Abuse Victims Speak Out

By Michael Orbach (The Jewish Star)
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Esther Malka's story began when she was nine, when her brother Reuven touched her at the pool.

Later that night he crept into her bedroom. Over the next nine years the sexual abuse escalated. She put a lock on her door but her brother took down the door. She began sleeping on the couch in the living room in her clothing. When she told her parents about the abuse, her parents, wary about shidduchim for her three brothers and younger sister, sent her to live with a family in Monsey. They refused to blame her brother; her father went so far as to explain that it was not her brother's fault since, 'boys have more tyvas,' desires, than girls.

At nineteen she began engaging in self-destructive behaviors. Her grandparents, tired of seeing Esther suffer, eventually took her to live with them in Baltimore. Now at thirty, Esther, a pretty girl with black hair and blue eyes, has little to do with her parents. She leads a normal life, working as an assistant at a medical clinic. She says that the stigmatization she felt from her family, and from her orthodox community, finally prompted her to speak publicly this past Sunday at an event dedicated to sexual abuse awareness.

"I want the stigma to be on my brother and my family. I want the stigma to be on the community that threatened me to be quiet," said Esther, who asked that her last name not be used in print, "They abused me and they made me feel like I did something wrong."

The event was organized by the Jewish Board of Advocates for Children, a group that works to promote legislation safeguarding children in parochial schools, and took place at Congregation Ohab Zedek on the Upper West Side. The fact that the victims were speaking in a shul was not lost on them.

"This is the first time sexual abuse survivors spoke without the risk of rabbis running them out of town," said another survivor named Pinny T. who also asked that his last name not be used in print. He declined to detail his abuse, stating that it was "too graphic for the shul."

A relatively small crowd was attributed to a lack of sufficient publicity before the event, said Rabbi Maury Kelman, a member of the Jewish Board of Advocates for Children, and one of the organizers of the event. He said a similar event dedicated to combating sexual abuse held two years ago drew close to 200 people. An additional factor may have been Ohab Zedek's location on the Upper West Side, considered an enclave of Modern Orthodoxy, as opposed to the Charedi ultra-Orthodox) world where the most recent efforts to combat sexual abuse have been directed.

"By definition, the Modern Orthodox community is not as secluded as the chareidi one and there
may be an internal perception that it is better equipped to deal with the issue of sexual abuse," said Kelman, adding that the "exposure in the ultra-orthodox community is making an impact" and that having four sexual abuse survivors speak in an Orthodox shul was "historic."

The survivors came from all walks of orthodoxy, including Asher Lipner, a prominent Jewish therapist, who admitted publicly for the first time that he suffered sexual abuse in high school.

"We have no choice but to admit it's happening," Lipner said. "We have to move forward and acknowledge how much work has to be done."

Sheldon Fine, a silver-haired community activist, spoke for the first time publicly about the abuse he suffered as a 12-year-old boy at the hands of a rebbe. He began his remarks noting that 50 years later his friends still discouraged him from discussing the incident.

"I need to talk because people are unaware this can happen to normal people," Fine said.

The event was also an attempt to drum up support for the Child Victim's Act bill, legislation that would extend the criminal and civil statute of limitations for child sexual abuse as well as open a yearlong window to bring cases currently beyond the statute. Most experts agree that the bill is necessary given that child sexual abuse victims do not come forward until their adulthood, well beyond the statute of limitations.

Assemblyman Dov Hikind, who spoke at the event and whose campaign to end sexual abuse inside the orthodox community prompted the recent attention, told the audience that despite his objections to the yearlong window, he would support the bill.

"It's the one time I agree with the American Civil Liberties Union," Hikind said, stressing that despite recent advances dealing with sexual abuse in the Jewish community, there is still a long way to go.

"On a scale from one to 10," Hikind said, "we're at one and a half."

For Esther and other survivors every step is an important one.

"I hope someday someone will contact me to help someone who's been abused; I'll be there for them because no one was there for me," Ester reflected the night after the event, "I'll tell them that life doesn't end, that there can be hope."