gossiping, harming someone's reputation); and "fear of stigmatization, concern about the effects of harmful secular norms, and reliance on rabbinical authority in everyday matters" mean that reporting sexual abuse is obstructed and controversial within these communities (Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2021: 1087). The authors write, "Consequently, sexual abuse is often treated within the nuclear or extended family, or within the boundaries of the community, away from the public eye," just as with Dinah (2021: 1087). Yet, we also know that many religious authorities do not act upon disclosure of abuse, with rabbinic bodies and others protecting their own, consciously or not (Sztokman, 2022: 54; Dreyfus, 2019). Just as "biblical rape culture is supported by male friendships, alliances, and shared homosocial experience" so too is present-day rape culture (Thiede, 2022: 14).

To deny abuse is taking place in Jewish communities is to remain silent, like Jacob. Look to our synagogues, our schools, our homes. Stories are beginning to be shared.[27] In 2021, allegations were made against British Jewish schools – allegations of sexual assault, and harassment (Judah, 2021). The

news article recounts one testimony: "I was in the lunch queue and he put his hand up my skirt and groped me… No one said anything" (Judah, 2021).[28]

As Sztokman writes:

> The backdrop of patriarchy in almost every aspect of communal life sends many messages about who is valued and who is not, and who deserves power and who does not. Those hierarchies enable abuse when the abuser is in a valued demographic and the victim is not
>
> (2022: 364)[29]

We learn that there is risk in women going out into the world, acting in their own interests, as leaders. Dinah's world is our world. Lifting up stories such as Dinah's is vital. They demonstrate that not only is abuse happening within our communities, but that the texts we lean upon and teach, promote harmful stereotypes, unjust laws, and unaccountable behaviours by predators. By holding our ancestors accountable, we begin to be able to hold abusive institutions, structures, and individuals accountable today. Dinah must no longer be left alone.

Together: a conclusion

Through our stories, those in our texts and those reported to us privately and publicly, we recognise the absolute, unconditional power granted to leaders (in the image of King David), and particularly rabbis: "The rabbi is like an angel of God with a halo around him, tasked with saving the people. This makes him untouchable – and it makes potential victims extremely vulnerable" (Sztokman, 2022: 167).[30] Even now, when reporting on abuse by rabbis, the media chooses to call abuse "affairs," which sanitises and underestimates the immense power of rabbis over others (Jerusalem Post Staff, 2019). Over-reliance on rabbis in Jewish spaces; the invitation to narcissism; delight in a leader's charisma; the myth that a synagogue community is a family rather than a professional body; and the presentation of the rabbi as parent, all make us pause and ask how the role of rabbi, and that of our communal leaders, can be transformed so the possibility for abuse is not inbuilt.[31] Of course, not all abuse is perpetrated by rabbis and leaders but, as Sztokman writes, "it starts at the top. Patriarchal cultures that objectify women and promote gender hierarchies help promote cultures that support sexual abuse" (2022: 190). Unless the fabric of our institutions is changed, and the sins of King David and others recognised, even those with good intentions will fail. As long as we uncritically engage with texts that depict women's bodies as a battlefield, there to be conquered or surrendered, with the act of penetration used as a living metaphor for invasion, how can we begin to talk critically about abuses occurring today?

If gender abuse "is a cultural dynamic rooted in patriarchal power structures that keep women and vulnerable people small" (Sztokman, 2022: 196), how do we tell Batsheva's story and sing psalms in her name? How do we go out joyfully with Dinah to visit the daughters of the land? How do we ensure Rizpah has many happy years with her sons? We wonder how we can uproot the patriarchal core to our sacred texts to ensure male domination is no longer inbuilt into the fabric of our institutions and leadership models. It requires an honest re-telling of our ancestors' stories from their viewpoint, the naming of the abuse by David and others, and a commitment to shaping our communities and leadership roles in ways which are always vigilant of these power dynamics. Their stories demand that we transform our understanding of how we construct our religious spaces, and how we use text to inform our practice.

In naming the abuse within our texts, our Jewish homes, and within our worlds, and in recognising the silencing of women's stories, we, as women, go out into a new world together. Not as victims but as agents and sisters. We follow scholars such as Carleen Mandolfo who forge a way for us to read "*with*…[women] *toward* God/male as object, thus automatically restoring the woman to a subject position, rather than the object position" (2007: 83). Our gaze shifts and, with this first step, we draw attention to the structural, systemic, theological, spiritual, legal work that must be done to shift male positional power (in the name of Batsheva); bring perpetrators to account and make sure institutions consider their culture and safeguard properly (in the name of Rizpah); and ensure justice is always primary and the responsibility of all (in the name of Dinah).

In the words of our teacher Maureen Kendler (z"l), we are not threatening to leave, we are threatening to stay (2018). We remain within our texts and Jewish spaces to focus on the stream of righteousness and sisterhood that we love and know within our tradition. We seek to tell our stories as a group of women who will always choose to be trouble-makers and outsiders on the inside to bring about the totality of change needed for abuse and the protection of abusers to stop.

Notes

1 We use these expressions ("airing dirty laundry" and "cleansing") intentionally, as these tropes are widely applied to silence victims, hide abuse within communities, and police women's bodies.
2 It is beyond the remit of this chapter to undertake any exhaustive study of abuse within British Jewish communities but we will bring case studies alongside the exegesis of our chosen biblical texts.
3 We use the term "abuse" in its widest sense, from rape and sexual violence to institutional and other forms of spiritual abuse (as defined by Oakley and Humphreys, 2019: 31).
4 *Megillah* 4:10 from the Mishnah (formerly oral, authoritative Jewish traditions set down in writing around 200 CE) provides a powerful example of how texts from the Tanakh (i.e. the Hebrew Bible) are explicitly selected and either transmitted,

restricted, or silenced. Notably, the texts mentioned here include narratives of sexual violence and abuse (Gen 35:22; 2 Sam 13).

5 *Zichrona livracha*, may her memory be for a blessing.

6 "Talmud" refers to a body of Jewish literature comprising law and legend. It contains both Mishnah (see note 4) and Gemara (analyses and commentaries of Mishnah). There are two major Talmudic traditions: Palestinian (Yerushalmi) and Babylonian (Bavli).

7 [Editor:] *Charedi* (or *Haredi)* refers to groups within traditional or Orthodox Judaism that are characterised by meticulous interpretation of religious sources and strict adherence to *halakha* (Jewish law).

8 Limmud (from Hebrew "to learn") is a British Jewish educational charity, which runs events to facilitate Jewish learning.

9 Yehudis was sexually abused by Todros Grynhaus – the son of a prominent *dayan* (religious judge), a Jewish Studies teacher, and youth educator. He was convicted and served a significant prison sentence.

10 We note this is a gendered stereotype and constructed model of masculine power as opposed to an innate biological truth.

11 Indeed, b.*Sanhedrin* 107a discusses how David attempts to satiate his lust but achieves the opposite by engaging in too much intercourse and thus "ends up" raping Batsheva.

12 It is important to note that we recognise that abuse can be perpetrated by women against men and boys, and by women against women and girls. Whilst writing this chapter, the news of former headteacher Malka Leifer's 15-year prison sentence for sexually abusing two girls was publicised (Percival, 2023). The judge's summing up can be found here: DPP v. Malka Leifer [2023] VCC 1443. Whilst most of this chapter references sexual violence by men against women, we recognise all types of abuse and stand with those affected.

13 See Gen 32:4, Num 20:14, Josh 7:22, and Isa 6:21, to name but a few.

14 Clines writes elsewhere, "This may be a contentious issue, but I would argue that all the language about sex [in the Hebrew Bible] describes acts of violence to the body of another. I found no case where the language of sex referred to an act of mutual desire" (2020: 35).

15 Indeed, Bible-using supporters of Donald Trump have (approvingly) compared him to both King David and, during the 2024 campaign, also to King Jehu. The consequence of the latter was to cast Kamala Harris in the role of Jezebel. Examples of this trope are abundant on the internet but we do not want to cite and thereby promote them here.

16 We have chosen to use the term "victim/survivor" with a nod to the complexity of finding a suitable label. We have found Lily Kay Ross' article helpful in critiquing these labels (2022). Further details of Freundel's legal case can be found here: United States v. Freundel, Bernard GMA [2014] CMD 018262.

17 The idea that Batsheva speaks up for herself is proposed by Frymer-Kensky, as reported and discussed by Kalmanofsky (2017: 27).

18 This Hebrew word is sometimes translated (anachronistically) with "concubine," which refers to a Roman institution. It appears to designate a wife of secondary status.

19 Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber undertook a vital piece of scholarship where he explores the worrying fact that "throughout the entirety of Jewish history, only one rabbi has had his *semicha* [rabbinic authority conveyed at ordination] revoked for perpetrating sexual harassment" (2022: 95). This is underpinned by "a widespread and genuine belief that *semicha* is irrevocable" – even for acts of violence (2022: 96). Given what we know about the extent of abuse, this dearth also shows a profound failure in safeguarding and justice. This, Kanter-Webber concludes, with our agreement, is a *chillul ha-Shem*, a desecration of God's name.

20 Yiddish – "to allow," "to indulge."

21 Midrash is a Jewish form of interpretation and commentary. The allusion to Ezekiel 16 is disturbing. This chapter is notorious for its depictions of Jerusalem using sexualised woman metaphors. The chapter is full of accounts of Woman Jerusalem's depravity and of justifications for using extreme violence to enforce her submission. Ezekiel 16 and 23 have often and justly been called misogynist and examples of "pornoprophetics" (e.g. see Stiebert, 2020: 30, 67–68, 80–81).
22 We have chosen to translate this verb as "raped," given the context.
23 This article is mostly focussed on abuse within British Jewish communities, while Weberman is American and his abuse took place in the USA. Nevertheless, Teitelbaum has thousands of followers (*chasidim*) in the UK, and the speech referenced was distributed to these *chasidim*. We therefore choose to include this anecdote as it exemplifies the global and rippling effect of male power.
24 Satmar is one of the largest *Chasidic* dynasties and characterised by extreme traditionalism. Its main synagogue is located in New York.
25 Further details can be found here: People v. Weberman 2015 N.Y. Slip Op. 9128.
26 We note Sztokman's warning that "women rabbis are often on the frontlines" and subsequently "are at high risk of dropping out as a result of abuse coming from all directions" (2022: 325).
27 For example, the recent conviction of a rabbi for possession of hundreds of indecent images of children (Rocker 2023).
28 Safeguarding concerns were raised by Ofsted (2021).
29 Sztokman's infographic on the "Dynamics of the Patriarchy in Jewish Life" is illuminating: men dominate professional leadership; men in power often protect other men; the sexual objectification of women is often normalised; men dominate in forming communal agendas; men dominate opinion-making; men dominate Jewish lay leadership; and men make more money than women (2019b: 38–39).
30 Especially as clergy "have a unique ability to garner trust at vulnerable moments" (Sztokman 2022: 17).
31 Sztokman's question of whether rabbis are being trained towards narcissism and charisma needs further investigation (2022: 161).

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