Survivor Story

By opening up about her darkest days, Rivka Joseph is shining a light on a taboo topic but one of consequential importance: child sexual abuse in Cleveland’s Jewish community

Story by Michael C. Butz
Photography by Rob J. Ghosh and Michael C. Butz
“It’s important to be there for others after you’ve survived and to use what you’ve learned to help them survive. I think of the people who were there for me in the beginning, and I think, ‘Where would I be without them?’”

– Rivka Joseph, survivor of child sexual abuse
Inside the ballroom of an East Side hotel one Sunday evening in early February, Rivka Joseph stepped up to a podium to speak. What she was about to share with a standing-room-only crowd of more than 200 fellow Jews – some acquaintances, some complete strangers – was unsettling, painful and often tense. Such conversations are difficult and uncomfortable. But talk about the sexual abuse of children in one’s community is difficult to know it doesn’t just happen in New York or bigger cities. It happens everywhere.”

As Joseph healed, her voice and sense of community grew stronger. She started volunteering at Jewish Community Watch, through which she and her ex-husband attended marriage counseling that it surfaced.

“The therapist asked me privately whether I was abused, and the first thing I did was shut down. I said, ‘no.’ I’m like the worst liar, though, and he knew right away. I did end up telling him the truth,” she says, crediting the therapist for this life-altering turning point. “It happened pretty frequently. … It stopped when the abuser didn’t have access to me anymore.”

Joseph added that her abuser was a fellow minor, only a few years older than her, and Jewish. Citing legal action she’s now considering against her abuser, she declined to be more specific about him or his actions.

Joseph shouldered the burden of her secret by herself for 11 years. It wasn’t until she and her ex-husband attended marriage counseling that it surfaced.

“The therapist asked me privately whether I was abused, and the first thing I did was shut down. I said, ‘no.’ I’m like the worst liar, though, and he knew right away. I did end up telling him the truth,” she says, crediting the therapist for this life-altering turning point. “He wasn’t the one who helped me work through all the healing, but he helped me get there. If he hadn’t asked me, I would’ve never told anyone. He was the first one who asked.”

As Joseph healed, her voice and sense of self grew stronger. She started volunteering for Jewish Community Watch, through which she’s able to counsel fellow survivors. Also, she enrolled at Cuyahoga Community College to formally start a career as a victim advocate, and she’ll soon apply to Case Western Reserve University to further her studies.

Then, this past November, she confronted her abuser.
"I didn't want to be in a position of being afraid of him anymore. I didn't do anything wrong, and I started to realize that I'm not the one who should be carrying the shame," she says. "If anyone should be living in fear, it should be him.

"There were a couple of incidents that made me realize he still thinks he controls me," she adds, explaining her parents kept occasionally sending emails to "put the fear back" in her. "It helped me realize I needed to do something. And for a very long time, I had this constant thought: What if he has other victims or what if he's still hurting people?"

Hearing at the challenges surrounding how and when victims share word of their abuse, Joseph admits she only recently told her parents – soon after she confronted her abuser.

"I didn't really tell my family until this year. I just didn't know how to tell them or what to tell them," she says. When she did, they were "in shock." Her parents were familiar with the abuser but never suspected anything, Joseph says.

"Their response was mostly, 'Why didn't you tell us before?'" she says. Her reply: "Because he told me not to."

Abuse happens here

Child sexual abuse often results in a complex and tangled web of physical, emotional and psychological distress for the victim. Perpetrators patiently and carefully gain control over their victims, instilling layers of secrecy, fear and vulnerability in the children they target, who in turn try to conceal those layers with "perfect" exteriors – either at the behest of their abuser or as a form of survival.

Some even refer to child sexual abuse as an invisible crime since so many of the deep scars left in its wake are internal and make victims impossible to pick out of a crowd.

So, the best place to start the conversation might be with statistics: Nationwide, one in four girls and one in six boys have experienced sexual abuse in some form before turning 18, according to the American Psychological Association, which cites U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention research.

Those numbers could easily be greater. It's widely accepted the crime is underreported due to the shame and complex relationships often involved.

"It's important to note, though, that those are national figures and aren't specific to the Jewish community – which can also be said for the larger issues at hand.

"Issues of survivors, perpetrators, family response, community response and school response are no different in the Jewish community than any other community," says Jeffrey A. Lox, chief operating officer at Bellefaire JCB in Shaker Heights.

Still, it happens in the Jewish community.

"We've worked with children who were repeatedly raped, molested in their homes, outside their homes, by family members, by non-family members, by date acquaintances, and with children who've been abused by other children," Lox says. "We've worked with kids who've experienced one unwanted sexual experience to kids who've been repeatedly abused over long periods of time before it was disclosed or discovered."

Rabbi Binyamin Blau, spiritual leader at Green Road Synagogue, a Modern Orthodox shul, says that over the years, he's occasionally been approached about instances of child sexual abuse.

"It's sporadic – thank God it's not often," says Blau, a father of four who also serves as rosh yeshiva at Fuchs Mizrachi.

"(Child sexual abuse) is a critical issue in the entire community, Jewish and non-Jewish alike," he says. "The question is, 'How vigilant are we being in trying to address it? Are we tackling it head-on and openly?'"

Lox and Blau agree that, on the whole, attitudes toward and education in child sexual abuse in Greater Cleveland have improved, but community denial often is the biggest hurdle in addressing such abuse.

"It's fair to say that many communities believe it doesn't happen in their community, and that denial of child sexual abuse is part of the phenomenon that perpetuates it, but that's not specific to the Jewish community," Lox says. "Look, it's hard and it's scary. Denial is part of the problem for a reason. We want to protect ourselves from this horrible knowledge, which is kids get hurt."

A mindset exists among some – though Lox and Blau both reject it – that a community shouldn't air its "dirty laundry," meaning it shouldn't publicly discuss difficult issues like child sexual abuse because it gives the community a bad name.

"That kind of thinking is the same kind of secrecy that's asked of the child victim, so in some ways, it mirrors the exact phenomenon that hurts kids," Lox says. "If we don't talk about it, it not only doesn't mean it doesn't occur, but we add to the damage done to kids when it does occur.

"Community discussion about childhood sexual abuse is absolutely crucial to prevention," he adds. "One of the main drivers of sexual abuse as a phenomenon is secrecy and denial, and community discussion –
“Perpetrators look for children who are not advocated for the most. So when they see a child whose parents have a strong presence in that child’s life, they’re not going to mess with that child.”

– Rivka Joseph, pictured with her 6-year-old son, Mendel
whether about prevention, treatment or even just informational statistics – lessens the likelihood a community will say “it doesn’t happen here.”

Blau understands the “dirty laundry” mentality – but he doesn’t condone it. “By pushing things under the rug, we do ourselves a great disservice and hurt people who don’t deserve to be hurt,” he says. “It’s shortsighted. If we keep it quiet, that’s unhealthy, unfair and unproductive.

“The Torah talks repeatedly about the converts, widows and orphans. It talks about protecting those who are vulnerable and need protection,” he says, also referencing a recent Torah portion focusing on the dead body found between two cities and invoking the fundamental concept of “All of Israel are responsible for one another.”

“This is a paramount belief of Judaism,” Blau says. “It’s spelled out clearly in the Torah, there’s no question about that. … Our job is to protect everyone in the community.”

Community resources

A quick search of the Internet turns up numerous headlines regarding child sexual abuse in the Jewish community on a national and international scale.

In August, a 21-year-old former Jewish Community Center of Metropolitan Detroit camp counselor was arrested and accused of taking nude photographs of three 5-year-old boys during an overnight camp stay and later posting those photos on a Russian image-sharing website known to be “frequented by individuals with a sexual interest in children,” according to the Detroit Free Press.

Earlier this month, one of Australia’s most senior rabbis stepped down as head of Melbourne’s Yeshiva Centre, in the process apologizing for his behavior toward victims over 30 years. An investigation by the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse exposed a “culture of turning a blind eye, a lack of knowledge about child abuse and reporting requirements, and a dearth of sympathy for victims between the 1980s and 2010,” according to that country’s 9News.

The sexual abuse cases in Brooklyn, N.Y.’s haredi community have become so extensively documented that they have a dedicated Wikipedia page.

It’s “sad” to see such national headlines, Blau says. But if there’s a silver lining, it might be that such reports give a community the opportunity to step back and evaluate itself and its response to child sexual abuse.

“On the ground, that’s happened here in Cleveland,” he says. “We’re very straightforward in the Orthodox community in addressing it: What happened? What do we need to do to make sure it doesn’t happen again? Are we dealing with it appropriately?”

Blau has lived in Cleveland for only 15 years, “which in Cleveland, is nothing,” he quips, acknowledging community leaders who’ve called Northeast Ohio home for decades. But in those 15 years, he’s seen improvement in the way the Jewish community here, on the whole, confronts child sexual abuse.

“In my two roles, there’s been a very clearly heightened sense of awareness and vigilance to make sure we’re dealing with sexual abuse appropriately and fully, and that’s important,” he says. “I’m proud of that, and I’m part of that, part of change. When I meet with other rabbis and educators, they’re all serious about it. No one is downplaying it.”

For its part, the Jewish Federation of Cleveland helps address the issue by funding organizations throughout the region.

“Our work as a Federation is to support the community where support is needed. Each year, our generous donors contribute to our annual Campaign for Jewish Needs, making one gift to 30 partner organizations that changes and saves thousands of lives,” Erika Rudin-Luria, Federation’s vice president of organizational and community development, said in a statement. “There are children and families that need our support – sometimes they’re facing the unimaginable. And thanks to our community, our partners provide help on the ground.”

Bellefaire JCB is one of those partners, and with Federation support, Lox says it’s able to place mental health professionals in most of the area’s Jewish day schools.

Additionally, over the past two years, Bellefaire JCB has served as the local hub for the Safety Kid program created by the Los Angeles-based Magen Yeladim Child Safety Institute. Safety Kid programming – which includes education regarding so-called “stranger danger” and body safety – reaches 800 to 900 Jewish children in Greater Cleveland each year, Lox says.

Bellefaire JCB also offers individual and family counseling at its campuses and in homes. When families approach the organization for counseling, Lox says, it’s often not for a child to come forward about sexual abuse but because a child is experiencing

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symptoms related to it: anxiety, fear, anger, sadness, withdrawal, and in severe cases, self-injury or thoughts of suicide. It’s only after counseling has begun that clues of possible sexual abuse arise.

“Something really important that many don’t realize is that many children who were sexually abused experience guilt as if they’d participated or had some control – or in some cases, they even believe they made it happen – and that’s a big reason why kids don’t come forward,” Lox says. “Kids do this in general. They attribute control to themselves over the world that they don’t have,” he adds, citing the “step on a crack, break your mother’s back” superstition as an example of this behavior. “So, somebody hurts them and it seems reasonable to them that they’ve played a role in it. A big part of treatment is helping kids let go of that guilt and help them understand that this has been done to them.”

Parents, too, experience a range of emotions and reactions.

“You get the whole range of parental responses, from people whose immediate response is disbelief and denial to people whose response is more of immediate belief, but what they all have in common is this is off the roadmap of how they thought parenting was going to go,” Lox says. “So even if they’re on the higher end of the response spectrum, they too have the ‘Why me? Why us? This is more than I can handle. Now I’m ashamed. Now I’m guilty. I don’t understand’ responses – that whole range.”

But do those shell-shocked parents still rise to the occasion for their children’s sake? “All the time,” Lox says. “When kids have experienced sexual abuse, one of the main determinants of prognosis is whether they were believed,” he adds. “Clinically, it’s really important. A child who isn’t believed – or isn’t believed immediately – struggles in a different way than a child who receives immediate belief from the adults around them.”

**JCW watches, acts**

Michael Seewald founded Jewish Community Watch, the group that hosted that February event, in 2011. The 26-year-old Miami resident endured two instances of sexual abuse as a child, once when he was 11 and again when he was 13. One instance involved a camp counselor, the other another boy at his school. The incidents occurred in Detroit and Minnesota, he said.

It was when Seewald was 15, though, that the foundation was laid for JCW. A close friend of his died in his sleep one night, and that boy’s father started a program in his son’s memory to help at-risk teens. However, the boy’s father used the program to get closer to children — and to abuse them, Seewald says. “Some were abused by this guy, some abused by other people, but no one was doing anything,” he says, explaining that he eventually caught wind of the situation. “I started investigating it and found abuse by this man going back two decades — and no one knew about it.”

That sort of community investigation would soon lead to a blog through which Seewald and other volunteers would try to help survivors. This was JCW in its infancy, but after three years — and an outpouring of requests for help from Israel, Australia, Canada and major metropolitan areas in the U.S., Seewald says, it shut down because there weren’t enough resources to sustain it.

It was reborn in 2014, however, when Miami entrepreneur — and child sexual abuse survivor — Eli Nash came forward to help fund it. Today, JCW offers therapy and peer-to-peer support for survivors. It also has private investigators and case managers, including in Israel, and works with law enforcement to go after abusers.

“Sometimes we’re the first person they talk to, and sometimes we’re the last person they talk to because no one else has helped — and thank God we’re able to help,” Seewald says of survivors.

Another key component to JCW is its Wall of Shame, which serves to expose those who sexually abuse children. It currently has about 120 names and faces on it, including one or two from Northeast Ohio.

“The only thing abusers fear is being caught and being exposed, especially when you’re living in a tight-knit community,” Seewald says. “If you have this problem (being an abuser), get help. Get help before we find you, because if not, you’re going to ruin your family and ruin your life. You’re the one who’s going to be responsible.”

Whether a direct result of JCW’s work or not, Seewald points out some positive headlines are beginning to pop up amid the more alarming ones. These include news of 107 haredi rabbis in the U.S. signing and issuing a kol koheh (Torah proclamation) urging anyone with reasonable knowledge of child sexual abuse to report it to law enforcement.

Closer to Cleveland, there’s Columbus’ David Schottenstein, a high-profile entrepreneur and philanthropist who once was named to Inc. Magazine’s “30 under 30,” who recently came forward about being abused by a counselor at sleepaway camp when he was 8. Schottenstein shared his story with JCW via a video on its website.

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– Meyer Seewald, founder of Jewish Community Watch

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As an outsider to Cleveland, Seewald said he and JCW’s message received a warm reception when in town for the event in February.

“Found it to be very welcoming,” he says, adding plans are in the works to soon host a second JCW event in Northeast Ohio. “People wanted to talk about it. This is something where people want to protect their kids, they want to be educated about this.”

It’s worth noting that Rabbi Yosef Blau, senior mashgiach ruchani at Yeshiva University in New York, is on JCW’s board of directors. He is the father of Rabbi Binyamin Blau, who considers his dad a “shining example” of how to tackle issues surrounding child sexual abuse.

Jewish Community Watch events like the one held here have taken place in other cities, too, and it’s Seewald’s goal to continue sparking dialogue across communities.

“We’re a light unto other organizations, because even in the non-Jewish world, an organization like this doesn’t exist,” he says. “This is such a dark subject, but we’re bringing it out. This is ‘a light unto other nations; and I believe people will follow and do the exact same thing in their community.’

Shining a light

As JCW brings the dark subject of child sexual abuse to light across the country, Seewald credits Rivka Joseph with bringing it to light in Cleveland.

“She’s sent so many people to us for help because people reached out to her (following the February event),” he says. “She’s keeping that conversation going in Cleveland every single day. If she didn’t exist, that conversation might’ve ended a couple weeks after the event.”

It’s a role Joseph has embraced, but she’s quick to point out that despite strides made in Cleveland to raise awareness of child sexual abuse, more can — and needs to be — done.

“Sometimes I’m dumbfounded. Why aren’t people doing more?” she says. “These are our children. There’s nothing more important and nothing more valuable than them and their safety.”

First and foremost, Joseph says, defending or harboring of abusers at the expense of victims must stop. “Whenever there’s an allegation of abuse, there are those who doubt the victim and accuse the victim of lying. … This is a dangerous attitude,” she says, explaining victims often hear such judgmental conversations in defense of abusers even if they’re not meant to.

“It hurts victims over and over again, and some victims have told me this is why they’ve never come forward publicly as a survivor – because they’re going to be judged and blamed for what happened and what they went through as a child.

“If we want to improve the way things are done in our community, we need to start protecting the children and the victims – no matter what,” she says.

In addition to hurting victims, such dialogue or other forms of passive acceptance also can affect children.

“Children pick up on everything, so when you support a perpetrator, when you allow them into a synagogue, when you allow them into your home — you’re sending a message: ‘This person is a good person and I allow them into my life,’” Joseph says.

“You’re sending your child a message that if something happens, well, ‘This person is important to me and I might not believe you,’ and then a child might not tell you what happens.”

Active parenting, not surprisingly, is also crucial to preventing such abuse, Joseph says.

“If you have children, you have a responsibility to educate yourself. You don’t have to know it on a Ph.D. level, you just have to know it at a basic level – enough to say you feel safe putting your child on the bus and sending them to school every day,” she says. “Information is so easy to access now, there’s really no excuse.”

An overwhelming majority — 93 percent — of all child sexual abuse victims know their abuser, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Of those, 34 percent are family members and 59 percent acquaintances. Joseph suggests this means parents must constantly remain vigilant.

“Perpetrators look for children who are not advocated for the most. So when they see a child whose parents have a strong presence in that child’s life, they’re not going to mess with that child,” she says. “They say single parents are more at risk, but I think the reasoning behind that is that oftentimes you’re relying on other people. People see you as vulnerable, so they’re offering more assistance. I think being your child’s best advocate is a good way to combat that.”

Joseph, a single parent, leads by example. She maintains a strong presence in her son’s life by, among other things, regularly meeting or chatting with school officials and neighbors.

“Things like that are important so people know you’re there and you’re involved — and if something happens to your child, you’re not going to stay quiet,” she says, adding that following the JCW event in February, a number of parents approached her about being stronger advocates for their children.

“They have small children and they ask me, ‘What books should I read to them? How can I talk to them about it?’ — and I love it,” Joseph says. “The greatest thing is when I get a ‘thank you’ from a parent who spoke to their child and their child totally got it, because then you know you’re preventing it and doing the most you can.”

Those interactions — ones in which she’s able to help others safeguard against what she endured as a child — hold special meaning for Joseph. In a sense, she’s paying it forward.

“It’s important to be there for others after you’ve survived and to use what you’ve learned to help them survive,” she says. “I think of the people who were there for me in the beginning, and I think, ‘Where would I be without them?’ So when people approach me and need help, I could be that person who was there for them in the beginning.”

Her evolution from child victim to adult survivor — and to being a strong woman, mother, advocate for change and voice for the voiceless — is growth that that younger version of herself, the person who suffered in silence for more than a decade, may never have envisioned. But it’s yet one more example Joseph is setting for others in Greater Cleveland: While the effects of child sexual abuse are by no means escapable, they can be overcome for an otherwise happy and fulfilling life.

“I definitely don’t feel like a victim anymore,” she says. “I’ve come through the worst of it, and I feel like my life is good now. I’m not going through it anymore; everything is coming into place.”

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