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The Eve of Yom Kippur - The Day of Atonement - 5774
Greetings and Blessings

I am writing to you on the Eve of Yom Kippur with the intention that this letter be read and contemplated in the break between Musaph and Mincha on Yom Kippur. Our Sages teach that notwithstanding the extraordinary holiness of the day, the reading of the Torah at Mincha on Yom Kippur recounts the laws of sexual misconduct, because of their unfortunate prevalence and the need to seek atonement. Furthermore we are instructed, that until we make amends with our fellow man, we cannot find atonement with Hashem.

In that spirit I wish to address the issue of child sexual abuse. Over the last few years it has become clear that our community has been affected by this scourge no differently than any other community. It has also become clear that we have not handled this issue in an appropriate manner.

I wish to be frank. For whatever reason a culture of cover up, often couched in religious terms, pervaded our thinking and actions. It may even have been well intentioned, but it was simply wrong. An issue of child sexual abuse must be reported to the police immediately and perpetrators must be brought to justice. It makes no difference whether the crime took place ten years ago or ten days ago. There can be no exceptions and no excuses.

I turn to the victims. No one can know your pain and what you have been through. And the pain has only been magnified by our inaction. On this holiest of days I sincerely beg your forgiveness on behalf of all of us who did not hear your voice. I can only assure you on my behalf, and on behalf of the vast majority of the Rabbinat, that we hear you now loud and clear. We will do our utmost not to repeat the mistakes of the past. We hope that you can find it within yourselves to forgive us.

Another word to victims. I know it is difficult for you to come forward to the police, but one of the ways through which abuse will be stopped is by perpetrators being prosecuted, and a clear message of deterrence being sent to potential abusers. Please try and find it within yourselves to come forward. There are victims advocate groups such as Tzedek who can give moral support. I myself recently accompanied a victim to the police. Please help us, if you can, to combat this abuse. Very often after coming forward victims find it easier to find healing and closure.

To perpetrators I say you will be found. It may not be today, it may not even be tomorrow but it will happen. There will be justice if not in this world, most definitely in the next. You have done a most heinous crime and you will never find atonement with Hashem or peace within yourselves until you do the right thing. Turn yourselves in. Admit to the wrong you have done so that you may begin the path to atonement and allow your victims to find healing and peace.

I wish to all, that you be sealed in the books of life and happiness. I hope that we all find peace and conquer the demons that in one way or another plague each of us. I pray that Hashem rights all the wrongs in this world and we find ourselves speedily in Jerusalem dancing in the courtyard of the rebuilt Temple.

Rabbi Moshe D Gutnick President