

FAMILY ISSUES

A Stolen Childhood Is Worse Than A Stolen Bicycle

By Dr. Shani Zoldan-Verschleiser, MSW

As a child, I fondly remember riding my bicycle in the summertime up and down the streets of Brooklyn. My mother would wave to me as I was leaving and say, "Have fun." She would also make sure I knew that if any thug tries to steal my bicycle from me, I should just give it to them. It was very clear that my life was worth more than the bicycle and fighting for it was not an option. This, Baruch Hashem, never happened to me, but it did unfortunately happen to a friend of mine. On that day, she walked through the door, tears streaming down her cheeks and told her parents that an older boy had forced her off her bicycle and stole it. Her parents comforted her and then praised her for doing the right thing. They took her out to dinner and celebrated her as a hero for making the right decision and protecting herself.

Most of my contemporaries have had similar experiences with their parents and as a parent myself I impart the same message. Just imagine my friend walking into her house completely distraught and her parents crossly saying, "Why would you give him your bike?" "How could you just go along with that?" "Don't repeat this to anyone, this is embarrassing." It is difficult to imagine this being a loving parent's reaction and yet...

This is often times the reaction when children disclose that they have been sexually abused. They are not lauded as heroes for enduring the unimaginable and surviving, they are not told that they did the right thing; instead they are shushed and silenced for fear of what will happen if others find out. Many loving parents try to protect their abused child as well as the rest of their children. They may want to avoid a lengthy difficult trial, *lashon hora* spoken about their child, a disbelieving hurtful extended family, or preserving future shidduch prospects for all their children. It is understandable to have this reaction based on what we have transpired many times in our communities upon open disclosure of abuse. But let's delve into a child's psyche for a minute and discuss what all of this "protection" does to a child who has experienced the trauma of sexual abuse.

The trauma assessment of a sexual abuse victim has many different perspectives and moving parts to it. One piece is the relationship perspective. The child who was sexually abused needs to be able to identify him or herself as the victim and the offender as the perpetrator. This may sound superficial and easy enough, but it is far more complicated than just pointing to the individual who committed the act of abuse. A perpetrator can be extremely manipulative and cause the victim to perceive him or her as having positive attributes that outweigh the negative role of being a criminal. This may be difficult to understand, but a perpetrator does not operate in a vacuum. I have often heard individuals who know and love an accused perpetrator say things like, "It can't be true, he was such a *baal chesed*" or "She was such a loving mother, teacher etc., I just can't believe it." Remember, someone who is a child molester may also have good qualities. Not all sexual abuse involves inflicting pain and torture. Perpetrators may be nurturing a child's needs as well as sexually abusing them. This in no way makes the perpetrator less guilty or gives him or her a pass. What it teaches us is that from a child's perspective it may be difficult to view that perpetrator as all bad and him or herself as the victim. He or she may feel implicit in the acts or a partner in the crime. This can be very damaging for a child's recovery and would serve as a piece to work on in therapy.

The next piece in the relationship perspective is the one between the offender and those significant others who are important to the victim. If those close to the victim such as a parent, teacher, sibling, rebbe, etc., view the offender as innocent and a positive person, the victim can have many more difficulties to deal with and may not have clarity on the offenders' status. This can happen if the offender is allowed to have an *aliyah* in the same *shul* the victim attends, is invited to a family get together, if the victim is told to just get over it because we are all family or there are public fundraisers held to help the offender. These types of behaviors can impact the victim

in the way he or she views his or her role in the abuse.

The third and last piece in this perspective is the relationship between the child and the significant others connected to the perpetrator. A child's self-esteem and sense of independence can be tied to the abuse. The child needs the support from within his own family caretakers in order to get through the trauma. A child who has very little support and very little affirmation of his or her body safety will look for affirmation from significant others. If they do not get this support and instead are met with questions of why they went along with the abuse, why they didn't tell right away, and the pressure to keep the secret, the results can be catastrophic. Often times the system including family members, clergy, defense attorneys, etc. can actually become the perpetrator and in fact be more traumatizing to the child.

These pieces are all extremely important for us to know about children who are sexually abused. When a disclosure is made great care must be taken to respond in a supportive way. This is the potential beginning of either healing the child or re-traumatizing a child who has already been through the unthinkable.

A child or adult who discloses sexual abuse has far more courage and bravery than it takes to give up a bicycle when it is being stolen. Where is their hero status? Where is their celebratory dinner for disclosing? Where is the gratitude for outing a perpetrator so he or she can't harm another one of our children? As a community we can and should do better. With education I believe we will.

Dr. Shani Verschleiser is a noted speaker on the subject of child safety. She has educated thousands of individuals on the topic of protecting children from sexual abuse through the curriculums created by her and Magenu.org, a national not for profit organization that Shani co-founded with her husband Eli.
