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The religious implications of being sexually abused by a rabbi: Qualitative research among Israeli religious men

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ABSTRACT

Background: Clergy perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA) is a widespread phenomenon, with many consequences for the victims. To the best of our knowledge, no research has focused on the religious consequences for Israeli Jewish religious men who were sexually abused by rabbis in their adolescence or emerging adulthood.

Objective: To describe the implications of CPSA for the religious faith, practice, and attitude towards rabbis among sexually abused Israeli religious men.

Methods: Based on a constructivist-phenomenological paradigm, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with eight formerly and/or currently still religious men who had been abused by rabbis.

Results: Three main themes regarding religious consequences, emerged from the findings: the impact of CPSA on the religiosity of the victims; the effect of being sexually abused by a rabbi on victims' attitudes toward other rabbis; and the process of finding a new rabbi after the abuse.

Conclusions: This preliminary study opens a window onto the complex nature of this type of sexual abuse and its religious consequences. The unique findings regarding the range of religious implications are not consistent with previous studies about Christian victims. These findings contribute to the understanding of this distinctive form of abuse, for establishing intervention techniques that will assist the victims and for additional research.

1. Introduction

1.1. Sexual abuse in relationships with religious authority figures

Clergy perpetrated sexual abuse (CPSA; e.g., Easton, Leone-Sheehan, & O'Leary, 2019) and is a widespread phenomenon. Between the years 1950 and 2002 more than 10,000 CPSA complaints were filed in the U.S. alone, and were committed by approximately 4400 Catholic priests, with 81 % of the victims being men (The John Jay College Research Team, 2004). In the following decade, an additional 15,000 cases of CPSA in Catholic churches throughout the U.S. were uncovered (Terry, 2015). The Church's efforts to protect its good name and hide these abuses, together with the offender's high status in the religious community, adversely affects CPSA reporting percentages (Harper & Perkins, 2018; Isely & Isely, 1990). Despite the great media interest in this subject, there is a shortage of empirical knowledge about CPSA (Easton et al., 2019; McGraw et al., 2019).

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It is difficult to estimate the precise prevalence of CPSA, particularly among non-Catholic populations (Langeland, Hoogendoorn, Mager, Smit, & Draijer, 2015). In addition, although most of the data about CPSA concern the Catholic Church, it can be assumed that the phenomenon exists among other religious groups, highlighting the importance of further research in a variety of religious contexts (Harper & Perkins, 2018; McGraw et al., 2019). We were unable to locate any empirical research focusing exclusively on victims of CPSA committed by rabbis within the worldwide Jewish community (Lusky-Weisrose, Marmor, & Tener, 2020), although we did find one study that focused on sexual abuse by a variety of authority figures in the Ultraorthodox community in Israel (Lusky-Weisrose, 2021). During the abuse, almost none of the participants (in that study) recognized that they had been sexually abused, and their recognition occurred mainly during adulthood. Until the victims finally understood that they had been abused, the abusive relationship with the authority figures was perceived by them in one of four ways: normative-educative; mutual; sexual but not abusive; or punitive relationship. Although the aforementioned study did contain several cases of sexual abuse at the hands of rabbis, over 80 % of the cases comprised abuses perpetrated by school and kindergarten teachers. In the current study we sought to fill this gap by interviewing men from Israel's Jewish national-religious and Ultraorthodox sectors who had been sexually abused specifically by rabbis. More precisely, in this research we examined the implications of the abuse for the victims' religious practices (i.e., observance of Jewish commandments), religious beliefs, and attitudes towards rabbis.

1.1.1. The consequences of CPSA

The variety of psychological consequences resulting from CPSA are consistent with the consequences of other kinds of sexual abuse (Easton et al., 2019). These include symptoms of depression and anxiety; suicide; dissociation; an increased risk of developing various disorders such as somatic pain, eating disorders, and PTSD (Charak, Eshelman, & Messman-Moore, 2019; O'Leary et al., 2017); drug and alcohol use (Vertamatti et al., 2019); sexual compulsion or inappropriate sexual behavior; and the development of delinquent patterns (Schraufnagel, Davis, George, & Norris, 2010).

However, anxiety and depression rates among CPSA victims are higher than those of victims of other kinds of sexual abuse and are similar to those typifying individuals who were sexually abused by a parent (Stevens, Arzoumanian, Greenbaum, Schwab, & Dalenberg, 2019). Additionally, when a venerated person who is considered to represent the good and the divine in the world is sexually abusive, victims often lose faith in their ability to distinguish between good and evil, between those who are trustworthy and those who are not. As a result of this loss of faith, many CPSA victims describe a feeling of distrust toward human beings in general, as well as difficulties creating intimacy and functioning sexually. They tend to repeatedly enter destructive relationships in which they are exploited, and they experience loneliness and an inability to integrate socially. Victims of CPSA have said that the abuse they underwent undermined their identity in terms of knowing who they were and what their aspirations were; their sense of self-control was impaired; and some perceived themselves as incapable of coping with life, seeing themselves as fake, ugly, and dirty (Easton et al., 2019).

Despite cases in which clerics were denounced as a result of their abusive acts, many CPSA victims report that the abuse exposure resulted in their being distrusted by members of their community and, consequently, in their being ostracized and isolated (e.g., McGraw et al., 2019; Neustein & Leshner, 2008). It has been indicated that the stronger the Christian identity of a religious community, the harder for the community members to believe claims that a priest was sexually abusive, and the more skeptical they are toward victims' complaints (Doyle, 2009; Minto, Hornsey, Gillespie, Healy, & Jetten, 2016). The withdrawal of social support has been shown to increase victims' loneliness and to cause them to feel a sense of sexual violation beyond the mere physical violation (Fogler, Shipherd, Rowe, Jensen, & Clarke, 2008).

1.1.2. Sexual abuse and religiosity

Several studies have examined how various types of sexual abuse affects religious beliefs (Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Appel, Kaplan, & Pelcovitz, 2018), with most of the research indicating that sexual abuse causes victims to experience negative changes in their religiosity (e.g., Walker, Reid, O'Neill, & Brown, 2009). These changes range from having a doubt in faith, complete abandonment and to public denunciation of religion. Some victims see the abuse as proof that God is punishing them and, as a result, they feel anger toward Him (Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013). On the other hand, a few studies have indicated a strengthening of religiosity in the aftermath of sexual abuse and an increase in victims' sense of spirituality and religiosity (e.g., Friedman, Labinsky, Rosenbaum, Schmeidler, & Yehuda, 2009). In these cases, victims were assisted by positive religious coping strategies (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000), such as developing trust in God and in His guidance and believing that existence has meaning that goes beyond the visible. As such, they were able to give meaning to the abuse, establish a connection with God, receive social support, and experience healing and resilience (Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013).

Only a few studies have been conducted among Jewish sexual abuse victims. Two of these studies described significant secularization processes (Ben Ezra et al., 2010; Rosmarin et al., 2018). In contrast, two studies reported a religious strengthening among victims (Friedman et al., 2009; Yehuda, Friedman, Rosenbaum, Labinsky, & Schmeidler, 2007). One explanation for the differences between the studies was that trauma in general and sexual trauma in particular might create changes in religious identity, and these changes can be expressed by a weakening or, alternatively, by a strengthening of religious identity (Rosmarin et al., 2018).

1.1.3. Religious implications in CPSA cases

Many offending clerics bring aspects of religion into the abuse. For instance, they may make statements along the lines of "God himself ordered the execution of these sexual acts" (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017), or quote religious texts to lend legitimacy to their behavior. They may also claim that this sexual interaction is part of the victims' religious education and learning process (Raine & Kent, 2019), and that victims' ability to attain spiritual enlightenment depends on their ability to satisfy the sexual needs of the clergyman

(Fogler et al., 2008). It is the introduction of religious elements such as these that, among other things, distinguishes between CPSA and other types of sexual abuse, resulting in the victim experiencing spiritual conflicts (McGraw et al., 2019; Rossetti, 1995) toward God and His commandments, toward clergy in general, and toward religious institutions.

Many CPSA victims come from devout Christian families in which they have been taught to have absolute trust in the Church and in clergymen (Raine & Kent, 2019; Wind, Sullivan, & Levins, 2008). However, in most cases, the abusive behavior by clergymen runs contrary to religious laws, and as a result many victims experience a deep conflict. They must decide whether they will acknowledge the abuse and act against the clergyman or whether, by contrast, they will cooperate with the clergyman, thus turning their back on and rejecting the religious laws which form a part of their core identity (Doyle, 2009; McGraw et al., 2019). Victims describe initially feeling guilty for causing a clergyman to sin (McGraw et al., 2019) and confusion as to whether they are allowed to be angry toward the clergyman. Eventually their feelings do often turn to anger and disgust, not only toward the offending priest but toward all priests and Church institutions (Doyle, 2009). Once victims recognize the abuse, they undergo significant changes, with many of them finding it difficult to believe in the religious content that the offending cleric taught and instilled in his lessons and sermons (Blakemore, Herbert, Arney, & Parkinson, 2017; Easton et al., 2019). Some victims report ceasing their social affiliations and severing ties with religious organizations, as well as abandoning religious careers (Easton et al., 2019). When victims discover that the religious establishment wishes to protect the offender, asking victims to refrain from reporting the abuse in order to protect the Church's image, there can be an intensification of feelings of betrayal and a disconnection with religious institutions (Doyle, 2009).

In addition, given that the cleric is often perceived as the earthly representation of God, CPSA causes many victims to feel that they were abused by God himself. As such, the feeling of betrayal at the hands of the beloved priest is interwoven with feelings of betrayal by God (Doyle, 2009). Victims of CPSA describe a sense of anger toward God, as He is seen by them as having enabled the abuse; they may thus experience a crisis which leads to a conceptual change transforming God's character from loving, caring, powerful, and comforting to frightening, evil, distant, and intimidating (Stevens et al., 2019). Among some victims these feelings may become exacerbated and lead to a total lack of faith in the existence of a transcendent God and an absolute abandonment of the religious world (McGraw et al., 2019; Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Mahoney, 2008). However, a minority of the victims have reported that in order to stay connected to God, they find a way to differentiate between institutional religion and God himself, and reconstruct His character accordingly (Flynn, 2008).

Unlike the research regarding the implications of sexual abuse for religious identity, which indicates that some victims do indeed report a strengthening of their religiosity (e.g., Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013), we could find no evidence indicating a religious strengthening in the aftermath of CPSA (McGraw et al., 2019). Rather, based on the few existing studies that address the effects of CPSA on religious identity, a picture emerged in which approximately two-thirds of men abused by priests no longer defined themselves as religious (Farrell, 2009; Isely, Isely, Freiburger, & McMackin, 2008). Among the remaining one-third, victims described a change in their perception of God and a difficulty in believing in Him and in religious institutions, the way they had prior to the abuse (Flynn, 2008). In a comparison between CPSA victims, incest victims, and victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by someone outside the family, CPSA victims reported the lowest level of religious faith and the greatest change between their self-religious affiliation definition today as compared to their definition in childhood (Allred, 2015; Stevens et al., 2019). These studies indicate that CPSA has negative implications for religious belief, religious practices (i.e., observance of Jewish commandments, and participation in religious ceremonies), as well as attitudes toward the clergy and the religious establishment (Easton et al., 2019).

Victims of CPSA have also been found to experience an impairment in their ability to feel a religious or spiritual connection, in general. After the abuse, victims stated that they were no longer able to attribute religious significance not only to events concerning the Church or institutional religion but also to life events that had previously been experienced by them as spiritual or had given their lives meaning and a sense of security. The abuse seems to cause religious symbols and spiritual elements to become reminders of the abuse and of the betrayal, causing victims to lose the ability to connect with them (Doyle, 2009; Flynn, 2008).

Judaism differs from most other religions (e.g., Christianity) in that instead of emphasizing the importance of intentions, thoughts, or emotions, it emphasizes the obligation to carry out required religious practices, and their frequency (e.g., praying three times a day) is higher than most religions (Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, & Kirkpatrick, 2019; Rosmarin, Pargament, Krumrei, & Flannelly, 2009). Also, there are differences between religious Jews and Christians in terms of their interactions with clerics. For example, in Christianity such interactions take place mainly on Sundays in church and during specific religious ceremonies. Religious Jews, however, meet with a rabbinical figure on an almost daily basis: There is a rabbi in almost every religious school, every neighborhood, and in every synagogue, and this rabbi accompanies the members of his community through every life stage in various ceremonies such as the circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, wedding, and funeral (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016). As previously stated, we were unable to locate any studies examining how CPSA affects the religiosity of Jewish victims (Lusky-Weisrose et al., 2020) and, given the aforementioned differences between religions, research into this subject is needed. The current study helps to bridge the gaps and marks an important step toward building a significant body of knowledge in this field.

1.1.4. Research context: religious Jewish society in Israel

As mentioned, the current study focused on Israeli men who were sexually abused by a rabbi, while belonging to the religious Jewish sector. At the end of 2016, the two largest religious groups in Israel – the national-religious sector and the Ultraorthodox sector – accounted for about 30 % of the Jewish population in Israel (Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Despite significant differences between these two groups, there are nevertheless several meaningful similarities between them. Among other things, both groups conduct their lives in accordance with their faith in God and in accordance with the tenets of the Jewish Bible, and feel a degree of obligation to observe religious practices, commandments, and rituals (Efrati, 2019). These populations are characterized by conservatism and the observance of social and religious codes. They tend to live in separate residential areas that meet their religious

needs, their children study in specific schools according to their religious worldview, and a rabbinical authority figure is present in their lives frequently (Coleman-Brueckheimer, Spitzer, & Koffman, 2009; Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016). Another characteristic pertains to the fact that Judaism attributes spiritual meaning to the physical and sexual dimension and there is a religious prohibition to engage in any sexual activity outside of marriage. This prohibition is a challenge and a source of confusion and conflict among all religious Jewish populations (Efrati, 2019; Frances, 2018). Although several studies have addressed sexually abused Ultraorthodox male victims in Israel (e.g., Lusky-Weisrose, 2021; Zalcberg, 2017), to our knowledge, no studies have been conducted on men from the national-religious sector who were sexually abused, and they will be included in this study. Additionally, as stated, we uncovered no empirical research focusing on cases of CPSA in Israel's religious Jewish sector.

The aim of the current study was thus to describe the retrospective meanings given by formerly and/or currently still religious Israeli men, who had been sexually abused by rabbis in their adolescence or emerging adulthood, to the implications of the abuse for their religiosity and their attitude toward rabbis. The main questions that guided this study were: How do men who were sexually abused while being a part of a religious community, experience the relationship with the abusive rabbi and their experience of the sexual abuse? How do these men experience the implications of the abuse for their religiosity? What are their attitudes toward other rabbis once they have recognized the abuse they underwent?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A criterion-based purposeful sampling approach (Creswell, 1998) was used to recruit participants to the study. The goal was to obtain information-rich cases that would maximally serve the study's purpose (Patton, 1990). Inclusion criteria were: 1) men who had been sexually abused by male religious authority during their adolescence or emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and 2) men who at the time of the abuse were part of Israel's Jewish religious population. Participant recruitment was carried out in several ways. First, rabbis and therapists who were known to be engaged in helping sexually abused religious men were approached. Second, a call for participation was published via social media networks. Finally, snowball sampling was used; that is, participants were asked to refer other potential participants to the study.

Recruitment proved to be extremely difficult given male victims' great concerns about and fears of being exposed. Overall, seventeen victims who met the study criteria were identified, but only eight of them agreed to be interviewed. These eight men provided us with multiple perspectives regarding the phenomenon under study (Sabar Ben-Yehoshua, 2016; Van-Manen, 1990).

2.2. Ethical approval

The study was approved by Haifa University committee for ethics in research that includes human beings. Each participant was presented with an explanation about the study, its goals, its potential benefits and implications, as well as the researchers' contact information. The researcher strove for full transparency regarding his own professional and religious identities, mentioning that he was an academic, a social worker, and a religious male. The voluntary nature of the study was made clear, and participants were told that they could refuse to answer any question and/or to end the interview whenever they wished. Given the highly sensitive nature of the study, all participants were presented with a list of telephone numbers of designated treatment centers that were prepared in advance to receive calls from the study participants. All participants gave their consent to the researchers' use of the interview materials, and any identifying details about participants, offending rabbis, or place or time of the abuse were disguised.

2.3. Description of the participants

The eight participants were abused by various rabbis during a time period, overall, of more than three decades. The age of the participants at the time of the interview ranged from 25 to 60; the age at which the onset of the abuse began ranged from 14 to 19; and the duration of the abuse ranged from two abusive interactions within a period of a few months to a sexually abusive relationship spanning over a decade and including dozens of sexual interactions. The time at which the victims recognized the abuse for what it was ranged from immediately (i.e., during its occurrence) to more than a decade after the sexual interaction. As mentioned, all of the study participants were religious at the time of the abuse, but at the time of the interviews they defined themselves as follows: Five of the eight participants defined themselves as religious; two defined themselves as secular; and one said he was secular but wore a yarmulke, indicating that he maintained the external appearance of a religious person while identifying internally as secular. Five of the participants were married to women and had children; two participants were single; and one participant was in a long-term homosexual relationship. Six participants had a higher education, and the remaining two had a high school education. The nine men who met the research criteria but refused to participate provided a variety of reasons for their refusal: Five feared that their identity would be revealed; two feared that talking about the abuse would bring up difficult emotions that they did not want to re-experience; and two men said that in their eyes the physical interaction they had had with the rabbi did not meet the criteria of sexual abuse.

2.4. Data collection

This study used in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to tell their story in their own words, openly and freely. All interviews were executed by the first author, a religious male. The interviews were conducted in locations chosen by the

participants and were approximately 90 minutes in duration. The interviews included several topics, among them the victim's relationship with the offending rabbi and the religious community, the scope of support they received, and the impact of the abuse on the victim's life. The topic that was the focus of the present research was the religious implications of being sexually abused by a rabbi, and questions such as the following were asked: Do you feel that the abuse affected/affects you? Has the abuse had an impact on your religiosity and your relationship with God?

2.5. Data analysis

Content analysis was done using the constructivist-dialectical analysis method. According to the dialectical point of view, observing a higher level of abstraction allows for an understanding of seemingly contradictory processes appearing in the text and organizing these processes into models and creating new theories. The process stems from active reflection (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2019; Enosh & Ben-Ari, 2016) and a "sense of differentness" (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011; Enosh, Ben-Ari, & Buchbinder, 2008); and includes an active awareness of contrasts and contradictions, inconsistencies, and incongruities. The analysis method consists of several stages (Enosh, 2019): (1) The first step is to identify and construct basic units of meaning. This is carried out by reading the text and marking or extracting any phrase, sentence, or paragraph which has a meaning for the researcher within the context of the study, or raises any thoughts, ideas, or questions. This process is carried out through the text of each interview, line by line. (2) The following step (which often occurs simultaneously with the first), is to label the unit of meaning, thus moving from the concrete text to a conceptual abstraction. This step may be considered the first level of meaning-making. (3) The third step in this process is to construct possible contrasts for each label. Often more than one possible contrast can be offered for each "label" or abstraction, creating a "fan" of possible contrasts or negations to be considered. (4) In the following stage, an active search is conducted through the texts for occurrences of the constructed contrasts. Thus, a list of pairs of contrasts is created, with ample "anchors" in the texts that exemplify each point. (5) The fifth stage broadens the scope of analysis by referring back to the pairs of contrasts and setting them up not as dichotomies, but rather with each pair representing endpoints of an axis. (6) Observing the axes enables researchers to ask themselves what would be the possible middle categories within these axes, and to search for such categories within the text. (7) At this point researchers may want to label the major axes that emerged, enabling them to construct the overarching themes of the findings (second level of meaning-making). (8) Having set up the major themes, researchers may want to refer back to the interviews/texts and examine the relationships between different themes and their sub-categories. Such interrelations may take various forms, for example describing developmental paths, mapping a theoretical space of meanings, offering a causal process, etc. (9) In the final stage, researchers reconstruct and integrate the different findings into a coherent whole that either sheds new light on ways participants make meaning of their lives, or suggests a new model or theory, or allows for a new understanding of the phenomenon at hand. Finally, it should be noted that the demarcation of steps is offered for analytical and presentational goals only, and different steps in this process often occur simultaneously or overlap.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative research is evaluated via trustworthiness — that is, through an audit trail. In the current research additional ways, proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000), were used to ensure its credibility. Two types of triangulations were used. First, we used triangulation across data sources, collecting information from individuals who had been CPSA victims at different ages and had been abused by different rabbis, this diversity increased the research's level of credibility. In addition, we used investigator triangulation; throughout the process of analyzing the data, additional researchers participated and provided additional opinions about the findings. Also, member checking was used; by using open-ended questions, asking for clarifications as well as examples when necessary. In addition, in two cases, after completion of the interviews and the data analysis, partial findings were presented to the participants for the purpose of obtaining a clarification of their statements.

The participants gave various statements regarding the interviewer's religiosity, some claimed that due to his religiosity he could understand them, and some claimed that his religiosity made it difficult for him to understand their experience. The group of additional researchers that were used for investigator triangulation included religious and secular women and men. This allowed the uncovering and the reduction of the reactivity which was caused by the fact that the interviewer was a religious male. Finally, due both to our wish to respect the participants and to allow as many readers as possible to read about the experience of sexual abuse at the hands of a rabbi, no graphic descriptions of the abuse are offered in the forthcoming Findings section.

2.6. Findings

The findings of the present research were formulated into three main themes: 1. The effect of sexual abuse by a rabbi on the religiosity of the victims, 2. The effect of sexual abuse by a rabbi on victims' attitudes toward rabbis, and 3. The process of finding a new rabbi after the abuse.

2.6.1. The effect of sexual abuse by a rabbi on the religiosity of the victims

As indicated in the literature review, in cases of sexual abuse caused by a religious authority, confusion is created in a variety of ways, for instance by the juxtaposition between sexuality and religious content. The findings of the current study indicated that this confusion created many conflicts for the victims, both during and after the abuse and it was found intertwined in many texts of the victims, as described by Tzvi, first abused at age 17:

Once, after we were together, we got dressed and he put on his shoes like you do according to halacha [Jewish law], first right, then left, then he tied the left shoe and then the right one. And I remember myself standing there and looking at him, and for a

split-second feeling like I was hallucinating: We just did really forbidden things and now he piously observes the halacha about shoes?! It seemed surreal to me....

Research participants displayed a wide range of perceptions about the extent to which the sexual abuse by a rabbi influenced their religiosity. On one side, Dani, first abused at age 16, who claimed that being sexually abused by a rabbi was unrelated to and had no influence on any aspect of his religiosity: "It certainly did not shatter my spiritual world; the two aren't related." By claiming that the abuse wasn't followed by any religious difficulty Dani disconnects and creates a split between the abuse and its spiritual meaning. Moti, first abused at age 16, describes that although the sexual abuse did raise questions in him about God's presence at the time of the abuse, but because his view of religion was that religious questions exist that do not have to be answered, he did not doubt his religious beliefs:

And here in the most sacred place, in the yeshiva, you are abused, and you ask, "Where's God in those minutes of the abuse?"... But again, these kinds of questions do not create a crisis in my faith, because these types of questions do not require an answer... God doesn't owe me an answer and he did not have to save me at that moment because he doesn't have to save us all.

All of the other victims said that the sexual abuse by a rabbi had varying effects on their religious level. Half of the participants claimed that the rabbi's sexual abuse had decreased their level of religiosity, but at the same time there were significant differences in the way this decrease was expressed. Josh, first abused at age 17, said the abuse did not cause him to stop believing in God, he still respected rabbis and planned to educate his children with these values. But at the same time noted a decrease in the degree of his commitment to keeping the commandments required by Jewish law:

I think it was a kind of a watershed moment for me... I became less strict compared to what I had been before. I rationalize everything now and it's not always the right thing to do. I am certainly much more liberal today.

Yitzhak, first abused at age 18, said that despite becoming secular he continued to observe some of the commandments: "It seems to me that I have become less religious... I still keep some of the mitzvot [commandments], but not according to what is written in the Shulchan Aruch [code of Jewish law]." Yitzhak came to the interview without wearing a yarmulke and said that he was in a long-term homosexual relationship. On the other hand, he said he had ceased his membership in an organization of religious gays because they had gone too far, permitting themselves other things that were forbidden by the Torah:

One night they showed a movie and there were a lot of immodest parts in it. I told them that to try to find halachic [i.e., according to Jewish law] approval for a gay relationship is fine, but that didn't mean that the rest of the commandments weren't important, or that you could do anything you want, so I left.

Furthermore, later in the interview Yitzhak referred again to his religiosity and said that although he had left religious life, he continued to speak about, quote, and remain interested in rabbinical books and religious studies: "I still work on my spirituality... and I am still totally into it." It seems that leaving religion after the abuse did not influence his sense of belonging to Jewish literature and his religious development.

Two other participants described a complete abandonment of religious life. David, first abused at age 15, presented a complex picture regarding his leaving religion:

I wanted to believe, because believing protected me from understanding what the abuse had done to me. Realizing what I had gone through suddenly revealed to me a terrible and black side of the world, a side of disorder. So, the belief in God somehow provided some meaning for why it had happened. But suddenly I realized that I only believed because it was convenient, and then I said "Enough. I do not want to believe just because it's convenient for me. I want to do what's real." ... I did not leave by slamming a door, I left with anger but not with any "anti" sentiment... I left in anger over what God had done to me. But both then and today, I wish I could believe again, I really miss it. I rarely still find myself praying or hearing Jewish songs because it makes me feel good.

During the interview, David said that in the years after the abuse, he continued to define himself as a very religious person and even saw himself destined to become a rabbi. However, as he began to recognize that he was a victim of sexual abuse, the systems that provided him a sense of order and meaning to his existence began to come apart, undermining his order of reality, and leaving him with a sense of chaos. David decided to leave the religious world and the meaning it had offered him, but at the same time described his longing for the religious world, and for the faith and meaning attached to it. In contrast, Eli, first abused at age 16, the second participant who had completely left religion referred to it with contempt, and throughout the interview whenever religion was mentioned, he used words such as: lie, manipulation, and an illusion that needs to be destroyed.

In contrast to the participants who described either a lack of effect, a weakening of intensity of religious belief, or an absolute abandonment of religious life, two participants said that not only had the sexual abuse by a rabbi not weakened their religiosity, it had actually strengthened his faith in God and of his observance of Jewish commandments:

I'm thinking about what you asked me about my religious life, and it seems to me that the abuse affected them in a good way... Not that I'm justifying what he did to me, but looking back, the abuse made me become a more independent person, to study Torah in a deeper way and to find better rabbis who were more suitable for me, and learn from them... But I do not become dependent on them for my connection with God... The rabbi who abused me is not worth having my relationship with God destroyed. He's not worth it.

(Tzvi, first abused at age 17)

According to Tzvi, the abuse pushed him to embark on a journey of inquiry and of developing his own independent spiritual identity via deeper study of the Torah and via connecting with new rabbis, a process that he said led to an improvement in his religious life.

The findings in this section, addressing the effects of sexual abuse by a rabbi on the victims' religiosity, were heterogeneous and wide-ranging. They ranged from a minor decrease in religious level to fully abandonment of religion, from statements claiming that the abuse had no religious influences to statements regarding a process of religious strengthening following the abuse. By contrast, the findings concerning the victims' attitudes toward rabbis, which will be discussed next, indicate an almost homogeneous attitude among the victims, according to which the figure of the rabbi underwent a transformation.

2.6.2. *The effect of the sexual abuse by a rabbi on victims' attitudes toward rabbis*

Except for the one participant who claimed that the sexual abuse had no effect on his religiosity, all of the other seven participants described a change in their attitude towards rabbis. Their comments focused on a new construction of the figure of the rabbi, his role and status in their lives, and their relationship with him. Eli, one of the seven participants talked about a sense of disconnection and an absolute schism toward the rabbinical institution as a result of the sexual abuse he had suffered in his youth. Although Eli used harsh words and claimed that the rabbis who defended the abusive rabbi deserved to go to hell, his words lacked a sense of anger, stress, or any emotional connection:

In retrospect, I think that the abuse was the point at which the lie became clear to me, the manipulation that could exist in the religious world ... It was something that just ripped me away from the whole rabbinical institution. ... When my father tells me, "You have no respect for rabbis!" I say, "Your right, I really have no respect for rabbis; I have no reason to respect rabbis."

Despite these statements, it should be noted that later in the interview Eli said that throughout the years after the abuse he continued to be in contact with various rabbis.

In contrast, the other six participants, including those who are not religious today, did not express sweeping anger toward rabbis, and some even partially expressed a sense of appreciation toward them. The participants' statements were characterized by a change in perception and the creation of new attitude toward rabbis compared to the time prior to the abuse. Josh described how his perception of rabbis, something he had assimilated as a child, changed as a result of the abuse:

All of this automatic belief in rabbis, just because they're rabbis... it must stop! There is something in our community that must change. It cannot be that our religious faith allows us to interpret things so mistakenly... I was taught that rabbis do not make mistakes, but the sages taught us that "No human being has control over their sexuality" and they knew very well what they were talking about.

A number of participants also reflected on this change in perception. As a result of the abuse, they came to realize that "rabbis are human beings":

Interviewer — Can you explain the sentence you said earlier: "Rabbis are human beings?"

Rabbis fall, and their falls can be severe. They might even have continuous, ongoing falls, not just one-time falls, and people say, Wow! But I say okay, they are people like me, like you. In fact, it is the opposite, because as the sages say, "He who is more pious, his desire is also bigger." And it's true. A man on a higher spiritual level experiences greater temptations and struggles.

(Dani, first abused at age 16)

Dani explained that the abuse made him understand that rabbis were not a different kind of a superior human being, and as such, they can commit even severe sins. Nevertheless, toward the end of this quote, Dani once again distinguished between ordinary people and rabbis and quoted a reference suggesting that it was rabbis' higher spiritual level that actually made them more prone to sin.

Two participants said that in the aftermath of the abuse they underwent a change in their perception of rabbis' roles. Specifically, post-abuse they saw their religious life as something that should mainly revolve around their relationship with God, and less with their relationship with rabbis or with their acceptance of a rabbi's authority. An illustration of this perception could be found in the words of Tzvi, quoted in the previous theme, when he described that his religiosity became stronger after the abuse. Although his post-abuse journey involved seeking out better rabbis to learn from, Tzvi also understood that his relationship with God did not depend on his connection with rabbis. Moti made a more extreme statement:

And I consulted with him a lot [his new rabbi], but he never told me what to do because if he had, I would have said to him: "Listen rabbi, I chose a hard life for myself; my religious relationship is only with God."

Moti completely changed his perception of the rabbi's role, post-abuse, reducing him from being an authority figure who could make decisions regarding other people's behavior to one who could give advice, but with no obligatory effect.

2.6.3. *The process of finding a new rabbi after the abuse*

Despite the changes in participants' attitudes toward rabbis, five of the participants described, without being asked about it directly, the development of a relationship with a new rabbi after the end of the relationship with the offending rabbi. All five victims included in their comments about the new rabbi a variety of criteria that distinguished him from the rabbi who had sexually abused them. Yoni,

first abused at age 19, talked about the difference in the rabbis' number of years of Jewish religious education and the kind of relationship these rabbis had with older/higher-status rabbis:

I remember telling myself that [I wasn't interested in relationship with] rabbis who hadn't studied for at least ten years in a yeshiva, or rabbis who hadn't been protégés of "bigger" rabbis. It was as if I wanted to identify everything the abusive rabbi wasn't.

Another participant emphasized how different the offending rabbi was from his new rabbis, in terms of personal qualities:

The [offending] rabbi was very, very talented and a great speaker. He was charismatic, the most charismatic person I've ever met. The rabbis who taught me thereafter were very not charismatic. They didn't speak so well at all. There was something very modest and egoless about them... They were not gurus, very not extroverted.

(Josh, first abused at age 17)

Moti mentioned a difference in the nature of the emotional relationship between the rabbis and their students: "The new rabbi... he wasn't a warm person, perhaps just the opposite. He was rational, tough, just a Tora teacher. I was very close to him, but without any emotional aspect." In a reflective moment during the interview Dani described another difference between the offending rabbi and the new rabbi, regarding the matter of physicality between rabbis and students:

Look, now that I think about it, the new rabbi's ability to have a personal conversation with us was close to zero. For example, he was a person with whom I couldn't see how something like this [sexual abuse] could happen because apart from a handshake on Friday nights or other special situations, we really had no other physical contact with him. There was a lot of personal interaction regarding our studies but really nothing that included touching, exactly the opposite from how it was with the abusive rabbi who always hugged and caressed his students.

Two participants noted that after they had built relationships with the new rabbis, they revealed that these rabbis were not afraid to deal with cases of sexual harassment or to condemn the offenders. One of them was Eli, the participant quoted above (who had previously said he felt a disconnection from and an absolute schism toward the rabbinical institution). Despite Elis feelings toward rabbis, in the years after the abuse he was in contact with two rabbis whom he regarded quite differently:

I must say that today I suspect almost every rabbi of manipulation. Every charismatic rabbi is suspect, either in regard to sexual or religious manipulation... But the exceptions were my [new] rabbis... They had something honest about them, they were the exact antithesis... They said that the desecration of God was the abuse, not the exposure of the abuse.

The following participant expressed his confusion, conflict, and anxiety regarding the creation of a relationship with a new rabbi:

I'm talking to you [the interviewer], and I realize it probably sounds weird that I went to another rabbi to ask for help. After all, how could I know that he would not do the same thing to me? And I kept trying to find some objective criteria that I could check off, to see whether the new rabbi met these criteria, and then that would be a sign that I was safe to be with him, or that he was a good or righteous rabbi, or I don't know what to call it.

(Tzvi, first abused at age 17)

The participants' words reflected their clear ambivalence. On the one hand, they feared being abused again and desired to protect themselves. On the other hand, they felt the need to have a rabbi, a spiritual authority figure, in their lives.

3. Discussion

In this article we examined the experience of eight Israeli formerly and/or currently still religious men who were sexually abused by a rabbi during adolescence or emerging adulthood, regarding the effects of the abuse on their religiosity and their attitude toward rabbis. Three themes were discussed in the findings section: 1. The effect of sexual abuse by a rabbi on the religiosity of men who were sexually abused in their youth. 2. The effect of the sexual abuse by a rabbi on victims' attitudes toward rabbis. 3. The process of finding a new rabbi after the abuse.

In regard to the first theme – the effect of the sexual abuse on the religiosity of the victims – there was a wide range of responses. One quarter of the participants claimed that their level of religiosity did not change following the abuse. Half of the participants noted a religious weakening, of different intensities: from a decrease in the degree of commitment to observing Jewish law, to observing only some religious elements, to a complete abandonment of religion and an attitude of contempt and anger toward it. One quarter of the participants indicated that following the abuse there was an increase in their religiosity. This range of responses aligns with the meaning-making coping model (Park, 2005). According to this model, after an event takes place that violates people's religious meaning systems, they make various adjustments to their beliefs, such as re-evaluating God's all-powerfulness, going through changes in their sense of belonging to the religious community, and finding a new set of values, or alternatively, experiencing a strengthening of their religious identity. In line with the options suggested in the model, the participants in the current study either made adjustments to their faith, left it, or revealed that it had been strengthened. Thus, the findings of the present study lend support to the meaning-making coping model, and specifically in the context of cases in which the traumatic event happened at the hands of a religious authority figure. Given the small study sample, however, research into this matter should be extended.

As previously mentioned, to the best of our knowledge this study is the first to examine how CPSA affects the religiosity of Jewish

victims. The findings from this research concerning the lack of religious change as well as the findings regarding a religious weakening and a reconstructing of God's character following abuse by a rabbi are consistent with and reaffirm the empirical literature regarding Christian CPSA victims (Flynn, 2008; McGraw et al., 2019). However, only half the participants in the current study experienced a religious weakening — a lower rate than that which was indicated in studies among Christian victims, where about two-thirds of the participants abandoned religion (Farrell, 2009; Isely et al., 2008) and the remaining third experienced a religious decrease of varying intensities (Flynn, 2008). In contrast, the findings in this study about religious strengthening following sexual abuse by a rabbi are unique, and no similar reports have been found in studies among Christian victims (McGraw et al., 2019). Various researchers have even argued that, unlike other kinds of sexual abuse, after sexual abuse committed by a clergyman, religious strengthening cannot occur (Stevens et al., 2019).

Various studies have shown differences in the perception of faith, God, religious practices, and the role of the rabbi in Judaism versus clergymen in Christianity (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008, 2016). It is possible that these differences exerted an influence over the findings. These novel findings indicate that further research is needed to examine the source of these gaps between Jewish and Christian victims and also to examine the ability to predict or moderate religious changes following any sexual abuse (Rosmarin et al., 2018), as well as following CPSA in particular. In addition, future studies should look into the elements that enable religious strengthening after CPSA.

The findings in the present research interface with the theoretical framework of 'Religious Coping' (RCOPE). This theory explains how religion can help a person in times of crisis or trauma (Pargament et al., 1998, 2000). Three religious coping strategies have been derived from this theoretical framework, these strategies help people who are in a state of crisis: God's support, belonging to and getting support from a religious community, and accepting support from clergy (Lazar & Bjorck, 2016). Only a few studies have to date examined the contribution of these strategies to the coping ability of sexual abuse victims (e.g., Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2014; Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013). That said, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have yet examined the ability of people to use these strategies when the clergyman himself is the abuser, rather than the source of support. The findings of the present study regarding the wide range of religious implications constitute a foundation for further research in this field. These findings which point to a decline in religiosity among half the participants, seem to indicate that the ability of CPSA victims to use religious coping strategies may have been impaired. However, it is also possible that the findings regarding religious strengthening, or not experiencing any religious change after the abuse, suggest that some victims were in fact able to use different religious coping strategies such as feeling God's support in order to maintain or increase their level of religiosity. Additional research is needed in order to investigate the ability of CPSA victims to be assisted by RCOPE.

Whereas most of the literature indicate that following CPSA, Christian victims feel anger, and many of them disconnect from the clergy and from Christian religious institutions (Doyle, 2009; Easton et al., 2019), the findings of the present research suggest that despite the significant decrease in the rabbi's status (in the participants' eyes), the participants mainly emphasized not an abandonment of rabbis or religious institutions, but rather a reconstruction of the way they viewed rabbis' status and role. Once the participants acknowledge the abuse, they no longer see the rabbi as a superior being, and some stopped seeing him as a figure who could obligate them in his instructions. At the same time, most of the participants expressed partial appreciation for rabbis, and two even claimed that it was the rabbis' high spiritual level that made them more prone to sin.

Regarding the process of finding a new rabbi following the abuse, we found no studies addressing similar such phenomena among CPSA victims from different religions, further research about this phenomenon should therefore be conducted. The findings regarding this theme may be examined from a broader theoretical framework, relating to the role of the father figure. Numerous studies have focused on the importance of having a father figure during the teenage years and the effect of his presence on health mental (Roman-Juan et al., 2020) and on the development of a proper self-image (Yomtov, Plunkett, Sands, & Reid, 2015). As previously mentioned, in many studies the offending clergyman is often likened to a father figure by the victims (Pilgrim, 2018) and has been described as enabling religious development (Doyle, 2009). In Judaism, unlike Christianity, the rabbi is a major part of religious boys'/men's daily life in a variety of settings, from childhood to adulthood (Lazar & Bjorck, 2008). It is possible that the findings regarding participants who did not leave religion post-abuse, together with the developmental need for a father figure, and the frequent contact that Jewish religious boys have with their rabbis, led to the need to find a new rabbi figure to help fulfill these religious and developmental needs.

Another possible explanation for the need to seek out a new rabbi may be associated with theories regarding the continuity of the relationship between incest victims and their abusive fathers (for review see: Eisikovits, Tener, & Lev-Wiesel, 2017). Although the current findings regarding the creation of a relationship with a new rabbi are not parallel to staying in touch with an abusive father, it is possible that explanations concerning incest victims' desire to stay in touch with the content and community that the abuser is a part of, leads CPSA victims to seek a relationship with a new rabbi. It is reasonable to assume that for those victims for whom the abuse did not completely destroy their spirituality, the process of reconnecting with rabbis and with religion is possible. All these unique findings must be further investigated.

The findings regarding attitudes toward rabbis and the process of creating a relationship with a new rabbi following sexual abuse are quite novel in relation to what is known in the literature and may indicate differences between Jewish men who were sexually abused by rabbis and Christian men who were abused by priests. The existence of differences between these populations, that was found in the present study, strengthens the hypothesis of McGraw and his colleagues (McGraw et al., 2019), who argued that differences in religious belief and practices, as well as differences in the religious attitude toward sexuality and the perception of the clergyman's role, may be one source of differences between CPSA victims of different religions.

3.1. Research limitations

The present research has several limitations. First, due to the great difficulty in recruiting participants for a study on such a sensitive topic, this study was based on a small sample. Additionally, the age range of the participants was very wide (25–60) and, as a result, the time between when the abuse occurred and when the interview took place differed from case to case. Also, although all of the participants had been sexually abused by a rabbi, the cases in the study differed from each other in terms of, for instance, the duration of the abuse and the sexual patterns that typified the abuse. These elements limit the representation capability of the research and illustrate the need for further research, including larger samples as well as samples that differentiate between type of abuse and time since occurrence.

Second, this research included participants who met the criterion of belonging to Israel's religious sector at the time of the abuse. The religious population in Israel comprises many sectors and sub-groups, each with different characteristics and perspectives regarding, *inter alia*, the role and status of rabbis (Kaplan, 2017) as well as attitudes toward modesty and sexuality (Fagin, 2015). In the current study we did not examine religious variability between participants before the abuse and/or whether this variability had an impact on the religious processes that occurred subsequently. Future research should examine whether religious affiliation prior to the abuse has an impact on post-abuse religious implications.

It can also be noted that the fact that the interviewing researcher was a religious man may have had the effect of participant reactivity on the interviewees and measures of triangulation and reflection were taken in order to reveal and reduce its influence on the data analysis. Given that the recruitment of participants for this study was carried out via contacting therapists, rabbis, and using a snowball sampling approach, there may be victims who were not located, and whose voices were therefore not heard. In addition, the fact that more than half of the men who met the criteria for this research refused to participate in it could indicate that the men who agreed to participate had different experiences regarding the abuse than did those who declined to participate. It is therefore important to continue locating additional victims for future research.

3.2. Implications for research and practice

The literature concerning the sexual abuse of men rarely addresses abuses that occur in cultural contexts, religious societies (Tishelman & Fontes, 2017) and to cases of CPSA that take place outside Catholic communities (McGraw et al., 2019). Future research regarding religious implications in the aftermath of CPSA is important in light of the fact that experiences of religious loss or distress around religious issues is highly correlated with increases in depression and anxiety and decreases in functioning capabilities (Murray-Swank & Waelde, 2013). Therefore, the current research findings concerning the wide range of religious changes following CPSA are a significant contribution to further research in this field and factors influencing or moderating the religious implications following CPSA must be identified. Also, in order to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon, future research in this area should also investigate additional perspectives such as those of the victim's family members, the abusive rabbi, members of the religious community, and therapists and/or rabbis treating the victims.

Many studies have pointed to the need to provide information about sexual abuse in the Jewish community and develop prevention and training programs for rabbis, community leaders, and teachers (Epstein & Crisp, 2018; Tener, Katz, Marmor, & Lusky-Weisrose, 2020). This research illustrates how the relationship between a rabbi and his religious student, which is perceived to be sacred and secure, may in fact be abusive and impair the student's religious and spiritual aspirations. Given that in CPSA the rabbis are the offenders, we would suggest initiating discourse among additional populations, such as yeshiva students, regarding the desired nature and boundaries of the relationship between students and rabbis.

Furthermore, the findings from the current study indicate that apart from the extensive sorts of damage resulting from any sexual abuse, CPSA victims experience specific consequences. Victims of CPSA experience a spiritual loss and a collapse of the systems that once gave them order and meaning to human existence in general, and to their own existence specifically (Doyle, 2009; Flynn, 2008) and the development of their religious identity is harmed (Easton et al., 2019). It should be assumed that combining these issues in therapy is of great importance, and therapists should be instructed to address these issues and to allow them appear in therapy. Therapists who provide treatment to Jewish CPSA victims must grasp the complex dialectic described in the current research findings and avoid thinking that this kind of abuse necessarily leads all victims to wish to sever all their ties with religion or with rabbis. Rather, some victims may wish to find a way to strengthen their connection with religion and with rabbis, and therapists should thus provide them with support during this process. This conclusion aligns with and supports the conclusion from previous research (Pargament et al., 2008) which claimed that CPSA raises issues in victim's lives, related to faith, spirituality, as well as the relationship with God and with the church and the therapist should create a dialogue around these issues.

This novel study has opened a window onto the world of Israeli men who were sexually abused by rabbis and examined the effects of the abuse on their religiosity. Therapists must be aware to the range of religious implications and the multidimensional attitude towards religion and rabbis found in this study. They should sensitively help the victims identify their own religious identity. Further research should be conducted, to allow for the building of more tailored intervention programs suited to this population.

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None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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