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Will Men Stand Up Against the Sex Slave Trade in Israel?

Rabbi Daniel Brenner | Feb 01, 2012 07:30 AM EST



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An e-mail popped into my inbox this morning:

"It would be wonderful if we have men standing with us!"

It was a message from a Canadian woman, Peggy Sakow, who is an advocate for the hundreds of thousands of girls and women across the world sold into slavery as sex workers. In the e-mail she shared details of the growing problem of sex trafficking in Israel, the efforts underway in the Knesset to deal seriously with the issue, and details of a [U.S. based rally](#) in support of the new legislation.

I'm a fairly typical guy, and after a depressing 30 seconds of reading the statistics and imagining the 12-year-old girls who are bought and beaten to perpetuate this business, I thought to myself that defeatist and admittedly cynical thought, "What guy is really going to go to a rally about this?" and I moved onto my other e-mails.

I made a phone call. I got up from my desk and got some coffee. And then, for a second, I returned to that thought of a 12-year-old girl, a bat mitzvah-age girl, I thought to myself, and I decided that I couldn't ignore the e-mail.

As the father of a daughter who is near the age that many of these girls are sold, and as a rabbi who works on the difficult issue of educating young men, I had to come to terms with the reality that Israeli sex traffickers have enslaved close to 4,000 minors and the police have done relatively little to stop it. And as I read more about the growth of the sex trade industry, I became increasingly convinced that this is one issue that men should be standing up for. Certainly we should be standing up because we are generally compassionate and decent beings and we believe that these women and girls are victims of a horrific form of indignity. But we should also be standing up because of the corrosive effect that the rising success of the global sex trafficking business is having on men.

Here's a subtle example that illustrates the kind of damage I am referring to: As I researched sex trafficking and the specific issue in Israel, I noticed that the banner ads I

was seeing on the web began to evolve. Within a few minutes, the banner ad for "Russian Love Match" appeared in huge letters on the top of my screen, adorned with the image of a happy young blond. I clicked, and learned that "Russian women enjoy being cherished and appreciated for their feminine characteristics and ability to please their partner."

Now if this phrase doesn't strike you as some warped gender fantasy, then I'm not sure what will.

Russian Love Match is, as I said, a subtle example, but there are thousands more raunchier sites that portray young women who "enjoy" pleasing their partner. In a way, these are all an advertisement for the services that sex traffickers are pushing on the streets of Tel Aviv and elsewhere -- and the not so subtle message is that if you are a man, then nothing is going to be better than having someone be your slave. Go onto the back pages of the *Village Voice* and you can order one to your door like you would a pizza.

My concern here is not about men fantasizing about women who will please them (or men who will please them, or transsexuals who will please them). Given that we are human, we probably all want someone to please us every now and then. And humans also enjoy looking at people who are acting as if they are enjoying something.

But there is something deeply troubling to me about the prolific commodification of sexual consent and the growing power of global criminal networks that are racing to meet the demands of the market. I have a strong sense that the fantasy of "pimping" is one of the many factors that are causing guys to move further away from developing the skills that they need to maintain more authentic intimate connections. Studies by Lynn Smith-Lovin of Duke University and others are showing that men are becoming more socially isolated and are losing close-knit friendships. Maybe the sex-trafficking trade is a symptom of an underlying problem for men?

Working with teens guys in the Jewish community, I see first-hand how recent bar mitzvah boys are struggling to make sense of a world where men's roles are shifting and where men are expected to exert power, have perfect bodies and know what they want at all times. One of the pediatricians I work with captured their confusion perfectly: "They don't know the difference between kissing someone and kissing with someone," he said.

My sense is that just as we need to rally to combat the crimes of sex traffickers to free women and girls, we need to ramp up our efforts to help the next generation of men make sense of the world that they see on the screen and the one they encounter in the streets.

Will this particular legislation end the sex-trafficking industry in Israel and stop the demand for prostitutes? I highly doubt it. But if similar bills in Scandinavia are indicative, it may be able to slow down demand and to end the enslavement of thousands of women and girls. And perhaps, it may be able to spark a conversation among men in Israel and in Jewish communities across the world about how and why we have allowed such crimes to go unchecked.

Call me optimistic, but I am still envisioning a time when men are able to articulate the simple wisdom that what makes us truly happy as men is not a moment of imposing our will on others but the genuine give and take with an equal force of desire. I recognize that it may take a long time for that type of insight to replace the world of Russian Love Match, but we, as men, have a responsibility to hold onto that vision.

Rabbi Daniel Brenner is leading a national effort to train a cadre of educators and mentors who can connect the ethical insights of Jewish life to the challenges facing today's teen boys. Prior to joining [Moving Traditions](#), Rabbi Brenner was the founding Executive Director of Birthright Israel NEXT and he developed and directed graduate-level training programs at both Auburn Theological Seminary and CLAL - The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership.

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