

# Cross-Currents

**February 22, 2008**

[What Remains](#)

Filed by Avi Shafran @ 9:33 am

Vindication is nice, but there's sometimes bitter mixed in with the sweet.

Back in October of last year, a headline in the New York Jewish Week read: "No Religious Haven From Abuse." The subheader amplified: "New study finds Orthodox women are sexually victimized as much as other American women." As I wrote shortly thereafter, first in a letter to the Jewish Week and then in a longer essay, the study found nothing of the sort.

Because of the sample it recruited, the study, in the American Journal of Psychiatry, could not and did not make any claim at all about the relative prevalence of abuse in the Orthodox and general American communities.

The study's authors themselves in fact stated as much, noting that "those who chose to participate may not be representative of the [Orthodox] population," and that the unfeasibility of obtaining a representative sample constituted a "major limitation of this study." What is more, over half the women comprising the recruited study sample were receiving mental health treatment at the time. Victims of abuse, needless to say, are more likely than others to seek counseling, and so the sample would be expected to yield a larger number of victims than one representative of the larger Orthodox community.

And so, by comparing the 25%-27% figure for American women claiming (in randomized surveys) to have suffered abuse at some point in their lives with the 26% figure yielded by the recent (self-selected and non-representative) study of Orthodox women, and concluding that "Orthodox Jewish women suffer as much [abuse] as other American women," the Jewish Week writer revealed only her own innumeracy. If anything, the similar percentages between an Orthodox group disproportionately likely to have suffered abuse and a non-Jewish random sample arguably indicate a lower rate of abuse in the former.

After daring to call attention to all that, I was roundly and strongly censured. One subsequent writer to the Jewish Week, utterly uncomprehending of the point about the number of study subjects receiving mental health treatment, claimed it indicated the precise opposite of what it did, and accused me of denying that abuse exists in the Orthodox community, although I explicitly noted in both my letter and essay that abuse exists in every community, including the Orthodox.

Another letter-writer, this one a Long Island psychologist, condescendingly sniffed that without "a knowledge of... non-parametric statistics" I simply was not qualified to address the study's findings. He too, incredibly, managed to misconstrue the entire point about the sample's disproportionate share of mental health patients. Then blogs, of course, weighed in, demonstrating with their rantings just how widespread is the misconstrual of the word "critical" in the phrase "critical thinking" as "negative" rather than "analytical."

Finally, though, several weeks later, some sanity came to reign. In a long and comprehensive article, the Director of Psychotherapy Training in the Psychiatry Residency Training Program at the University of Cincinnati, Dr. Nachum Klafter, asked by a blog to evaluate the study and the Jewish Week article, presented his conclusion that I had “correctly read the AJP paper” and that the Jewish Week writer had clearly misreported its findings.

That was followed by a joint monograph by a Professor of Psychology, a Professor of Education and Philosophy, a doctoral student in Clinical Psychology and a well-known and regarded author of essays and books on cultural issues. It stated that “to attempt to generalize from [the study highlighted in the Jewish Week article] to the Orthodox mainstream – or to draw grand comparisons between subgroups within this skewed sample – seems to be a gross misrepresentation of the data obtained.”

Both of the recent papers, moreover, noted that the study’s data in fact yields the remarkable (yet somehow unremarked upon by the Jewish Week) fact that the survey respondents who were raised Orthodox were 50% less likely to have experienced sexual abuse than those from non-Orthodox homes. Considering that the survey asked if abuse occurred at any point in respondents’ lives, it is plausible if not likely that much of the abuse reported among those raised non-Orthodox occurred before they joined observant communities.

None of which, of course, is to deny either that abuse exists in the Orthodox community (as it does in all communities) or that all communities, including the Orthodox, have a responsibility to put effective measures into place to prevent it. But the fact of its existence in the Orthodox world is no justification for drawing unwarranted conclusions about its extent there.

I am gratified, of course, that the record regarding the study and article has been corrected. But something still grates, and, I think, for good reason.

Because all that many, if not most, of the Jewish Week’s readers will likely ever remember about the entire business will be a mendacious headline. Despite all the setting straight of facts, what will remain in minds – not to mention in the eternal echo-chamber of cyberspace – will be only those deceptive, in fact slanderous, words.

© 2008 AM ECHAD RESOURCES

[Rabbi Shafran is director of public affairs for Agudath Israel of America.]

[Spread the Word](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Trackback](#) | [Comment Feed](#)

Bookmarks: 

## 24 Comments »

1. This is a general problem with modern life. We get so much information pushed at us, from so many sources, that:
  1. We don’t have time to properly evaluate it for truth.
  2. We remember only the parts that are easy to digest - even if they are deceptive.

Both of these facts make us tremendously vulnerable to propaganda. Any ideas on how we can resist it, without giving somebody else the ability to control what we see and read?

*Comment by Ori – February 22, 2008 @ [10:08 am](#)*

## 2. Rabbi Shafran,

If possible, please provide links or other ways to obtain the two new papers cited.

*Comment by Bob Miller — February 22, 2008 @ [11:31 am](#)*

## 3. Your readers might find this Jewish Press article of interest. Pay special attention to the abuse statistics studies mentioned.

[http://www.thejewishpress.com/displaycontent\\_new.cfm?contentid=30215&mode=a](http://www.thejewishpress.com/displaycontent_new.cfm?contentid=30215&mode=a)

KT

*Comment by joel rich — February 22, 2008 @ [12:23 pm](#)*

## 4. Bob,

Dr. Klafter is a frequent commenter on Cross-Currents, and I wonder why he didn't submit it as a guest column. I've only seen it [elsewhere](#) on the Net. David H. Rosmarin [published his study](#) on his site.

*Comment by Yaakov Menken — February 22, 2008 @ [12:31 pm](#)*

## 5. Rabbi Shafran,

If it's any consolation to you, I distinctly recall Dr. Klafter's article because I marveled at how well he presented his points and how he simplified the issue so that even novices such as myself could understand the shortcomings of the Jewish Week's column. Those looking for the truth know where to find it. Those uninterested in finding it will miss it even if it's placed on their doorstep.

*Comment by Mark — February 22, 2008 @ [12:44 pm](#)*

## 6. Joel,

Where are the numbers in that Jewish Press article? He just tells us "research has shown" that "the Orthodox community" has as big a problem with domestic violence, substance abuse, and sexual abuse. He's misreporting flawed studies like this one.

Dr. Michael Solomon is part of a web site that posts false accusations against frum Rabbis with true stories of abuse (Orthodox and non-Orthodox). Even if he davens three times a day, you can't trust his judgment about the Orthodox.

*Comment by Yossi — February 22, 2008 @ [1:53 pm](#)*

7. My essay can be read here: <http://hirhurim.blogspot.com/2008/01/sexual-abuse-in-orthodox-community.html>

I would like to clarify that while I disagree with the critique of the AJP paper which is cited above in comment 3. This is addressed in my essay in footnote #10.

I wasn't aware that cross-current solicits guest posts. The reason I posted it on Hirhurim is that Gil Student invited me to.

*Comment by nachum klafter, md — February 22, 2008 @ [2:30 pm](#)*

## 8. 1) "...the record regarding the study and article has been corrected." linking the article and the study leaves an unfair implication. Read dr. klafter's post carefully. 2) It was not just the article that deserves attention / censure. 3) balanced means attacking inaccuracies on both sides. 4) many incorrect conclusions can be drawn from the study; many conclusions in either direction are speculative.

*Comment by dr. william gewirtz — February 22, 2008 @ [4:25 pm](#)*

9. The disagreement between Dr. Klafter and Dr. Rosemarin et al seems to be whether the original paper's authors or only the Jewish Week writer derived an untenable conclusion from the data about actual incidence of abuse. Marvin Schick says the paper derives the false conclusion, Dr. Klafter says it doesn't, and Rosemarin et al say the authors were vague and contradict themselves.

All parties are in agreement that no such conclusion can be drawn, which, of course, was Rabbi Shafran's point in his [original article](#), which to my reading agrees with Dr. Klafter's approach. As Rabbi Shafran pointed out, both also say (using Rosemarin et al's words) "individuals who were raised Orthodox were nearly 50% less likely to experience sexual abuse than those from non-Orthodox homes."

*Comment by Michael — February 22, 2008 @ [5:19 pm](#)*

10. I believe there are two distinct issues that the controversy over the Jewish Week article highlights. The first is the legitimate question of the prevalence of domestic abuse in the Orthodox community: how much and how often; is it being given the resources and attention it warrants; to what degree is there denial/defensiveness about the issue from community leaders and rabbonim; etc.

The second - and more insidious - issue is the apparent determination by some to vilify the Orthodox community through innuendo, misrepresentations, and outright defamation, whatever the subject may be. This is a much more serious problem since factual refutations are irrelevant to the goal of tearing down the Orthodox and therefore rarely accepted.

Maybe the increased size and influence of the Orthodox world has something to do with becoming a larger target of critics. Maybe our own infighting has given impetus for others to attack us. Whatever the reasons, we can't just chalk it up to "Ortho-bashing" and leave it at that.

*Comment by Robert Lebovits — February 23, 2008 @ [9:16 pm](#)*

11. WADR, one can and should distinguish between three different phenomena under discussion. The study that the NYJW article linked to was clearly devoid of sufficient information that warranted the draconian conclusions therein. Dr. Klafter confirmed that fact, while reminding us that abuse exists within our communities. Dr. Salomon's book decries the psychotic elements that have been raised in the shidduch process. All of us should and can agree that these elements have no place in the process. I would part company with his assessment that someone who appears to be precise in his or her observance of mitzvos is manifesting an obsessive compulsive disorder. That being the case, I think that we should be all thinking of venues such as a Shabbos table where both genders can sit in a non-pressurized situation and consider whether someone present is even worth considering dating before investing time in the process.

*Comment by Steve Brizel — February 24, 2008 @ [12:22 am](#)*

12. It's interesting that Rabbi Shafran writes "Both of the recent papers, moreover, noted that the study's data in fact yields the remarkable (yet somehow unremarked upon by the Jewish Week) fact that the survey respondents who were raised Orthodox were 50% less likely to have experienced sexual abuse than those from non-Orthodox homes." This looks like essentially the same thing that Rabbi Marvin Schick said, and which Dr. Klafter explicitly dissected:

"He [Marvin Schick] also states, "In sum, to the degree that this survey has any value, it appears to point to a lower, probably much lower, incidence of sexual abuse in the Orthodox community than in American society as a whole." It puzzles me that while he so eloquently establishes that the data are not representative, he is nevertheless willing to tentatively draw selective conclusions from it."

I haven't read Dr. Salomon's book and so can't comment directly about it but I will say that while someone who is precise in mitzvah observance may not be manifesting an obsessive compulsive disorder, there certainly are sufferers from OCD in the Orthodox population. Not only that, observance provides a vast and fertile ground for expressing obsessive and compulsive behavior. It is possible that for people with mild OCD, halachic observance and a wise Rav might well give them the tools to manage their pathology without medication, and even use it in a positive

way. Unfortunately for some among us it's more serious than that and honoring a person for behavior that is not healthy doesn't do them any favors.

After I had been observant for a couple of years a professor who was likewise a BT told me of an acquaintance of his who got so — yes, obsessive about chametz that once his Pesach cleaning was done he kept packages of paper muffin tin liners by the doors so that members of his household could use the liners to turn the knobs and not get chametz on their hands. My mentor commented that the laws of Pesach gave a person a great opportunity to confront certain neurotic tendencies. But neurosis is healthier than full blown OCD.

*Comment by YoelB — February 24, 2008 @ [1:17 am](#)*

13. "It is possible that for people with mild OCD, halachic observance and a wise Rav might well give them the tools to manage their pathology without medication, and even use it in a positive way."

I very much agree. I have commented on this in another forum in the past.

Actually, there are certain halakhos and minhagim which seem to be designed specifically to help people with OCD or with obsessional, intrusive worries about ritual observance.

For example, there is a fine minhag observed by many women to eat something immediately upon leaving the mikvah facility. Some mivka'os provide candies, and others popcorn. The reason for this minhag is avoid the possibility that the woman who has immersed will become concerned that there may be or may have been some food substance caught in her teeth which may have served to invalidate the immersion as a chatzitz. Therefore, if a woman eats food right away, she will not attribute any imaginary sensations in her mouth to food which was before the immersion, but will attribute it to the food she ate immediately upon leaving the mikvah building.

No, this is not a safeguard against obsessions about cleanliness and ritual purity which can typify full blown OCD. Yet, as a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, it strikes me as highly plausible that this minhag has saved many women a lot of psychological anguish. There are similar advantages for people with obsessional worries which are offered from bitul, chazaka de-me-ikkara, and the atzumo shel yom ha-kippurim mekhaper.

"...but I will say that while someone who is precise in mitzvah observance may not be manifesting an obsessive compulsive disorder, there certainly are sufferers from OCD in the Orthodox population."

Yes I have witnessed countless examples of this. Individuals who cannot stop saying keriyat shema because they fear they have mispronounced a word in a manner which is me'akev; concerns about netilas yadayim—I am aware of the case of a person who washed his entire arms because he was not sure where the "wrist" is exactly, and even an intervention from this Hassidic Rebbe failed to alleviate him; an individual who due to his concerns about mayim chamim nifsalim le-mayim acharonim investigated with the water company whether his cold tapwater might possibly be water which was warmed at one point and then cooled off; individuals who check their tefillin all morning long to make sure they are centered and perfectly square to an extent that they can't complete the dovening; individuals who worry about basar or chalav being transmitted from their hands to a towel to someone else's hands etc.; individuals who have learned the gemara which states "hirkurei aveira kasho me-aveira" and become trapped in an vicious cycle of scrutinizing their thoughts to make sure they have no sinful fantasies but then, of course, directing their thoughts to sinful fantasies in the process of scrutinizing them; etc., etc.

I will also add that the line is hard to draw from a clinical point of view. I will not name them in this forum, but there are great gedolei ha-dor who are known to have exhibited the following symptoms.

- 1) The inability to stop thinking about Torah to an extent that it would cause him headaches when he tried to stop learning. Some consequences—he found it mentally agonizing to use the toilet because it is forbidden to think about Torah there, he rarely got haircuts because he did not want to spend even a few minutes with his head uncovered; he could not refrain from learning Torah even to observe the fast of Tisha Be-Av in its entirety.
- 2) An individual who was troubled by anything which resembled a crucifix or cross. This caused him to complain to the telephone company in Israel that the telephone poles and wires are constructed in a way to resemble a cross.

Now, again, these two individuals were incredible ga'onim and gedolei ha-dor. Yet, it is hard for me to imagine that

these were not symptoms of some obsessive compulsive difficulties. Therefore, it is not so simple to draw the line between psychopathology and what I will call “pious eccentricity”. We need to let individuals themselves decide when their ability to live their lives the way they want is being hampered, and to decide when they need treatment. We need to avoid imposing our own sense of what is an acceptable manifestation of unconscious conflict or anxiety vs. what is unacceptable and requires treatment. (I am not referring to cases where there is a danger to oneself or others, or when someone’s judgment is so impaired that he cannot decide for himself in his own best interests.)

*Comment by nachum klafter, md – February 24, 2008 @ [12:26 pm](#)*

14. Here again is the link to the original article:

<http://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/abstract/164/11/1700>

I have previously indicated my agreement with Dr. Klafter’s critique and have little to add to that. Mr. Rosmarin and his co-authors should submit their critique as a letter to the editor of \*American Journal of Psychiatry\*, to which Dr. Yehuda and her co-authors could respond. I totally disagree with Dr. Schick regarding his labeling of the original article as “Scholarly Abuse”. It is absolutely true that the article was not designed to address prevalence. However, it is essential that preliminary studies such as this must be published in order to allow for the funding of more expensive studies that can accurately address prevalence, incidence, and risk factors, and lead to interventions that can address the problem. The last sentence in Mr. Rosmarin’s article sums up this very well: “It is hoped that this inquiry will spawn future research in this area, however, and ultimately lead to an increased understanding of this important subject matter.”

*Comment by Charles B. Hall – February 24, 2008 @ [1:04 pm](#)*

15. Dr. Klafter: I wonder whether or not some of these stories about gedolei Yisrael, where their behavior exhibits possible signs of OCD, may in truth be exaggerations told by admiring disciples in a well meaning but misguided attempt to praise and magnify their piety.

*Comment by LAWRENCE KAPLAN – February 24, 2008 @ [6:17 pm](#)*

16. One profound distinction between a great Rav and the poor soul Dr. Klafter mentioned who couldn’t stop saying Kriat Shema is that a posek who responds to shailot from all over the Jewish world cannot be irresolute. Certainly, he must feel the enormity of his decisions, but he must also make a decision, a distinction, and take the responsibility for it.

*Comment by YoelB – February 24, 2008 @ [10:43 pm](#)*

17. Yes, YoelB is correct. The psychiatric term for what you are describing is the ability to “function”. But many individuals are able to function despite very painful symptoms.

Prof. Kaplan may indeed be correct. It is impossible to know what is true and what is not. However, at least in the case of the wires and the telephone poles, it seems that the information I was given is fairly well documented.

*Comment by nachum klafter, md – February 25, 2008 @ [10:38 am](#)*

18. Is a Gadol somebody without psychological difficulties? Or is it somebody who has great Torah learning and insight, and great midot (= character traits)? How is having OCD incompatible with being a Gadol?

*Comment by Ori – February 25, 2008 @ [5:37 pm](#)*

19. Ori, I am not disagreeing with you.

In the context of the discussion above regarding the difference between punctilliousness in halakhic observance on the one hand, and OCD symptoms on the other hand, I am offering the following observation: It is difficult to draw such a distinction because extremely pious individuals express their piety even in their symptoms of mental

disorders. Stories about gedolei-olam even seem to reflect this complexity—the traits which are being praised and admired also appear to be symptoms of psychological difficulties.

So, I absolutely agree with you that being afflicted with a mental disorder does not disqualify one from being a great Torah manhig. In fact, it is easy to argue that part of what makes tzadikim and gedolim so great is that even their rough spots are channeled into avodas HaShem and Torah.

This is a fascinating thing—one person develops a fear that he is contaminated with germs, and another develops a fear that he will harm others with loшон hora. Same disorder (OCD), but different underlying “dynamics” (=motivations and conflicts).

The more important distinction to draw is whether the symptoms observed are causing a person to suffer in a way that he or she wants to be treated. This is the non-judgmental vantage point that psychotherapists need to be operating from. I would not treat someone because there is something wrong with worrying about telephone wires looking like crosses. Rather, I would treat someone because he finds the resemblance between telephone wires and crosses to be causing him undue distress, interfering with his ability to think about other things, etc., despite his full awareness that there is really nothing “wrong” with the construction of our telephone poles in a halakic sense. (Again, exceptions to letting the patient decide what is a subject for treatment are cases of danger to self/others, psychosis, and other profound impairments in judgment).

*Comment by nachum klafter, md — February 25, 2008 @ [6:38 pm](#)*

20. Alternatively, however, one could argue that the numbers may be deflated, as women who grew up in frum homes, but were sexually abused, may have left the community and therefore not participated in the survey. Alternatively, the sexual abuse of Baalei Tshuva when they were young may have been the impetus for their life changes.

*Comment by Alan — February 25, 2008 @ [6:40 pm](#)*

21. Dr. Klafter: That is why I referred to “some ” of these stories.

*Comment by LAWRENCE KAPLAN — February 25, 2008 @ [7:05 pm](#)*

22. Alan:

Yes, what you say is a very reasonable speculation about one artifact in this data. However, once we determine that the data are declared as unrepresentative. we simply can't draw any conclusions from it about the general population. I.e., the point you are making is may be neutralized or greatly overpowered by many other factors.

The Rosmarin et al argues the opposite of what you are imagining. If you see footnote #10 of my essay I briefly address a few of the many points in their critique which I take issue with.

Prof Kaplan: You are always one step ahead of me. A point I forgot to make is that if the stories are hagiaographic bubamayses, then it is all the more remarkable to consider that in our current frumkeit, one person's inspiring mayseh is another's pathognomonic sign of OCD.

*Comment by nachum klafter, md — February 25, 2008 @ [10:10 pm](#)*

23. RE: #22 Dr. Klafter is making a very important point that bears restating in an even more emphatic way because it is one of the things about data sets that takes some getting used to especially when we have an emotional investment in an issue:

If the data are unrepresentative (due to small sample size, or the sort of factors Rabbi Shafran mentions regarding the AJP article, etc.) you cannot draw any conclusion at all — whether it be a conclusion that you don't like or one that you do like — about the population the sample was drawn from. You might even be right in your opinion; it's just that the data don't support your ideas (the data don't refute your ideas either.)

*Comment by YoelB — February 26, 2008 @ [9:57 am](#)*

24. Dr. Klafter: Thank you for your kind words. One story I remember that made my hair stand on edge was told in some hagiographic book relating the life a particular Gadol. The story concerned a certain Rav living in Jerusalem in the early part of the 20th century. (The Rav was not the Gadol.) This Rav was always (to my mind almost pathologically) concerned about the proper order in making birkhot hanehenin or whether he made the right berakhah over a particular food, etc. He would always be coming up with new problems and dilemmas and was (again, to my mind almost pathologically) worried lest he got it wrong. He was wont to comment that he did not understand how people could enjoy their food; they should be worried about making some mistake in the halakhot of berakhot. I was shocked that he begrudged ordinary people, struggling in very difficult economic circumstances to put some food on their table, the pleasure of eating the fruit of their labors. My feeling was he needed to be reminded that the term is birkhot hanehenin, NOT bithkot ha-innuyim. What was worse, in my view, was that the author of the book told this story in praise of this Rav's scrupulous halakhic behavior.

*Comment by LAWRENCE KAPLAN – February 26, 2008 @ [4:47 pm](#)*

## Leave a comment

We read every comment submitted, but only publish selected ones. If you wish your comment to be published, be sure to write politely, address the issues, add something new, provide a valid email address, and use a minimum of non-English terms. For details, please read our [comments policy](#).

You will see your comment from this computer after posting, so that you will know that it has been received. Please post only once.

<input type="text"/>	Name (required)
<input type="text"/>	Valid EMail (will not be published) (required)
<input type="text"/>	

Comments for this post will be closed on 14 March 2008.



Our Advertisers

- Passover vacation in Europe Passover Vacation with The Feder family & Tour Olam. Join with us at the best

spa resort on the Balaton Lake. Glatt Kosher.

[Read More...](#)

[Advertise on Cross-Currents](#)

- Admin:
  - [About Us](#)
  - [Comments and Tips](#)
  - [Our Writers](#)
  - [Past Writers](#)

[Powered by WebAds](#)

## • Contributors:

- [Avi Shafran](#)
- [Dovid Gottlieb](#)
- [Emanuel Feldman](#)
- [Eytan Kobre](#)
- [Gedalia Litke](#)
- [Harvey Belovski](#)
- [Jonathan Rosenblum](#)
- [Mark Bane](#)
- [Shira Schmidt](#)
- [Toby Katz](#)
- [Yaakov Menken](#)
- [Yitzchok Adlerstein](#)

## • Genesis:

- [Oral Torah](#)
- [Questions & Answers](#)
- [Torah Forum](#)
- [Written Torah](#)

[Support Us](#)

- Search:

  

- Archives:

- [February 2008](#)
- [January 2008](#)
- [December 2007](#)
- [November 2007](#)
- [October 2007](#)
- [September 2007](#)
- [August 2007](#)
- [July 2007](#)
- [June 2007](#)
- [May 2007](#)
- [April 2007](#)
- [March 2007](#)
- [February 2007](#)

- [January 2007](#)
- [December 2006](#)
- [November 2006](#)
- [October 2006](#)
- [September 2006](#)
- [August 2006](#)
- [July 2006](#)
- [June 2006](#)
- [May 2006](#)
- [April 2006](#)
- [March 2006](#)
- [February 2006](#)
- [January 2006](#)
- [December 2005](#)
- [November 2005](#)
- [October 2005](#)
- [September 2005](#)
- [August 2005](#)
- [July 2005](#)
- [June 2005](#)
- [May 2005](#)
- [April 2005](#)
- [March 2005](#)
- [February 2005](#)
- [January 2005](#)
- [December 2004](#)
- [November 2004](#)

February 2008

S M T W T F S

1 2

3 4 5 6 7 8 9

10 11 12 13 14 15 16

17 18 19 20 21 22 23

24 25 26 27 28 29

• [« Jan](#)

• Meta:

- [Login](#)
- [RSS](#)
- [Comments RSS](#)
- [WP](#)



Powered by [WordPress](#)