

## Article

# Everyone's Accountable? Peer Sexual Abuse in Religious Schools, Digital Revelations, and Denominational Contests over Protection

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**Abstract:** Since the emergence of the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements, online tracts have been employed to publicly reveal experiences of sexual abuse and assault among women and men in religious institutions and to shame abusers, which tend to be examined as an issue of women's rights or child protection from adult predators. Drawing on the use of digital reporting platforms to testify against peer offences within religious schools, this paper asks how do such testimonies reveal adolescent agency and provoke policy re/actions about the accountability of religious institutions? Digital revelations submitted anonymously to *Everyone's Invited* are analysed alongside interviews conducted with educators, parents, and youths in Jewish schools in Britain. Findings indicate how adolescent digital revelations of peer sexual abuse call for accountability by implicating the faith schools in question, which in turn triggers pedagogical and policy debates from educators. Public responses reflect diverging denominational positions on how to balance the protection of young people and safeguard religious self-protectionism. The paper spotlights the agency of youth in shaming peer abusers as much as faith schools and structures of religious authority, and in turn, how online shaming reveals frictions over accountability.

**Keywords:** adolescence; digital reporting sites; religious schools; peer sexual abuse; United Kingdom



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## 1. Introduction

The #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements have drawn attention to feminist activism against sexual abuse and assault on social media, which expose conducts perpetrated by men and male religious leaders and spotlights women's (often extra-judicial) pursuits of accountability (Colwell and Johnson 2020; Di Leonardo 2018; Eriksen 2018; Pipyrrou 2018; Zarkov and Davis 2018).<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the internet has emerged as a vehicle among religious movements and minorities to anonymously challenge male clergy for molesting children and to call for reform in holding abusers to account (Fader 2020; Kravel-Tovi 2020; Petro 2015). Peer abuse in faith institutions has, however, received considerably less attention from scholars of religion—despite raising diverging implications for how activism against sexual assault unfolds at the intersection of gender, faith, and age. Understandings of sexual violence activism can be broadened by examining how protection is conceived by adolescents vis-à-vis adults who are responsible for their welfare, as well as tracing how intersections of religion and sexuality are re-configured by digital technologies. The use of high-profile digital reporting sites, for example, offers an opportunity to critique how adolescents draw public attention to abuse in religious institutions, what responses emerge, and what they construct as appropriate protective responses. Against this backdrop, my aim in this paper is to ask how do digital reporting sites reveal adolescent agency and provoke policy re/actions about the accountability and responsiveness of educators in religious schools? Investigating public responses to peer abuse across faith denominations illustrates how pedagogical or policy responses put forward by educators are situated in multiple ideas of protection—that of children or adolescents and of religious self-protection.

In what follows, I explore the use of digital platforms to testify against peer offences by female pupils attending a range of Jewish schools in England. I frame their submissions to reporting sites as ‘digital revelations’ to capture how online disclosures conveyed and provoked a range of realizations—for them and their religious institutions—as educators acknowledged and debated the extent of peer abuse. Analysis of the digital revelations spotlights how women attending religious schools express a consciousness of bearing rights to protection and how practises of online reporting provoke institutional responses but also reveal frictions over accountability and authority. The paper first introduces the digital revelations submitted to *Everyone’s Invited*—a reporting site that led to a range of Jewish schools being identified—and the situated responses that emerged across religious denominations. The realities of peer abuse in Jewish schools that were rendered visible by digital revelations are then juxtaposed with data drawn from interviews that examine responses to sexuality education among Jewish educators, parents, and youths. The paper illustrates the agency of youth in reporting peer abuse as much as faith schools, and in turn, how online shaming reveals new possibilities for understanding the politics of protection.

### 1.1. Sites to Spotlight and Domains to Demand: Abuse and Accountability

Digital reporting sites have emerged as sites to spotlight abuse and domains to demand accountability but pursue diverging approaches and goals. In June 2020, Soma Sara launched *Everyone’s Invited* (n.d.a) as an online ‘place for survivors to share their stories’, and with a mission to ‘expose and eradicate rape culture with empathy, compassion, and understanding’.<sup>2</sup> Survivors were previously invited to identify the school, university or organisation where the abuse or assault occurred alongside a brief report of the event itself, but since 2021, schools have been named separately in a publicly available list (*Everyone’s Invited* n.d.b). The digital revelations are ahistorical, as dates and ages are not included as part of the testimonies. While educational policy change is not cited as an explicit objective by *Everyone’s Invited*, the prevalence of peer abuse against women has generated institutional responses such as a review of safeguarding policies in state and independent schools and colleges and support for implementing statutory sexuality education (Ofsted 2021a). Conversely, an online petition and reporting site called *Teach Us Consent* (2021), launched by Chanel Contos, had an explicit goal of pursuing pedagogical change in Australia—to ‘teach us to demolish rape culture’ (emphasis added). Unlike *Everyone’s Invited*, testifiers were invited to submit the graduating year and school name to offer a historical point of reference to digital testimonies. Contos’ petition gained widespread public attention, and her digital activism had heralded pedagogical responses to peer abuse in schools. Hence, such voicing practises and shaming of school-based abuse triggered public, pedagogical and policy debates, and foregrounds how mechanisms of modernity and digital technologies shape the self (Giddens 1991; Thompson 1995), but as rights-bearing individuals that exercise agency in the pursuit of accountability.

Scholars of religion have drawn attention to how the internet is used to ‘name and shame’ Catholic bishops who have abused children and vulnerable adults (see Petro 2015), and more broadly, how abuse in religious institutions is committed by predator priests (Orsi 2018). Within the ethnographic study of Jewish life, sexual abuse is most often examined among Haredi Jews (Haredim), who are otherwise and problematically regarded as being ‘ultra-Orthodox’. The ‘ultra-Orthodox’ label implies a gradation of religiosity when what sets Haredim apart are philosophical differences in what it means to be Jewish (Watzman 1994). Haredim can be more appropriately framed as being *self-protective*, which offers a discursive shift from projections of ‘genuine’ Jewish practise and foregrounds how social reproduction and continuity are premised on negotiating influences that are positioned as external to the group (Kasstan 2019). Moreover, this conceptual shift directs attention to the productive tensions inherent in religious self-protectionism in the digital age (Fader 2012, 2020).<sup>3</sup> While the Internet is viewed as being as dangerous to Jewish continuity as the Holocaust, anthropologist Ayala Fader (2020) demonstrates how anonymous bloggers in Brooklyn pushback against communal self-censorship and shame leaders who protect

abusers. In Israel, Haredi activists are vocally challenging sexual violence and mobilising against the ‘prevailing cultures of denial’, a development that Michal Kravel-Tovi (2020, p. 66) appropriately describes as ‘nothing less than revolutionary’. Through a critique of the emic discourse and activism of a ‘Haredi #MeToo’ movement, Kravel-Tovi (2020) illustrates how Haredi women navigate a delicate balance of upholding socially-stringent codes of conduct while calling for rabbinic accountability—if not reconfiguring vernacular meanings of what leadership entails.

Sexual abuse and assault, however, is not an issue confined to religious or Jewish orthodoxies<sup>4</sup> or authorities, and my attention to *peer* abuse in religious minorities in England instead flags how the Internet is used to demand change and to spotlight issues of accountability across denominations. Anthropologists note how the #MeToo movement has emphasised public shaming as a response over judicial recourse in ways that ‘fail to tackle the structural problem of sexual violence’ (Pipyrou 2018, p. 416). Minority populations, however, offer an opportunity to critique how changes at collective levels are envisioned and pursued, which is afforded by contiguity between religious schools, charitable services, and specific media channels. When leading Jewish schools were identified in digital revelations submitted to *Everyone’s Invited*, Jewish newspapers began to run headlines such as ‘prestigious Jewish schools in London reel over allegations of sexual abuse’ (Judah (2021)) and ‘schools to run workshops to discuss abuse of girls’ (Rocker (2021)). Religious schools then became a site where (primarily) girls were positioned as being rendered vulnerable twice over—from boys within their own minorities and institutional silence. The public responses that emerged reveal denominational rifts on how to balance the protection of young people and safeguard religious self-protectionism, and how online reporting reveal contestations over accountability in offline worlds.

### 1.2. Faith Schools: Jews and Jewish Schooling in England

States afford religious schools degrees of freedom to decide how children are immersed in religious instruction, but they also perform a powerful role in segregating children and cultivating identities and gender philosophies (Fader 2009). Religious schools materialise boundaries in situated ways, which raises questions about the values that conservative religious minorities seek to conserve or protect, and why (Guhin 2021; also Stadler 2009). Scholars note that the autonomy over education that religious schools pursue has caused conflicts with responsibilities to government policy, as well as the responsibilities of states towards upholding human rights and children’s rights (Perry-Hazan 2015; Dwyer and Parutis 2012). Yet, autonomy over educational curricula is dependent on financial status. In England, where I live, religious schools are often termed ‘faith schools’, and many are state-aided and subject to oversight and policy compliance in ways that independent fee-paying schools can negotiate. Faith schools that rely on state funding to operate are subject to inspection by the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted)—the body responsible for evaluating the performance of schools in England.<sup>5</sup> Faith schools that do receive state funding must follow the national curriculum but can choose how religious education is delivered.<sup>6</sup>

It is estimated that 60 per cent of Jewish children in the United Kingdom<sup>7</sup> are educated in 120 Jewish schools, a reality that is celebrated as ‘perhaps one of the greatest success stories of the Anglo-Jewish community’ (PaJeS n.d.). Jewish schools in the UK operate in different ways, but most are state-aided, and parents are expected to make a modest annual and voluntary contribution to cover the cost of religious programming (Miller et al. 2016).<sup>8</sup> Not all Jewish schools are sex-segregated. Jewish children from Liberal, Reform, Masorti (Conservative), Orthodox, and Haredi denominations (and those who are non-aligned) attend Jewish schools. Most Jewish schools operate along Orthodox lines—even if the students come from families that are not observant of *halachah* (Jewish law). Jewish schools form part of a strategy of preventing assimilation and intermarriage, cultivating Jewishness and constructing ‘socio-spatial boundaries’—‘with the expressed aim of defining and creating particular versions of what “good” Jewish children and young adults should

look like' (Valins 2003, pp. 245–46). Parents, however, are often more concerned about the standards of attainment in Jewish schools (regarding the national curriculum) and socializing with Jews rather than a commitment to cultivating high levels of religious literacy (Miller et al. 2016; Samson 2020).

Haredim (pl.) are an exception to much of the educational dynamics outlined above, where there is an emphasis on religious instruction that provides limited preparation for professional training.<sup>9</sup> Haredi schools are often aligned to movements, have their own definitions of prestige, are highly selective, and in some circles, a child's place can be dependent on parents signing disclosure forms that there is no access to the internet at home. A number of Haredi schools in England are independent and fee-paying, which forms part of the Haredi delineation of space and residential boundary-making in pluralistic cities (see Flint-Ashery and Stadler 2021). There is evidence to suggest that 'unregulated'<sup>10</sup> schools are widely operated in Haredi neighbourhoods, and are reported to have inadequate child safeguarding measures in place (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse 2021). Haredi schools serve as a strategy to separate children and protect them from exposure to social contagion, particularly children from (non-Haredi) Jewish families who are raised with competing ideas of what being Jewish involves (Kasstan 2019). Moreover, education is a crucial force in shaping the gendered life course of Haredi Jews, and girls tend to have more exposure to national curricula as part of an expectation to navigate the secular world, including employment and statutory services (Fader 2009).

In recent years, I have observed how Jewish schools have faced intense scrutiny around child protection and the teaching of relationships, sex, and equality education.<sup>11</sup> In 2014, three Haredi Jewish institutions (state-aided and independent) were downgraded following no-notice inspections by Ofsted.<sup>12</sup> Inspectors (Ofsted 2014) noted shortfalls in safeguarding requirements in a Beis Yaakov School—but also that students were not prepared 'adequately for life in modern Britain'. *The Jewish Chronicle* (2014) reported that this rebuke was an apparent reference to the non-teaching of sexuality education and LGBT content in Haredi schools. These events heralded a long-running struggle between Haredi educators and the UK state, which intensified when plans to make the teaching of relationships and sex education (RSE) a statutory requirement were first announced in 2017—and legislated in 2019.<sup>13</sup> Issues of child safeguarding and sexuality education are, however, not specific to Haredi schools, and in 2021, Ofsted (2021b) ranked JFS as 'inadequate' on the basis that 'leaders do not ensure that all pupils are safe from harm' and that 'many pupils report sexual bullying, including via social media'. The events and the public responses that ensued reveal denominational rifts on how to balance the protection of young people and safeguard religious self-protectionism and social organisation, which I uncover in this paper.

## 2. Materials and Methods

To address the question of how digital narratives reveal adolescent agency and provoke policy re/actions of accountability, I draw on a decade of ethnographic engagement with welfare and wellbeing among Jews in Britain.

### 2.1. Methodological Context

When conducting immersive ethnographic research with Haredi families in Manchester (2013–2016), participants shared their experiences of sexual abuse committed against themselves or their children and grandchildren during interviews and informal conversations. Several high-profile scandals arose during my fieldwork, notably the extradition and conviction of Todros Grynhaus, who sexually abused two girls (aged between 13 and 15 at the time) and fled to Israel on a false passport. Mr Justice Timothy Holroyde remarked in his sentencing that the following:

Both [girls] were vulnerable by reason of their young age. Both were additionally vulnerable because they had been brought up in the Haredi community and had therefore been insulated against any form of sex education or exposure to sexual

images. You took cynical advantage of their vulnerability. ([Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse 2015](#))

Holroyde's comments preceded major policy changes, as plans were announced to make the teaching of RSE a statutory requirement in all schools in England in 2017, as mentioned above. I then decided to examine how the statutory teaching of RSE is being navigated by Jewish families and schools and how they projected ideas of protection in follow-up research (2020–2022).

## 2.2. Participants

Fifty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, who were primarily Orthodox and Haredi, and to a lesser extent Liberal, Reform, and Masorti. My decision to work across denominational groups was to understand how differently positioned actors are affected by a universal policy shift, and how activism around sexual abuse provoked competing responses of accountability. Participants were recruited from past ethnographic studies of Jewish life in Britain (mentioned above) as well as snowball sampling methods, and participants were subsequently grouped into the following four key cohorts: (i) parents, (ii) adolescents and young adults, (iii) educators, and (iv) activists against sexual abuse. Topic guides were developed for the interviews, and included prevention of sexual abuse, as the issue is covered by the RSE curriculum. The paper draws on interview data which raised issues of peer abuse in faith schools. Interviews were conducted over Zoom or telephone due to public health control measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Interviews were recorded, with permission, and detailed notes were recorded.

## 2.3. Digital Data

When *Everyone's Invited* was established in 2020, digital narratives of peer sexual abuse implicated Jewish schools. I manually archived screenshots of submissions that identified Jewish schools and monitored the institutional responses that were relayed through media, public (online) fora and social media. This method enabled me to capture the social dynamics that emerged and analyze how peer abuse was framed by the different sets of stakeholders—the student-survivors and educators. My approach is grounded in digital methodologies of situating use of social media and the internet in wider social and cultural worlds, and tracing how new possibilities for activism emerge and engender political transformations ([Miller 2018](#)).

It is not possible to accurately discern the number of submissions relating to Jewish schools as digital revelations are no longer posted alongside schools' names. We should appreciate, however, that the number of sexual abuse disclosures never reflects the true extent of abuse. Hence, my analytical interest is in what the submissions catalysed, as detailed below. The publically available list identifies the following Jewish schools: Hasmonean High School for Boys (Orthodox, London); Immanuel College (Orthodox, Bushey [independent]); JCoSS (non-denominational, London); JFS (Orthodox, London); King David High School (Orthodox, Manchester); Yavneh College (modern Orthodox, Borehamwood). Haredi schools had not been identified (by February 2022), though evidence of sexual abuse, mainly from teachers or rabbinic authorities has been recorded elsewhere ([Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse 2021](#)).

## 2.4. Analysis

Digital testimonies were analysed according to the content, including issues of consent; whether assaults happened in school or outside of school; claims made around cultures of gender ideology (especially masculinity) in Jewish schools. I treated institutional responses that were published in media as primary data and paid close attention to how accountability was fielded in the public domain—and *which* public was being engaged. Analysis of data from interviews and digital testimonies was inductive and thematic, allowing theoretical insights to emerge from prolonged engagement with the data ([Nowell et al. 2017](#); [Braun](#)

and Clarke 2008). This approach enabled me to develop theoretical insights by engaging with the data and juxtaposing responses drawn from interviews and digital testimonies, rather than hypotheses being pre-conceived.

### 3. Results

Findings demonstrate how adolescent agency provoked communal responses to the public naming and shaming of Jewish schools and policies on how to protect young people through education around consent and relationships. Yet, by juxtaposing communal responses to *Everyone's Invited* from differently positioned actors, accountability was situated within denominational differences and struggles over the protection of children as much as religious self-protectionism.

#### 3.1. Digital Revelations, Public Shaming, and Communal Responses

Digital revelations narrated how sexual abuse occurred *within* school premises, and how abuse was enabled by peers that chose not to report or condone acts that they witnessed—reflecting the discourse of a pervasive rape culture that Soma Sara outlined (above). As a pupil of JFS wrote, ‘I was in the lunch queue, he put his hand up my skirt and groped me he then made a comment about my bum to his friend. No one said anything’. A student of JCoSS illustrated how acts of sexual abuse, and what could be construed as rape (though not explicitly referred to as such in the testimony), may have happened *outside* of school amidst intoxication; however, male peers would continue their harassment on school grounds as follows:

“[ . . . ] i just remember opening my eyes every once in a while to see his naked body on top of me, but I was too drunk to move or even stay awake [ . . . ] The boy continued to bully me at school, he told me it wasn't true and laughed about it with his friends while i was right there [sic].” (See Figure 1 for full quotation)

Hence, the context of peer sexual abuse was fluid as it took place across school and communal domains, raising implications for responses and accountability. The digital revelations captured how female students felt unprepared at the time to understand bodily autonomy, ‘only now, over a year later, am i realizing i was silenced by him and i lost rights to my body’ (Figure 2). Discerning the boundaries between consensual and non-consensual acts later became clearer and shifted their perceptions of what constituted sexual assault as follows:

“A while back me in summer i was talking to a boy and we met up one day w two other ppl and went to his house. We were watching a film and he leaned over to kiss me and kissed him back shortly after the two other ppl left, the boy then put his hand down my trousers and started fingering me *without my consent* and i felt really uncomfortable and wanted to leave but he had me pressed down on his bed so i couldn't get up, he kept on fingering me and i was rly uneasy and wanted to get out so i pretended my mum had called me to go home so i got up and left with my friend as quickly as possible not really saying much to the boy as i left, at the time i didn't realise that this was a form of sexual assault as i had kissed him back so felt i had led him on however *now i see it wasn't right* at all and felt guilty and it was my fault *for a long time after* [sic, emphasis added].”—JFS

The temporal lapse between the abuse and understanding of consent is unclear in this digital revelation, which reflects the ahistorical context of *Everyone's Invited*. However, women indicated that schools could have prevented acts of sexual assault by offering ‘education’ on inappropriate conduct, which can be inferred to include relationships and sex education. To quote one testimony, “[ . . . ] i really feel this is a prime example of something that could have been avoided with more education on how bad it was [sic]”—JFS’ (Figure 3). While this revelation (and others like it) does not reflect an explicit aim to shame the Jewish school in question, we see evidence of flagging perceived deficits in education around relationships and consent in schools.

"i was 15 and dangerously drunk at a house party. Next thing i knew, this boy (who was completely sober) had taken me to bed with him. I can't exactly remember what went on, but he forced himself on me after i became unconscious. i just remember opening my eyes every once in a while to see his naked body on top of me, but i was too drunk to move or even stay awake. I was then found by my friend who threw this boy out of the room. The boy continued to bully me at school, he told me it wasn't true and laughed about it with his friends while i was right there. Sexual assault is not funny. I became suicidal, depressed and suffered from frequent panic attacks. I had no one to talk to because no one understood what i went through. YOU ARE NOT ALONE"

- JCOSS

**Figure 1.** Digital testimony submitted to *Everyone's Invited*.

"We were with a massive group of friends watching a film, i was sitting next to him and i felt his hand on my thigh, he started travelling up my top to my boobs with his other hand now on my thigh moving inwards i kept shrugging him off but he kept persisting and saying it's okay were friends, i felt so frozen and scared of making a scene in front of my friends and of being called a liar or a drama queen. i didn't realise how wrong this was of him my body felt violated - this wasn't the only time this happened with the same boy and all of his friends do the same thing to many other girls regularly and they are never called out on it. i am sick of it. he made me second guess my feelings and only now, over a year later, am i realising i was silenced by him and i lost the rights to my body."

- JFS

**Figure 2.** Digital testimony submitted to *Everyone's Invited*.

These digital revelations, just a few of the many submitted to *Everyone's Invited* that identified Jewish schools, prompted communal 'soul searching' over child and adolescent protection and what situated responses and interventions could be developed. The Jewish Women's Aid (JWA n.d.), a charity supporting Jewish women and children affected by domestic and sexual abuse, launched a fundraising campaign to expand education in response to the digital revelations documenting rape, abuse, and harassment. Rather than offering one-off sessions for Jewish schools, the JWA (n.d.) advocated for a 'whole school approach, developed together with the school, which is more in-depth and bespoke to the school's ethos and needs'. Hence, digital revelations highlighted the reality of peer abuse in Jewish schools and signalled a communal need for educational interventions (which reflects the context of the shifting policy landscape around teaching RSE). To quote Naomi Dickson, the Chief Executive of JWA (n.d.), 'What we're hearing is that some girls feel scared, unheard and preyed upon, and boys feel accused and unsure how to

respond'. The digital revelations then propelled discussions around offline communal policies and practises to address the legitimate concerns of safety and silencing among 'girls' and questions of male responses and defensiveness, with school education viewed as the appropriate site to address these binary experiences and concerns.

compared to some of the stories on here, but i really feel this is a prime example of something that could have been avoided with more education on how bad it was. so a small group of our close friendship group were at an evening in, it just so happened to be two couples, and myself and our close friend (all jfs) . we had a bit to drink (nothing excessive) and then i sat with the guy as the other couples were together. it was very obvious i had no intention of anything other than a good friendship like we had. that night i think he tried to gw me i specifically told him no but i think he wanted to take advantage of the fact i was a bit drunk. he groped every girl there (three) and put his hand down my friends jeans in front of her boyfriend. multiple times i had been sitting with him and he put he gripped me or just rested his hand on my arse so i moved it away physically or moved to sit somewhere else, he asked me to come back and sit with him and i thought it's fine i told him to stop so he won't do it again. but he did. i don't think we ever accepted how awful it was because he was always known as such a respectful guy who would consistently call out other "friends" who had also sexually harassed us girls in the group and made us uncomfortable. to this day i consider him one of my close friends but i'll never forget how he acted. i genuinely believe if he were more educated on how awful it was this might not have happened."

- JFS

**Figure 3.** Digital testimony submitted to *Everyone's Invited*.

Patrick Moriarty (2021), Headteacher of JCoSS, penned a public response in TES (formerly Times Educational Supplement) in April 2021, positioning the issues raised in Jewish schools as part of a broader conversation about sexual abuse in schools in England. Moriarty's response ran with the heading and sub-heading of 'My school was named on *Everyone's Invited* [ . . . ] but we need to face our *shame* head on [emphasis added]'. Hence, the digital revelations that identified Jewish schools were interpreted as an act of public shaming toward educators and institutional heads. Moriarty situated the digital revelations in a pervasive culture of 'toxic masculinity'—one that inflicts abuse on girls as well as boys. He raised the question of responsibility for what occurs 'beyond the direct jurisdiction of school', and how education programmes can address the issues raised in digital testimonies around the engagement of social media, drugs, alcohol, consent, and pornography outside of school hours. As publicity around the Jewish schools identified in *Everyone's Invited* intensified, PaJeS,<sup>14</sup> a Jewish educational advocacy group, hosted a Zoom event on 8 June 2021 to discuss 'talking tricky topics: creating safe spaces to talk about a culture of consent'. The online event featured presentations from Jewish teenagers, the JWA, Reshet (a network

for Jewish youth provision), and the metropolitan police. Rabbi David Meyer, the Executive Director of PaJeS, began by explaining his denial of the issues raised by digital revelations of sexual abuse in Jewish schools as follows:

“The first time somebody mentioned to me about, *Everyone’s Invited*, I said to them, ‘I don’t think that’s something we need to worry about within our schools’. It showed, actually, considerable ignorance on my part, I was very wrong. Unfortunately, the stories that we have read about, the horrific incidents that have taken place, the acts of sexual harassment, misogyny etc., which are an enormous problem across the whole of our society, have without doubt, also become a real problem within the Jewish community.”

The initial non-acceptance that peer abuse could be present in Jewish schools was followed by a recognition of the extent of peer abuse. There was, however, a discursive emphasis on children, rather than discussing peer abuse, using the subject position of adolescents and the rights and responsibilities that were signalled in the digital revelations as follows:

“There is a danger this evening that we could turn every single boy in the school into a potential abuser and every single girl into a potential victim. That is not what this evening is about. The vast majority of our *children*, thank God, are neither victims nor abusers [ . . . ] so a lot of this evening is going to be about how we, all together, can effect a change across our community and across our society.” (See [PaJeS 2021](#) [emphasis added])

Rabbi Meyer’s introduction draws out many issues, ranging from a gradual awakening to the problem of sexual abuse, the implications of typecasting Jewish boys and girls, and appropriate responses that not only centre on school education—but also contiguity with home and communal messaging. Common to all these institutional responses was a need to instigate cultural change through communal frameworks and Jewish schools. However, not all educators were as shocked as Rabbi Meyer by the reality of sexual abuse, and interviews illustrated long-standing concerns around consent and ‘rape culture’ in Jewish in/formal educational settings.

### 3.2. Consent and Context

Miri has spent much of her professional life in Jewish youth work and developing safeguarding training programmes across all denominations (except for Haredim) and is herself an expert on Jewish informal education. We first met in 2013 and re-connected to discuss the issues of peer sexual abuse in Jewish schools that adolescent digital revelations had exposed and what requests for communal conversations on protecting young people had been provoked. As she recalled, ‘certainly since *Everyone’s Invited* became a thing, I have had a lot of people asking me more about consent and how do we teach that and what do we do about that?’ Miri was positive about the online reverberations that *Everyone’s Invited* offered, especially to young people, but also criticized the ahistorical context of digital testimonies as follows:

“I was actually talking to a colleague earlier this morning about *Everyone’s Invited*. It really is great, it is about youth empowerment. I think it is really naming “this is my lived experience – you have to acknowledge it.” I think the only challenge that I have from it is that you don’t have to put a date. I think that would be really much more useful because a number of Jewish schools have been named on *Everyone’s Invited*. It would just be useful to see when they were or that that has been a long period of time. So, in terms of data collection, that would have been much more helpful for me to see, ‘Well, is that people of my age who have heard about it and are now writing about it or is young people now?’”

Hence, Miri felt that the opportunity for practical learning and implementing responses is hindered by the non-disclosure of when the sexual abuse occurred—especially considering shifts in the policy landscape around safeguarding in the UK. Yet, participants indicated how the digital revelations had reflected the realities in school. Chayim was in his early-

teens and living as part of a Haredi family when we first met, and had switched to a more modern Orthodox and state-aided school until the age of 18, before attending yeshiva for a year and then university. Now twenty years old, Chayim recalled how ‘rape culture’, as framed by Soma Sara, manifested during his time at school, as follows:

“There was a very toxic culture within the school about consent, in terms of the boys, like rape jokes, constantly, it was a given thing for rape jokes. I can give you one example that was awful, “why is it good to have sex with a baby? Because they can’t say no. Or like a dead person, they can’t say no.” That was the norm. It was really normal to say these kinds of jokes, but there was nothing about consent at all.”

This recollection of misogyny, shocking as it is, ought to be understood in the context of, as Chayim described, an absence of teaching on consent or sexuality education in formal education or informal Jewish education and the legal consequences of non-consensual sexual acts. In his words, ‘I’ve never really received any sex education’. Yet, Miri was also surprised by the explicit focus on formal education in the digital revelations submitted to *Everyone’s Invited*, but not on informal education and youth work, which are central to the contemporary Jewish life course as follows:

“I think part of the challenge we see in *Everyone’s Invited* is that stuff has happened at school or at university. I have been amazed, actually, that people haven’t written stuff about youth groups particularly, about church youth groups or synagogue youth groups, given the scope and scale of the kind of work that I have been involved with since being a young person and until now. When it first hit, I said to people, “Just prepare yourselves. Make sure that you have got a solid commentary on a press release so that when they name your youth organisation or your synagogue, you can respond to that”, and it hasn’t happened. I am not sure why it hasn’t happened because I know that the issues of consent have not only happened in school or university.”

The institutional scope of digital revelations submitted to *Everyone’s Invited* was therefore not perceived by Miri to reflect the full range of spaces where conversations around consent needed to take place, especially given the context of peer sexual abuse. There were, however, denominational differences in how protection was envisaged—especially when balanced against the self-protective stance of Haredi Judaism.

### 3.3. Denominational Differences around Protection

While the conversation so far has centred on non-Haredi Jewish responses to *Everyone’s Invited*, the public positions taken by Haredi educators reveal denominational differences in accountability. Eli Spitzer, a Haredi educator in London, holds a public presence through social media, and a blog and podcast running in his name—but those are ‘aimed squarely at the interests and needs of the Orthodox Jewish (Charedi) community’. While Spitzer positions himself as speaking about, and to, *the* community, it is important to reiterate that Haredi Judaism is far from monolithic, and it remains unclear which Haredi constituents engage with Spitzer’s outputs. With the internet used by commentators such as Spitzer to depict the collective ‘interests and needs’ of Haredi Judaism, I became interested in how the issues raised by *Everyone’s Invited* were interpreted. Unlike the debates surrounding Jewish schools outlined above, it appeared that Spitzer sought to carve a space for communal responses to forms of abuse within the framework of religious self-protectionism.

Spitzer noted in his blog how JFS had long been held as a model of Jewish education—against which Haredi schools were ‘condemned’. Citing *Everyone’s Invited* and Ofsted responses, Spitzer asserted that the total amount of sexual assault recorded would be dramatically reduced if all schools were sex-segregated and had social media use among minors been banned (as is the reality in most Haredi Jewish lifeworlds). He maintained that such a social revolution would not happen because it ‘is incompatible with basic moral assumptions that permeate every aspect of mainstream British and British-Jewish

life'. Hence, Spitzer argues, 'schools are busy implementing mitigation measures that are compatible with liberal culture, which they know will not eradicate the problem, but will, they hope, cut the amount of suffering somewhat'. In contrast, he argued that Haredi Jews are imposed with an opposing logic, as follows:

"if there is a problem in the Charedi community, every measure to combat this must be on the table, regardless of how incompatible it is with the Charedi social system, until the problem is eradicated'. Mitigation measures that are compatible with Charedi morals and values are not acceptable because they will still leave some victims." (Emphasised in original)

Hence, Spitzer suggests that the 'alternative social model' of Haredi Judaism—a framework that is itself reminiscent of anthropological analysis of how Haredi Judaism is premised on an 'alternative social reality' defined by stringency (Fader 2020)—had an unfair expectation to address social problems that position people as victims regardless of how congruent interventions are with its lifeworld. In Spitzer's words, 'Because *Charedi* society deviates from this norm, its existence can only be justified by the elimination of all harm'. Yet, the issue of child or adolescent protection is arguably about meeting minimum requirements in safeguarding, which, as noted, Haredi schools appear to struggle to implement, and how the absence of sexuality education leaves adolescents vulnerable to abuse (see Introduction and Methods). I was struck by Spitzer's call to address problems through Haredi methods, as it offered a clearly divergent response to the conversation on peer abuse so far.

"Just as liberal society has an ongoing obligation to ameliorate its problems through liberal methods, so *Charedi* society has an ongoing obligation to ameliorate its problems through *Charedi* methods. The mere fact that reforms advocated by outside parties are incompatible with our model for communal life does not excuse us of the burden of finding our own solutions."

Spitzer's reflections on *Everyone's Invited*, however, did not offer solutions on how to address peer abuse in Haredi schools. Yet, it should be noted that Spitzer's claim that sex-segregated schools, as is the norm in the Haredi lifeworld, would dramatically reduce incidents of sexual assault obscures the experiences of peer abuse among boys raised in the Haredi school system. Zvi, now twenty-nine, recalled how sexual conduct did occur between male students while being unable to draw on the grammar of consent, 'we had no sex education [at 12–13 years old], no idea about what is appropriate, what is not appropriate'. Zvi then recalled how male-male sexual encounters did occur, not all of which were consensual, and recalled a peer 'teaching people about things and then them experimenting, and then maybe someone being uncomfortable with it'. While the event Zvi described took place many years ago, he nonetheless signals that the absence of sexuality education had left boys to learn about sexuality from each other, which could to non-consensual sexual acts.

What is significant, however, is that Haredi educators continue to publically oppose the teaching of RSE (Taragin-Zeller and Kasstan 2020), which not all parents agreed with. Mrs Rajak, a Haredi mother of eight, reflected on the challenges of teaching her sons a vocabulary of sexual and reproductive function and the potential for repercussions for transgressing Haredi models of education, 'I have a problem because if I teach them the word[s], they will literally get chucked out of school'. Moreover, sexual abuse committed against Haredi children is a reality that Independent Sexual Violence Advisors are tasked with responding to and hence maintain that 'All children, whether they are Chasidic or not, Charedi or not, deserve to understand consent' (Fletcher 2019) and that children should be entitled to thorough safeguarding mechanisms (Goldsobel 2022). While Spitzer's response was entitled 'each to their own', own appears to be situated at the Haredi collective and sidelines the demand for education on consent raised by testimonies of Jewish pupils to *Everyone's Invited*. Hence, questions remain about how 'Haredi methods' will address the concerns raised by Zvi and Mrs Rajak, especially amidst the current movement in Haredi Jewish neighbourhoods to expose abuse and call for rabbinic accountability (Krauel-Tovi 2020).

#### 4. Discussion

Concerned with the question of how digital narratives reveal adolescent agency and provoke policy re/actions of accountability, this paper has integrated an analysis of digital revelations of abuse submitted to reporting sites, public responses, and interview data concerning sexuality education. The ethnographic record on sexual abuse in religious institutions has mainly focused on clergy and leaders in orthodox lifeworlds, which leads to digital revelations and calls for accountability within their social context (Fader 2020; Petro 2015). The issues of peer abuse that were flagged in submissions to *Everyone's Invited* instead provoked diverging ideas of how to intervene across Jewish denominations. While it remains unclear *when* the abuses described in *Everyone's Invited* testimonies took place, it can be assumed that the women were under the legal 'age of consent' (16 in the UK) at the time. The legal age of consent underscores the emphasis on protective interventions among communal leaders and educators as much as the discourse of protecting Jewish *children*, as communal stakeholders put it. Testimonies, however, relayed a diverging reality of violence in *adolescent* sexuality and gender relations and inculcated a responsibility among male pupils for their actions. The digital revelations positioned education and knowledge of consent as being central to prevention, which formed part of the communal responses put forward by the student victims, educators, and advocacy groups in non-Haredi schools.

The identification of Jewish schools provoked soul searching and communal conversations about how to appropriately respond to the realities of peer abuse, which female pupils were experiencing. The digital revelations triggered institutional responses to policies of protection—including the momentum around statutory changes to the teaching of relationships and sex education. Yet, denominational differences in how to protect young people clearly emerge. Haredi educators positioned the issues exposed by *Everyone's Invited* as being enabled by mixed-sex schools and social media, which are not vernacular to the Haredi lifeworld. Instead, any peer abuse within Haredi schools was perceived to require Haredi responses, but with little insight into what those methods of attaining the highest possible standards of child and adolescent safeguarding involved. For Haredim especially, the protection of young people and adolescents is balanced against religious self-protectionism, whereby any response must explicitly 'reinforce' and not 'undermine' 'the overall approach' (Spitzer 2021). Haredi Jewish educators might argue that the prevalence of 'rape culture' in broader UK society, which is evidently converging in Jewish schools, is not characteristic of Haredi lifeworlds given the stringent emphasis on modesty and gender separation (Kasstan 2019; Fader 2009; Stadler 2009; Taragin-Zeller 2014). Modesty frameworks, however, do enable institutional silencing around sexual abuse—which is increasingly being challenged offline and online (Fader 2020; Kravel-Tovi 2020).

Examining the connections between digital and religious domains illustrates how online reporting sites engender a sense of self-making among pupils (as was recognised and celebrated by informal educators) and as having agency to spearhead religious institutions into action in the face of safeguarding risks. Social scientists have long conceptualised how mechanisms of modernity lead to a cultivation of the self and, in a chain reaction, shape the institutions that characterise contemporary societies (Giddens 1991). Through reflexivity, Giddens notes (Giddens 1991, p. 3) how the self is configured and re-configured 'amid a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities', especially trust and risk—the latter of which is central to modernity and its social organization. The rise of digital communications has become a key site to observe how interactions shape the self and applications of agency and power (Thompson 1995). Digital reporting sites capture how women conceive the self as rights-bearing individuals, locate the risk of abuse within religious schools, and assert their entitlement to a protective grammar of consent. Their actions, in turn, provoke policy responses that capture how the self is not a 'passive entity' (as Giddens put it) but a profound influence on institutional continuity. When comparing denominational responses, however, a diverging frame of rights emerges—which is that of religious collectives to respond to peer abuse in a way that is consistent with their social organisation and modes of institutional reflexivity. The issue of safeguarding against peer abuse in schools then reflects

a broader phenomenon of appropriating philosophies of secular liberal politics to pursue autonomous self-governance, as has been mainly observed among Haredi constituencies in the US (Fader 2009; Stolzenberg and Myers 2021). The challenge for social scientists moving forward will be to discern how each right ‘to their own’ way is balanced against obligations to safeguard and protect young people from abuse, as required by statutory services, and how these negotiations take shape across different jurisdictions.

#### *Strengths and Limitations*

The paper critiques how different denominations respond to safeguarding issues vis-à-vis broader stakes. A key strength of the study lies in the method, which afforded analysis of responses among differently positioned stakeholders—the student-survivors and educators. The plurality of the Jewish population enabled this denominational comparison and offers a methodological framework for scholars to examine responses to peer abuse among schools aligned to different Christian and Muslim movements. Further work should examine how schools have, across denominations, responded to issues of peer abuse by revising safeguarding policies and whether they help to address the issues reported in this manuscript and on digital platforms.

#### 5. Conclusions

Unlike previous commentaries that suggest digital feminist activism around the #MeToo movement situates accountability at the level of the individual rather than structural transformation (Pipyrou 2018; Eriksen 2018). My attention to the digital revelations of peer abuse in faith schools demonstrates how conversations at the level of the *collective* were provoked in a minority setting. This account of peer sexual abuse in religious schools offers several departures from the social study of religion and the current focus on digital exposure of sexual abuse among self-protective minorities—especially when committed by male authority figures. The digital age has forged a domain where everyone is invited to expose gender injustices, demand accountability, and contribute to the re-working of power dynamics—though not everyone takes up that invitation in the same way, raising the question of what is at stake and for whom.

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#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Scholars have noted that the prominence of the #MeToo movement in 2017, especially among white women, erased the original use of #MeToo by Black feminist activist Tarana Burke (Zarkov and Davis 2018).
- <sup>2</sup> *Everyone’s Invited* (n.d.a) defines ‘rape culture’ as, ‘When attitudes, behaviours and beliefs in society have the effect of normalizing and trivializing sexual violence. This culture includes misogyny, rape jokes, sexual harassment, online sexual abuse (upskirting, non-consensual sharing of intimate photos, cyberflashing), and sexual coercion’.
- <sup>3</sup> It should be noted that there are barriers to disclosing safeguarding concerns in Haredi neighbourhoods, and can bring the social sanction of being ostracised (Lusky-Weisrose et al. 2021). Those who reveal experiences of abuse and the names of abusers can be shamed as a ‘moiser’—a term that describes a Jew who reports another Jew to secular authorities (Independent Inquiry Child Sexual Abuse 2021).
- <sup>4</sup> Use of the term Jewish orthodoxies is borrowed from Fader and Avishai (2022).

- 5 Education is a devolved matter in the UK. In England, Ofsted inspect state-aided schools, including faith schools, and a proportion of independent (fee-paying) schools that are not affiliated to the Independent Schools Council (Roberts and Hill 2021). The Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) is appointed by the Department of Education to inspect independent schools affiliated to the Independent Schools Council. The ISI reports to the Department of Education on the extent to which the statutory independent school standards are met.
- 6 In England, faith academies differ to faith schools in that they receive funding from central government and are run by an academy trust. The distinction is that faith academies have more control and autonomy over operations, and do not have to follow the national curriculum, but are still subject to Ofsted inspection for quality and standards.
- 7 The majority of Jewish schools, but not all, are located in England.
- 8 Faith schools, including Jewish schools, have historically held privileged place in the UK in terms of receiving state funding (see Miller 2001).
- 9 Haredi Jews generally subscribe to the following branches; culturally-dominant Litvaks, Hassidic dynasties, and Sephardim and Mizrahim.
- 10 Meaning they do not want to have formal oversight and are not inspected as schools are. In 2022, the Department of Education announced proposals to address this issue.
- 11 In 2014, it became a statutory requirement to teach ‘Fundamental British Values’ (FBV), which is premised on promoting a value of democracy, the rule of law and tolerance for faiths and beliefs (Department for Education and Lord Nash 2014). (From 2011 there was a requirement for schools to ‘respect’ British values, which formed part of UK Government response to false allegations that Islamic extremism was being cultivated in UK in a controversy known as the ‘Trojan Horse Affair’). Scholars have argued how the requirement to teach FBV forms part of a statecraft and securitization project to counter extremism and terrorism—which has explicitly sought to contain Muslim minorities (Khan 2021).
- 12 Ofsted is required to inspect whether schools (state-aided and independent) teach about groups with ‘protected characteristics’, which includes religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, and gender reassignment (to name a few categories), under the Equality Act (2010).
- 13 Closely tied to the FBV project, the RSE curriculum has a dual role of contributing to student understandings’ of groups with protected characteristics and promoting sexual and reproductive wellbeing.
- 14 Jewish schools are supported by advocacy groups such as PaJeS (n.d.), which works to promote professionalism and ensure outstanding outcomes in inspections, and advocate for Jewish schools around government policy, most recently regarding sexuality education.

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