



March 1, 2019

Dear friends of Hillcrest Jewish Center,

Last February 8th, *The Jewish Week* published an article entitled: "'Real Fears' Over Child Victims Act, Say Charedim."

The Child Victims Act allows all abuse survivors, regardless of their current age, to file a civil claim within one year of when the law becomes effective. The law also extends the statute of limitations through age 55 for people whose claims are not time-barred under the current statute of limitations.

The article discusses the impact of the Child Victims Act, approved unanimously by the Judiciary Committee and passed by the New York Assembly.

The Jewish Week reports that Agudath Israel issued a statement shortly after the bill passed on January 28th that the Child Victims Act "could literally destroy schools, houses of worship that sponsor youth programs, summer camps and other institutions that are the very lifeblood of our community."

The Jewish Week also reported that "While the RCA and other centrist Orthodox groups have been largely silent on the issue, the ultra-Orthodox community, alongside the Catholic Church, has consistently opposed the bill's passage, for fear of the Act's possible financial impact." It also cited a recent op-ed in a widely disseminated charedi newspaper that praised Agudath Israel's continued objections to the bill and referred to lawsuits that might result from it as "nuisance lawsuits."

The above statements in today's reality are troubling.

As a Jewish survivor of child abuse put it: To those groups still objecting, "you're simply on the wrong side of history."

Now, why are some schools, houses of worship, institutions, and organizations, still reluctant not only to celebrate or embrace, but even to accept the passing of a law that will bring justice to so many people who suffered abuse under those who vowed to care for them, people who, at the time of the abuse were defenseless?

I'd like to suggest that it is not because they don't care about those who suffer, but because they believe that the good name, prosperity, and success of their school, house of worship, institution, or organization takes precedence over the suffering of the individual. If we could paraphrase it, it would sound like this: "We are so sorry for what happened to you, and we are even willing to fire the person who hurt you, but keep it quiet. Please don't hurt our good name and our finances."

The truth is that organizations are made up of human beings. If we pay lip services to the compassion, kindness, and tikkun olam we preach by maintaining that our organizations are more important than the individuals who are part of their fabric, we lose our *raison d'être*, the reason itself for which these organizations, schools, houses of worship and institutions were created.

Our generation is understanding correctly that if we consume child labor products, we are contributing to child labor, and if we benefit from work done in slave-like conditions, we are perpetuating injustice.

The same is true about child abuse and sexual harassment. There is a cost to its eradication and we must be ready to pay that cost. Freedom, as you know, is never free.

Tikkun Olam, I am afraid, is not a committee or a chesed project, like collecting non-perishable items. It is a way of living, and it always begins at home.

If we don't protect the more vulnerable in our own organizations, schools, houses of worship and institutions; if we hide or minimize the abuse and protect the abusers; if we don't put our money where the values we preach are; we can talk about tikkun olam from now until the end of time, and we will still be part of the problem.

As the saying goes, "charity begins at home." Jewish organizations, from all denominations, must be at the front of the fight against abuse, injustice, oppression, and suffering, being the first to denounce them, even at home. If we miss the opportunity, we will be on the wrong side of history.

We just read in Sidrat Terumah (Exodus 25:8): *"And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them."*

The verse is unequivocal: although a sanctuary is being built, God dwells among the people. The people is the reason for the sanctuary, for the institutions, for the organizations, for the shuls; and not the other way around.

Only by building organizations based on compassion, kindness, justice, and truth, will we invite God to dwell among us.