

Historic Jerusalem Child Abuse Conference

By: Yonatan Schechter

Published: March 2nd, 2014

On March 3, professionals and lay leaders from around the world will gather in Jerusalem for a historic 3-day conference. They will be convening for the First International Congress for Child Protection Organizations in the Jewish Community at the Mount Scopus campus of Hebrew University. The conference will include professors, mental health workers and policy makers who represent an array of governmental authorities and NGOs from all over the globe, with representation expected from organizations in the US, UK, Argentina, South Africa, France, Switzerland and Australia.

The purpose of this unprecedented effort is to draw community organizations together to share ideas, resources and information for the sake of improving their capabilities in addressing the scourge of child abuse in their respective communities. Among the topics planned for discussion are school-based child safety curriculums, Jewish law as it relates to child abuse and communal responses to abusers.

The event will be sponsored by two organizations that have shed light on the enshrouded topic of abused children, particularly sexually abused, within Jewish communities. The Haruv Institute, founded in 2007 and based in Hebrew University, advances research into abuse and neglect of children and implements that research by devising educational programs and by offering advanced training to professionals. The Institute has become an internationally recognized authority on child abuse and neglect. The other sponsor, Magen, is a community-based organization that was born out of one man's discovery of a glaring need within his community.

As David Morris tells the story, in 2010 he was serving as chairman of a social service organization in Beit Shemesh, when he was approached to assist in a case of a sexually abused child. Mr. Morris was astonished to find a gross lack of professional resources to respond to the child's case. Upon further inquiry, he observed widespread suspicion of authority among many Orthodox communities along with insufficient cultural awareness among authorities charged with providing services to those communities. The result was an inept system of child protection and law enforcement. And the victims, he further discovered, were hundreds of abused children without protection or treatment, and child abusers without accountability to the law. Mr. Morris then laid the foundation for Magen, whose mission was to supplement the authorities already in place for the sake of providing robust and responsive services on behalf of the community's children.

Over the next three years, Mr. Morris noted other grassroots organization, with stories and missions similar to Magen's, which were mushrooming in Jewish communities around the globe. Instead of watching from afar as each organization endeavored in isolation to "re-invent the wheel" of confronting sexual and physical abuse, Magen teamed up with the Haruv Institute to create a forum for collaboration between the various organizations. "We're trying to create a community of community organizations," said Morris, now the CEO of Magen. He said that the primary aim of this new international community is to form a "macrosystem" that

will “make sure that Jewish children will be safer from abuse today than they were in the past.”