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## Higher calling

**Why did the Orthodox community ignore three decades' worth of allegations that Rabbi Baruch Lanner abused children in his care? Simple: He was good at his job.**

[MICHAEL KRESS](#)

Despite potentially monumental Mideast peace talks and increasing Jew-on-Jew violence in Israel, the predominant subject of conversation in Jewish communities for the past several weeks has centered on the **National Conference of Synagogue Youth, the youth group run by the Orthodox Union, the central communal organization of Orthodox Judaism.**

A spate of investigative articles, which first appeared late last month in New York's **the Jewish Week**, yielded accusations that **Rabbi Baruch Lanner, a Jewish educator and NCSY official, had physically, sexually and emotionally abused kids in the group over the past three decades.** The stories included the explosive news that the NCSY received numerous complaints about the rabbi throughout his tenure, but did little to investigate the accusations or control Lanner's behavior, let alone take action to bar him from working with children.

As soon as the first article appeared, the Orthodox Union demanded Lanner's resignation from the NCSY and appointed a panel of well-known Jewish figures to investigate the organization. Meanwhile, the Orthodox community, its leaders and laypersons were left to wonder how the NCSY could have looked the other way for three decades as Lanner supposedly kneed boys in the groin and kissed and fondled girls, to mention only some of the specific accusations. Lanner's behavior may well be impossible to understand, but a compelling question remains to be answered by those around him: How could so many people have looked the other way while such improprieties were repeatedly committed?

There is, of course, plenty of blame to go around and many contributing factors to explain the seemingly inexplicable. But part of the answer, I believe, lies in the way the NCSY viewed its mission, and in Lanner's unquestionable success at that mission.

The NCSY is focused on the concept of kiruv, or bringing unaffiliated Jews to a life of strong Jewish observance. When an organization pursues such transcendent goals, it becomes

frighteningly easy to judge its missionaries (for that's what Lanner essentially was, a missionary) purely by the success of their mission, and to dismiss all who speak or act against the missionary (Lanner's accusers, and now the Jewish Week for its report) as enemies of the mission or its goal.

The NCSY has never tried to hide its mission. Its Web site explains, "NCSY is a leader in bringing unaffiliated youth an awareness of what Judaism is all about," and claims that the group "is at the forefront of the battle against assimilation." NCSY does not hope to just hold onto Orthodox youth and ensure their continued Jewish observance; it has, quite effectively, reached out to non-Orthodox and unaffiliated Jewish youth and led them to stricter observance of (Orthodox) Jewish law and custom. Essentially, the NCSY is a type of proselytizing organization, despite the fact that its target audience is Jewish.

Lanner was a star of the NCSY, a rabbi so successful in his mission that, even as an increasing number of Orthodox leaders have denounced him in the wake of the accusations, many have continued in their vocal support. One rabbi called Lanner's removal from an NCSY summer program — a prelude to his ultimate dismissal — "a devastating loss" for Jewish youth. Letters to the editor printed in the Jewish Week have blasted the newspaper for supposedly endangering the NCSY's kiruv potential, and lamented the fact that many unaffiliated Jews will likely be turned off to the NCSY and the Orthodoxy it advocates because of this news.

I attended several NCSY functions in grade school, and for a brief time was influenced by them. I was a non-Orthodox student at an Orthodox Jewish school and was forever struggling with religion and degrees of observance, having been exposed to Orthodoxy at school and Conservative Judaism at home. I was gradually moving toward stricter Jewish observance, and so the prodding of the NCSY made an impression, encouraging me to try harder to live the lifestyle it advocated.

In the end, despite my growing observance, I soured on the organization, put off by the way it went about accomplishing its goals. I was most uncomfortable with the NCSY ritual of reciting "success stories."

At a typical NCSY Shabbaton (weekend retreat), the Havdala (a ceremony ending Shabbat) always loomed large. A short celebration involving a multiwicked candle, wine and a spice box, Havdala is usually a quick affair. But at NCSY events, leaders would pass around the candle, asking kids to say something meaningful when the candle was passed to them. The kids' stories generally involved nonobservant youth who became observant, thanks to the NCSY. And

inevitably, those teens and preteens would elaborate on the sacrifices they made for their faith: enduring hostility from their parents; refusing to eat at their parents' not-kosher-enough home; refusing to spend weekends at their non-Shabbat-observant home.

As disturbing as these narratives might have seemed (they certainly bothered me), the NCSY encouraged them. The organization openly disregarded parental concerns and prided itself on the courage of children who could make a complete lifestyle change overnight — the consequences be damned.

This situation creates an implicit paradigm in which kids see the NCSY and religion in opposition to their parents. They learn to believe that their new lifestyle has the authority of God's word and 2,000 years of tradition, while their parents are enemy forces seeking to stymie their progress toward the Right Lifestyle. Under these circumstances, it is easy to see how even in cases of abuse, vulnerable children might choose to follow a charismatic religious leader and keep their parents in the dark about their lives — even if their lives were plagued by abuse.

I am more observant now than ever before, but it is only now that I realize the unhealthiness of such a situation, the importance of gradual change, the ethical necessity of parental involvement and familial discussion during a time of turbulence and transition in the lives of vulnerable youngsters.

The NCSY's focus on kiruv may not have caused or influenced Lanner's behavior, nor is kiruv — or proselytization in general — an inherently misguided action. But the NCSY's attitude when it comes to kiruv and its sheltering of Lanner are rooted in similar, misguided values. When kiruv is king, problems often follow close behind.

It is clear from the stories in the Jewish Week that Lanner was a star at what he did. He was a hugely successful, charismatic and beloved leader who brought countless Jewish youngsters to Jewish Orthodoxy. For an organization that aims to win souls, such a leader is indispensable, and so it becomes easy to personalize that leader and ignore — or depersonalize — his accusers.

When the goal is recruitment to a “higher plane” of existence, every person you encounter can be viewed as a means to an end, as a soul to be saved, rather than an autonomous human being who has unique needs, who is immersed in a family and community of his or her own — a person who, by virtue of his or her age and aspirations, is tremendously vulnerable.

It is easy, in pursuit of this goal, to ignore or fight off anything that can be destructive or distracting — whether that be parental objections or abuse by a youth leader. Rabbi Yosef Blau,

a highly regarded leader at the (Orthodox) Yeshiva University seminary who has become one of Lanner's most vocal critics, told the Associated Press, "I think that they [Orthodox Union officials] were so enamored with his success and accomplishments that they didn't want to hear problems."

Many Orthodox Jews and many individual NCSY leaders have succeeded in their mission of kiruv, and they have done so while understanding each individual's unique needs, problems and situations. But NCSY failed to see its non-Orthodox members as more than means to an end, as Jewish people who are all observant and dedicated to tradition at different levels and intensities. Success for an endeavor like kiruv relies on personal, psychologically deep connections between the missionary and the flock; religious leaders who build such relations have a grave responsibility, especially when they are working with children.

The NCSY, with good intentions perhaps, condoned family schism. In the case of Lanner, the organization also practiced wanton disrespect for its youthful targets, ignoring their reports of abusive and potentially criminal behavior by a leader who was hugely successful and widely loved, a man whose victories at proselytization spoke much louder than his improprieties.

As a Jew concerned about the future of our religion, I think it is vital that we (and our communal organizations) remember that every human being is created in the image of God. We must be as concerned about each individual human being as we are about the future of Judaism, and humanity, as a whole.

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