

SHABBAT SERMON
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Joe Paterno, the Catholic Church and the Jewish Community

Knowing that there were going to be children in the synagogue this morning I hesitated in delivering this sermon. But I decided to do it anyway because, after all is said and done, the purpose of this sermon is to protect our children.

It is not just the sports world but American society that has been shocked by the revelations that have come out of Penn State University regarding former defensive coordinator on the renowned Penn State football team, Jerry Sandusky, who stands accused of molesting numerous boys over a 15 year period. Penn State University's football team – the Nittany Lions – is one of the most highly respected football programs in the nation under the leadership of 85 year old Joe Paterno – the winningest coach in college football history. What makes the recent revelations most appalling is the realization that college officials, including Paterno, knew about the accusations for at least 10 years and did close to nothing about it, leaving youth unprotected to Sandusky, the predator. The fallout from this lurid story had led to the firing of Penn State's President and the fabled Joe Paterno. Many have expressed sorrow that such a legendary coach's career should have such a tragic ending. Forgive me for saying it, but I don't feel sorry for him at all. He was part of the problem. I feel sorry for the children who lost their innocence because Paterno just didn't "get it."

Why did it take so long for the Penn State disgrace to be confronted? Paterno saw the man who he had been told was taking advantage of children in the shower room ... he saw this man continue to be on campus. Why didn't he do something? Because Paterno is from the old school ... you've got to protect the institution at all cost! The team comes first! After all, such so-called sexual "shenanigans"

have always been part of the sports culture, it is part of the locker room “fooling around” and “horse play”... why shake up the boat when hundreds of millions of dollars in ticket sales may be affected.

It has been pointed out that there is a parallel story to the Penn State story and that is the scandal that rocked the Roman Catholic Church. As one writer in the New York Times put it: “The parallels are too striking to ignore ... a suspected predator who exploits his position to take advantage of his young charges, the trusting colleagues who don’t want to believe it – and so don’t – even when confronted with convincing proof, they choose to protect the reputation of their institution. In the face of a moral imperative to act, there is silence.”

Yes, the Catholic Church is another institution run by an “old boy’s network” which tried to cover up its sins, failing to understand that we are living in the 21st century and behavior that might have been swept under the carpet in the past can no longer be kept secret. And it has to be said that Herman Cain may be guilty of the same mistake. I don’t know if Herman Cain is innocent or guilty in this “he says/she says” conflict, but the problem is that there are now several “she’s” in the conflict and that is hard to put aside. Cain’s supporters are trying to do that despite the fact that they, too, don’t know if he is innocent or guilty! But is it not possible that Cain mis-stepped back then ... because back then such behavior was part of the male dominated business culture? You know, it’s just “flirting” or “making a pass” ... nothing serious! Well, today women are the CEO’s and they take it seriously! Remember, back then a book about airline stewardesses was entitled, Coffee, Tea or Me. That would not be said today! Twenty years ago when Anita Hill testified before a group of U.S. senators about her former boss, Clarence Thomas, one of the Senators – all of whom were men – referred to the charges as “this sexual harassment crap.” You don’t get away with that talk anymore! It is a new world we’re living in. And one has either got to change their ways or pass the reigns to a new

generation. And that is one of the lessons we can learn from an analysis of today's Torah and Haftorah portions.

You know, every Shabbat we read both a Torah and Haftorah portion. The Torah portion comes from what is called "The Five Books of Moses." The Haftorah comes from the books of the prophets. Some say that the reason for the Haftorah is because there was a time when reading from the Torah was banned, and so, in order to remember the theme of the Torah portion, we chose a prophetic reading that had a similar theme. Today's Torah portion told of Abraham ... today's Haftorah portion told of King David. What is the commonality connecting them? In both cases, they have grown old. Our Torah portion told us: "*V'Avrohom zakein baw bayamim* – and Abraham grew old; advanced in years." The Haftorah uses the exact same words in describing King David: "*V'hamelech Dovid zakein baw bayamim* – and King David grew old; advanced in years." But there the commonality ends. Abraham, on the one hand, accepts the reality that his time is passing by, and so he realizes there is nothing more important than finding an appropriate woman for his son, Isaac, to carry on the tradition; this, to his everlasting credit.

King David was not as wise. He is depicted as remaining secluded in his home because of his old age, unaware of the palace intrigue that is taking place with an attempt to usurp his crown. Only when pushed by Nathan the prophet and Batsheba, the mother of Solomon, does David decide to take action.

Abraham, in his old age, accepted reality ... no one had to tell him what to do. David, on the other hand, became a bit "out of it" and needed others to push him. Abraham took the initiative ... David could only react. Yes, Abraham was the wise leader; the one who knew that times were changing and things would have to be done differently. And so he let go of the reins of power. David had to be pushed to the very end.

And so did Joe Paterno. In 2004 the President and several leaders of Penn State University put pressure on Paterno to retire; people could sense that the time had come for doing things differently. Paterno resisted and said, “No!” So he stayed because, after all, he was more powerful than the University’s President. And now, like the Catholic Church, the University is paying a bitter price for reacting when they should have acted.

And sad to say, they are not alone. There is another institution that is suffering from this same malady involving the very same issue ... and that is elements of the Orthodox rabbinate. By way of the Internet and blogs, there is hardly a week where there isn’t a new revelation of sexual abuse of children taking place in the Orthodox community. Recently, Brooklyn’s District Attorney said that he has arrested 89 ultra-Orthodox men on sexual abuse charges in the last two years. 89! In Brooklyn alone! Those in the know will tell you that, unfortunately, this is nothing new. Whether it be in all-boys schools or all-girls schools, there have always been teachers who overstepped the boundaries. In our own community and others, I know of parents who were told not to have their child in the class of this or that teacher, because the teacher had a predilection to what was called in Yiddish “*tappin’* – touching.” (By the way, Jerry Sandusky’s book of memoirs is entitled Touched.) It was part of a culture connected to Yeshiva dormitories and fooling around at the mikvah. But in recent years the culture of silence and acceptance started to change, thanks to people like Baltimore’s own Phil Jacobs, who as editor of the Jewish Times, brought some of these stories to light. People, at the time, expressed sorrow that these reputable rabbis had their names sullied. I didn’t feel an ounce of sorrow for them. I felt sorrow for the children whose lives they defiled. I felt sorrow for Phil Jacobs who came under attack for what? For protecting our children! What happened at Penn State not only could happen in a Yeshiva ... it *has* happened ... and a lot more than once. Rabbis had known the truth but they remained silent. And now, even when the truth has come out,

like the Catholic Church and like Penn State University, they have tried in every which way to protect the institution ... even if it's at the expense of an individual child.

You know, there is a statute of limitations on how many years later a person can claim sexual abuse by a teacher. Some states have attempted to extend the years of that statute, only to be fought by the Catholic Church which fears a continuation of lawsuits against it. But it's not just the Catholic Church which fights it ... it is also leaders of ultra-Orthodox organizations who fear how much lawsuits can affect their institutions; obviously knowing that they are vulnerable. That's some picture of allies in court, the Catholic Church and an ultra-Orthodox organization joined in protecting their institutions – not their children!

And even now, with all that has unfolded, the “old-boys network” of rabbis continues to try and protect itself by telling members of their community that if their child claims to have been sexually molested by a teacher, you know what they should do? They should immediately call ... their rabbi! The government says to call the police! The rabbis say to first call the rabbi! You tell me: why should they call the rabbi? The rabbi who oftentimes has never been to college ... what does he know of post traumatic stress disorder and flashbacks and repressed memories and low self-esteem and transference and forensics and all the other psychological and criminal issues that go into such accusations? Why go to the rabbi? Explain the rabbis: to first make sure that this is not just *lashon hara* – gossip – that there is a basis for the accusation against the teacher. Once again protecting the perpetrator and not the victim. One of the great halachik decisors of the 19th century, Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanson, known by the name of his book, The Shoel U'miashiv, wrote of a teacher accused of sexual abuse ... “The rabbis already said ... that *lashon hara*, even if we do not accept it, we nevertheless must concern ourselves with the possibility it might be true. Woe to us that in our days such a thing has occurred that we had such a person as a teacher of

small children, children whose very breath is pure and we must be so concerned that his impure breath will impurify them.” Well, if that was true in the 19th century, it is certainly true in the 21st!

The time has come for the rabbis of today to learn from Abraham that there comes a time when you have to be active and not reactive ... when you have to be prepared for a new way of thinking and let go of the “good old days” way of doing things. Some ultra-Orthodox rabbis, to their credit, have accepted this reality. Many others argue that this is a non-Jewish perspective; that in fact, the wisdom of the older sages is far superior than of those of the modern day. These rabbis claim that Jewish tradition teaches that the rabbis know best and the ways of the Talmud are far superior to 21st century thought. And one of the proofs they offer of this is found in today’s Torah portion.

The central part of today’s Torah portion describes in detail how Abraham sent his servant to find the right woman to be his son’s wife. Our sages were struck by the fact that so many verses are used to describe every word that the servant, Eliezer, spoke; contrasting this to an important mitzvot in the Torah for which very few – if any – details are given. Our sages say this comes to teach us, “The ordinary conversation of the patriarch’s servants is more pleasing than even the Torah of their children.” This is a famous Talmudic concept of *niskatnah hadorot* – the decline of the generations; that the teachings of a servant of Abraham was considered greater than even the words of the Talmudic sages ... that the earlier generations always knew better. In the words of our sages, “If the earlier scholars were sons of angels, we are the sons of men ... and if the earlier scholars were sons of men, we are like donkeys.”

But is this really true? Were people so much wiser in the “good old days?” In some ways, yes ... I’m sure. But not in all! Even rabbis in the Talmud admitted that sometimes non-Jewish scholars knew more than they did! The rabbis knew they were not always right. Similarly,

would anyone say that our knowledge of the world around us, our knowledge of science, medicine and physics and biology had declined over the generations? Certainly not! It was the great, first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who saw the idea of progress as being extremely important when he wrote: “All of existence evolves and becomes elevated.” Yes, our understanding of the world evolves and becomes elevated over time. And one of those areas that has become elevated in recent times has to do with the status of women and the protection of our children. The Jewish people have always been at the forefront of progress ... God forbid, we should fall behind in these most precious areas.

Former FBI agent, Ken Lanning, who wrote a Justice Department manual, “Child Molesters: a Behavioral Analysis” is quoted as saying, “Two of the largest organizations in this country that have the biggest problem with this are the Catholic Church and the Boy Scouts. When you have that image, a program idolized as pure, the harder it is to admit you’ve made a mistake. If you have this need to appear to be perfect, the harder it is to admit that you made an error in judgment.” Sad to say, many rabbis are falling into this category. And that is why I felt I needed to deliver this sermon today. “And Abraham grew old, advanced in years,” says the Torah, and then continues, “*V’Hashem beirach et Avrohom bakol*” – and God blessed Abraham with “*bakol*” which means “everything.” And one commentator points out that this Hebrew word, “*bakol*” has the same numeric value as the Hebrew word “*bein*” – “a son.” Abraham had everything because he was blessed with a son. We, who are blessed to have children, must do everything in our power to cherish them, to nurture them and, yes, to protect them. And then, like Abraham, we, too, will be blessed with everything. Amen.

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