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Hava Dayan



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# Sexual Abuse and Charismatic Cults

hava dayan

University of Haifa, 199 Aba Houshi, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel.

## Abstract

The article explores the enigmatic yet dire phenomenon of sexual abuse in cultic circumstances. Such a quest into the realm of cults is vital since, “sexual exploitation of women in cults of all types is widespread, and, to date, is possibly the least talked about, and certainly the least researched, aspect of cult life” (Lalich, 1997, pp. 7). Sexual abuse of consenting adults has been examined in circumstances of formal authority (workplace, mental institutions, jailing institutions and even academic institutions), however the study of consenting adults in informal circumstances of authority in general, and of cultic spiritual authority in particular, has hardly been addressed.

The article attempts to do so, supported by empirical extrapolations from a recent criminal ruling of the Jerusalem District Court. Are women cult members genuinely capable of exercising their sexual autonomy with their charismatic cult leader? If they are unable to do so in cultic circumstances, does this impair their informed consent to the point of rendering their sexual relations with the cult leader legally abusive and criminal? The answers to these questions have dire consequences for both women cult members and cult leaders. Through a comprehensive review of the legal, criminological and sociological aspects of the case, the article sheds much needed light on one of the most enigmatic and elusive fields: sexual abuse of adults by a spiritual authority.

## Introduction

In a recently decided case by the Jerusalem District Court, the leader of a Jerusalem Hassidic group was convicted of a series of sexual offenses against the cult’s women followers. The court ruling was unique in that it convicted the defendant despite the women’s unequivocal and unwavering claims that they had consented to the sexual relations<sup>1</sup>, and legal doctrine in Israel which, similar to most developed countries, maintains that sexual relations between consenting legally competent adults constitute in effect a technical barrier against criminalization of the relations. The court used the legal element of ‘informed consent’ to criminalize the sexual relations between the defendant and his women followers,

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<sup>1</sup>

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