An Incest Survivor Reclaims Her Place in the Jewish Community

by Lilian Green

I am a person who loves to dance, who is stubborn, a writer, a woman, a Jew, the child of Holocaust survivors — my mother, who has a wicked sense of humor, my father, who says that the world is reborn on Rosh Hashana. I have blue eyes. I have a green thumb. I play the piano. I am thirty six years old, double chai, a survivor.

From the age of two until nine, I survived physical and sexual abuse from my grandmother. From ten to thirteen, I survived physical, sexual and psychological abuse by my (now ex-) husband. I have read dozens of books and written a million words to understand how these pieces fit together. I have pounded pillows and wept. I have listened to experts and survivors. I have been frustrated, impatient, frightened, furious, anguished, amazed, excited, joyful, grateful and amused.

I am not unique, not even rare. Studies show that 15% to 19% of Jewish families, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, are abusive, a rate that is about the same as for non-Jewish families: Other women generally leave after three to five years of family violence, Jewish women stay eight to ten years, leaving in our thirties or forties, while our non-Jewish counterparts escape in their twenties.

Victims of child abuse are instructed by their perpetrators to blame themselves and to minimize or deny their experience. When the victim is Jewish, taught that abuse does not occur in her community, her guilt is doubled. She feels there must be something terrible in her to provoke her Jewish family to abuse her, or it must not have been as bad as she believed. Perhaps it never happened at all. She is primed for spousal abuse, feeling undeserving of love, distrusting her perceptions. She remains silent and hidden until someone gives her permission to speak.

In my case, permission came through therapy and participation in an incest survivor’s group help at the Y.W.C.A. My need for a Jewish context led me to seek help at Jewish Family and Child Services, where I found my therapist. Through group and individual therapy, I learned to be myself — at least with my non-Jewish friends.

I had had little to do with the Jewish community for years, believing that I had no place there. It was hurtful to be cut off from my people, my religion, my roots. To reconnect, however, was a risk. Would the entire community react to me as my family had, with disdain and disbelief? Would my worst fears be confirmed, that in fact I did not belong?

When I grew strong enough to risk it, I looked for a place that fit my values, I joined a Reconstructionist synagogue.

It was difficult to attend shul at first. It was the place my frum, sexually abusive brother belonged, not me. I sat in the back. I came late to avoid the part of our service where people wrapped their talleisim [prayer shawls] around family and friends to bless one another. Gradually I moved up and closer. I came in time for the community blessing. To my surprise, there was always someone to share a tallis with me. The strangeness wore off, and I felt warmed. I purchased my own tallis. I wrapped my warmth around those near me. I belonged.

This experience was a salve on the wound of having been ripped from my roots. It provided a basis for speaking out in the Jewish community. I believed that within the silence of the community there were others who, like those in my shul, would be respectful and supportive, would be stirred to confront the problem, or would be touched by my experience and know that they were not alone as survivors.

I decided to launch my book, Ordinary Wonders, through a forum on healing from abuse. A panel of seven women, including myself, discussed recovery. By holding the forum in the heart of the community, we gave substance to the issue of abuse in Jewish homes, to the right of survivors to speak out, and to the need to address the problem within mainstream communities.

Speaking out against incest, I am following, ironically, in my mother’s footsteps. For years she has publicly spoken about her experiences during the Holocaust. Like my mother, I am subject to misunderstanding, stigma and pity: What did you do, why didn’t you fight back, how could you allow it? Like her, I am also subject to ennoblement, people’s awe at another’s suffering that ends up distancing me as much as the pity. From my own and my mother’s points of view, we feel neither degraded nor elevated by our suffering. We are simply people who have been in difficult situations. Out of our experiences we create something positive to give meaning to the suffering.

The difference between our efforts is that my mother has the support of a community that loves to talk about the Holocaust. This community does not, however, love to talk about sexual abuse.

For much of my life, I felt overwhelmed by the Holocaust. My troubles seemed insignificant in comparison; my parents’ experience more real than my own; my protection of them more important. Similarly, the Jewish community focuses on remembering the Holocaust and preventing future Holocausts, to the exclusion of dealing with current, internal problems. It is understandable. The Holocaust is an event of such immense, tragic proportions, it is hard to grapple with it and have any energy left over. However, it is also easier to commemorate the past than to change the present.

The painful reality is that we are not any better than the goyim [non-Jews]. It is a hard truth, and I am concerned that readers will point to me and say, “Well, perhaps abuse happens in families of Holocaust survivors, but not to us,” just as the Berliner Jews said that Polish Jews might be put in concentration camps, but not them. Jews always want to look impeccable in the erroneous belief that if we’re just good enough, we won’t be attacked, much as the abused child believes that if she pleases the perpetrator, she can avert the violation. Our pose of moral superiority will not stop anti-Semitism; our denial of sexual abuse within our community perpetuates the damage.

For incest survivors, who often have limited, if any, connection with their families of origin, community can provide a crucial foundation of support and nurturing. Instead of denying the existence of abuse in the community, thus further isolating victims, we can broaden our value of family life by making the community an extended family which includes those who have lost their nuclear ones.

As Jews, we have a history of endurance, flexibility and ethics that can inspire and direct us in dealing with abuse in the Jewish community on several levels. First, we must become informed about the issue. Next, we can listen, believe, and understand the one in five of our friends, relatives and neighbors who have been abused — giving them our personal support. We can then mobilize
MY DIARY

January 22, 1987

If I am not a receptacle for the wishes of the dead and not a receptacle for my brother's sex, then what am I?

October 2

In the mirror I see my past: my mother's cheeks, my grandmother's nose, my father's jaw, and all the others I never knew who left a piece of themselves in me, the ones who died in the War. When I look into the mirror, I see a photograph of my father's sisters sitting on a park bench winding wool, their eyes so much like mine: the one who could have been an artist, the one who gave my father her fountain pen for his bar mitzvah. I know so little, just scraps of my father's memories. My mother remembers nothing before the War. So there we are, my face made up of scraps and missing pieces.

I am terrified that Gran will jump out of the mirror, shattering the pieces of me, and that I will be like her when she was abusing me: bitter, angry, powerful, hurting little helpless things. Gran is my blood, too. It hurts me to think of that. It hurts because the nameless monster who abused me was my own grandmother. I can almost see the shards of glass flying from the mirror, and what will I find then — my grandmother, or who I really am?

I want to look in the mirror and see myself, the past within me, my past, my family past, my historical past, and beyond that my own specialness that's just me.

November 15, 1988

My Brother's Secret

My parents own a secret. This little business of incest, we talked with your brother well, it's a matter of perspective, you weren't abused Your brother is religious, has a wife, three children, is a doctor.

What am I?
The possessor of fractured memories

pictures without sensation, feelings without incident.
I remember touching and being touched
dread, curiosity, nausea, vomit, arousal,
and recognize the secret I wear like a second
skin.

The secret is
my brother shakes with zeal at prayers
as once he shook abusing me;
my brother's smug piety once promised fun
while I smiled uncertainly at his bare skin
white as death engulfing me
until I found myself kneeling at the toilet
wondering at the strangeness of the colors
in my vomit.

The secret is
my brother tucked me into his bed with a
book of legends
when I scared myself reading Jane Eyre
no child at eleven
staring at his back while he studied,
signalled his desire with one, two fingers,
the odds/evens game to choose who's it,
always it, cold, scared,
glad to be chosen, wishing I weren't
because it makes me sick
but it's something I share with my brother.

The secret is
my brother was good, grown-up, smart.
I saw it as the old woman in my dreams, an older wiser part
of me. I was surprised at what I said and
sicken with the memory
of his shaking at his prayers
so much like his shaking against my skin.
I ache
with the betrayal of my love
touch the lies that paint my skin ugly,
raw wounds beneath.

November 29

In group therapy, Anna had me sit in
one chair and be the part of me that holds
back, that is afraid the pain will kill me. In
the other chair, I spoke as the part of me
that pushes forward. I've never heard it
speak so distinctly. I saw it as the old
woman in my dreams, an older wiser part
of me. I was surprised at what I said and
felt, sitting in that chair. I was sad, as if I
had already felt this pain. Even so, I knew I
had to go on or the growing part of me
would die.
I picture the old woman walking with
me, hand on my back, giving me her
strength and love. She says I will not die of
the pain. I ache for the world I've lost. I
want it back. She promises a new world.
She says I have to choose between my
family and myself.

I stand inside myself and look back at
Mum gathering light, blessing Shabbas
salters. In two days it is Hanukkah. Dad
sings Maoz Tzur, Rock of Ages. They sit
with my sister's and brother's families,
eating latkes, playing dreidel. And I am
here, on my own.

Somehow, I will find a way to
celebrate without them.

[excerpted from Ordinary Wonders: Living Recovery from Sexual Abuse]