ANATOMY OF A SMEAR:
THE INTERNET TRIAL OF MARC GAFNI

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“In our reasonings concerning matters of fact, there are all imaginable degrees of assurance, from the highest certainty to the lowest species of moral evidence. A wise man, therefore, proportions his belief to the evidence.”

—David Hume

I. THE MAKINGS OF A SMEAR

Marc Gafni is arguably one of the most influential spiritual teachers and public intellectuals to appear over the last several decades. His positive influence on what many have called “the evolution of culture and consciousness” is acknowledged even by some of those people who are currently subjecting him to a coordinated smear campaign that goes back decades.

He was born in 1960, the second of two children, near Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Gafni’s parents survived the Holocaust, emigrating from Poland to the last place one might expect the post-WWII flight of an ultra-Orthodox family to end. A few years later, the family moved to Columbus, Ohio, where Gafni, at the age of 6, remembers falling in love with books and, for the first time, felt that he wanted to become a rabbi.

In his early 20s, Marc became an activist youth leader in a New York synagogue. He was later ordained as a Rabbi. He ran a synagogue in Boca Raton, Florida, and in 1989 moved to Israel. Eventually, he founded and led a popular renewal movement called Bayit Chadash. He created and hosted a leading national TV show on Israel’s most popular channel. He received his doctorate from Oxford in 2008, under the co-supervision of professor Moshe Idel. He is the author of 10 books, but is best known for the early best-seller, Soul Prints, which was turned into a PBS special, and the recent work, Your Unique Self, which was featured a 2011 TEDx talk.

He left Israel in 2006 and, over the last decade, became a prominent figure in the eclectic scene of American spirituality. He founded and now runs the Center for Integral Wisdom, a self-described activist think tank in California.

Those are the main facts of his life. But the details behind them—the how, why and what of Gafni’s life—are the subject of highly polarized debate. As in other trials by Internet, wild claims have been made about him. Regardless of their accuracy, these claims have become part of the narrative. Is it true that his ex-wife Chaya Lester wrote his doctoral dissertation, as she has claimed? (No, this claim is totally false. Lester had nothing to do with his dissertation.) Did he get a degree at Oxford, or did he make that up? (No, he has a documented D.Phil from Wolfson College at Oxford University.) Did he change his name from Winiarz to Gafni and move to Israel to avoid a scandal? (Absolutely not. It’s quite common to Hebraicize one’s surname when making Aliyah.) Though anyone who knows Gafni well could tell you that the answer to these questions is demonstrably “No”—the fact that they are regularly reported as true illustrates how multi-faceted and wide-spread the smear against Gafni has become.

The misrepresentations of Gafni’s life have gone on for nearly 20 years. But in 2015, the rumors became significantly more vicious and went national. If you look him up on the Internet, you find that bloggers and Internet “journalists” have been calling him names like “rapist,” “pedophile,” “sociopath,” (and sometimes all the above). Moreover, this name-calling is now regularly and repeatedly referenced in the echo chamber of innumerable online articles, blogs, and social media posts.

Let me say at the outset that anyone who knows Gafni well, knows that these characterizations are false. They are both demonstrably untrue and self-evidently absurd. But as psychological research has long ago revealed, the more something is repeated, the more it is believed to be true. And, as the 2016 US presidential election demonstrated, the big lie tactic can eventually render facts irrelevant. Clickbait headlines and tabloid-worthy claims have allowed truthiness to supplant truth. In Gafni’s case, the smear organizers, who we’ll meet in a moment, enrolled respectable publications, including the New York Times, to obscure and omit key facts to kick off the 2016 smear against him.

Since the beginning of 2016, the Jewish Forward has published almost as many stories on Gafni as it has on Netanyahu, even though Gafni has had no ties with the Jewish community in over a decade. This obsession is not believably explained by an intent to “protect future victims,” which is what Gafni’s detractors often claim as their reason for working to destroy his reputation. In fact, anyone who looks closely at the story realizes that it is mostly based on false claims, collapsed timelines, and an
intent to further the increasingly common #believe-the-victim meme.³

The Story of Two People
The story of Marc Gafni is the story of two people who bear only slight resemblance to each other. One is the real person. The other is an Internet fabrication. Which story you hear is a function of who you ask.

Marc’s “supporters” tell the story of a man who is one of the most brilliant thinkers and social activists to come along in a generation. They speak of a practitioner whose intellectual brilliance is matched by an unusual capacity for empathy. They describe someone who is generous, authentically warm, surprisingly modest, and who is both open and loving.

His “detractors” speak of a sociopath and master manipulator. They tell the story of a man who preys on children, brainwashes his followers, using, I assume, the “occult powers” he’s been accused of possessing, and responds to betrayal and dissent with threats, intimidation, and coercion. They make general claims that imply a life littered with victims of abuse and harassment. All evidence or testimony which substantively refutes those claims is simply ignored.

To Gafni’s colleagues and friends, his larger-than-life capacity to create a space of provocative, sacred learning is a refreshing alternative to the vanilla pluralism that characterizes the American spiritual landscape. To his detractors, he is a Svengali-like demagogue, a misguided firebrand who’s betrayed the trust of every community he’s ever led.

Even Gafni’s capacity to keep creating, teaching, and growing after a decade of attacks is subject to wildly different interpretations. His supporters see it as a confirmation of the depth of his character and the steadiness of his purpose. They point to his ability to continue offering love, creativity, and new teachings in the face of hardship. His detractors cite it as evidence of his sociopathic nature, which allows him to continually “recreate himself” rather than disappearing from the public scene.

The story of Marc Gafni is the story of two people not because he is two people, but because it's been manufactured as such. One person is real, while the other is a fabrication, the product of an elaborate and organized smear campaign that has systematically distorted partial truths and filled in the narrative cracks with outright falsehoods and bald-faced lies.

The Fallacy of the "Truth Lies Somewhere in the Middle"
How do we reconcile this disparity? The temptation is to say the truth lies somewhere in the middle. But to say that the truth can be found by splitting the difference between two competing narratives can often disguise the fact that one is true and the other is not. It’s a fundamentally weak position, not because it seeks to compromise, but because it does so when compromise is unwarranted and undeserved. In late 2007, when the rumor went around that Obama was a Muslim, the truth could not be found by meeting somewhere in the middle. Simply accepting that Obama was a non-practicing Muslim—or some other equally ridiculous compromise—was not an adequate resolution. Rather, resolution came through exposing the smear as preying on post-9/11 fears while pedaling distortions that were easily cleared through some simple fact checking.

When reconciling competing positions, on any subject, let alone someone’s life, to be deserving of compromise, the positions advanced by both sides ought to contain a similar degree of legitimate partial truth.

A glaring example is the claim that Gafni is a “rapist.” In fact, this is a completely made-up Internet-propagated myth. It has no factual basis. Moreover, none of Gafni’s partners have ever made such a claim. Nonetheless, it is bandied about on the Internet as a given without hesitation.
These very same minimal standards ought to be applied to the claims made by Gafni’s camp as well. They should not be blindly taken as true or immediately dismissed as false because of who uttered them.

Such standards are rarely applied, in the case of Gafni or in any number of other smear-driven trials by Internet, which have come to characterize our “takedown culture.”

Consider the questionable sexual harassment claims against Yale professor, Thomas Pogge, the false rape claims against the Duke Lacrosse team, the false rape accusations reported as true in the botched and debunked Rolling Stone article, the false complaints at Roanoke College, the false child rape claims against Alan Dershowitz, and, in an earlier era, the false daughter rape claims against Landmark Education founder Werner Erhard, as but a few of the many possible examples.

Generating such minimal standards of justice is one of several aims of this article.

The Anatomy of a Smear
A rampant and vile form of pluralism allows smear campaigns to flourish. But acknowledging that reveals little about their aims, motives, methods, or components—which are collectively, the anatomy of a smear. Understanding these dimensions is essential for recognizing how smears operate and why they are such an effective way to perpetrate a trial by Internet.

A smear campaign often works by enrolling people in what appears to be a righteous cause or by appealing to supposedly shared values. In the famous smears of 1950s McCarthyism, the cause was anti-communism, often disguising personal ambition or the desire to take another person down out of competition or vengeance.

Contemporary smears work in a similar fashion. We are justifiably horrified by the idea of sexual abuse. To call someone a rapist is essentially to put him outside the pale of society. When such claims are made about a public figure, even people who might otherwise be neutral or positive towards that person will want to steer clear of him. And, even those who want to be a voice of support will often be afraid to speak out. Through assassinating a person’s character, credibility, or reputation, smears aim to enroll the un convinced in their “noble cause” while creating a social virus that causes everyone to avoid the smear’s target.

On the surface, smears appeal to shared motives—victim advocacy, saving future victims, justice, or a desire to avoid something terrible from happening in the future—but underneath they are typically driven by hidden actors with hidden motives like vengeance, malice, or rage for crimes not committed.

For those they can’t convince—thinking people, perhaps, or anyone who intuits there’s more to the story—smears tend to lock them into a “responsible” middle. They feel that balance is eminently more noble than picking a side in a highly-polarized debate.

These impacts are self-amplifying. Personal positions then become further entrenched, because smears activate the social psychological phenomenon of motivated reasoning, which is often called confirmation bias.

According to sociologist, Steven Hoffman, motivated reasoning refers to the process where people, rather than searching “rationally for information that either confirms or disconfirms a particular belief, actually seek out information that confirms what they already believe.”

Once smears have succeeded in eroding the middle, then subsequent claims, false or otherwise, serve to confirm the conclusion that has already taken hold. Once people are saying that “if there’s smoke there must be fire,” there is already a bias in their reasoning. It does not occur to most people that “where there is smoke there is fire” is exactly the response that the smear campaign seeks to evoke. Once this bias takes hold, contrary information tends to be ignored. Because of this, you hear so-called “neutral” comments like “Maybe Gafni’s not a rapist but he must be a scumbag if these things are being said about him.” New claims, false or otherwise, serve to further confirm the conclusion that’s already taken hold and contrary information, even when based in verifiable fact, tends to be increasingly ignored.

Little by little, as the slurs on the targets reputation mount up, even those who believe he is being unjustly maligned are afraid to stand up for him for fear of becoming collateral damage.

Edmond Burke famously wrote, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.” But good people do not do nothing for no reason. They often do nothing because they are protecting some other closely-held, good value, which they are afraid will be compromised or tarnished. They are good people, after all.

What good people fail often to see—and what postmodernism directly discourages—is that good values can be ranked. Some goods are of a higher order—and standing against the social murder attempted through an
artful smear upholds foundational values of human rights. As such, standing against the methods a smear is often more noble and more just than the other good values we are protecting.

This suggests the words of Martin Niemöller, the German theologian who belatedly opposed Hitler:

> When the Nazis came for the communists,
> I remained silent;
> I was not a communist.

> When they locked up the social democrats,
> I remained silent;
> I was not a social democrat.

> When they came for the trade unionists,
> I did not speak out;
> I was not a trade unionist.

> When they came for the Jews,
> I remained silent;
> I wasn’t a Jew.

> When they came for me,
> there was no one left to speak out.

Good people speak out because it is the right thing to do in terms of the principles of social justice that are ignored or undermined by smear campaigns. In a forthcoming book, I will address in greater depth several cultural themes, along with the methods and mechanisms that drive orchestrated smears and attempts at social murder. In this article, while I touch briefly on some of these issues, my primary focus is simply exposing the campaign against Gafni for what it is, an orchestrated smear.

**How a Smear Operates**

A set of standard tactics allow a smear to operate. Demonization, name-calling, misquoting, misinformation, lies, false accusations, a false claim of sexual deviance or mental illness, the creation of false narratives, and a refusal to consider competing evidence are all deployed to further a smear. These tactics are typically used to dress up outright lies and minimal partial truths in the distorting and distracting garb of heinous crimes (see this book for an extended discussion of smear tactics.)

Nowadays, such methods often inflame a frenzied Internet mob that blindly believes its own virulence. The mob crusades for retribution disguised as justice—a form of social jihad, Internet lynching, or a modern-day witch hunt—all while believing that their actions are the appropriate response to a real moral panic. Reasoned discourse and the possibility of discovering anything resembling truth becomes a near impossibility.

Spotting these tactics being used is fairly straightforward. In her book, *The Guru Question*, Mariana Caplan identified several questions that one can ask to differentiate legitimate claims against a teacher from a potential smear.

First, have those involved spoken carefully to all parties before telling the story or taking action? Second, has a fact-checking mechanism been set-up to check (and cross-check) all available evidence—including the historical, sometimes hidden, relationships between parties, collusion, ulterior motives, unknown third parties, and other relevant political dynamics—before taking action? Third, is there a mechanism in place to examine any new evidence and is new evidence considered by those people taking action? Fourth, is there a protocol for—or even minimal interest in—healing and forgiveness for both sides? Fifth, is the accused treated with dignity, or are they dehumanized, demonized, and obsessively pursued? If the answer to these questions is a “No,” chances are that a smear is afoot.

Spotting the smear is relatively easy. Not falling into its distorted story is another matter. Most people assume that since Gafni has been attacked for so long and so intensely, some of what is said about him must be true. Again, this is exactly how a smear operates; this is what the smear organizers aim to have you think.

As we will see in greater detail below, in late 2015, the New York Times resurfaced old stories and old questions about Gafni. This article appeared to spur a series of condemnatory posts and follow-up articles numbering in the dozens. A petition went up on Change.org to stop Gafni from teaching and letters were sent to his funders and board members encouraging them to withdraw their support.

In effect—and actually, by design—this resurgence of interest in Gafni appeared spontaneous. Observers were led to assume it must have been triggered by some new action on Gafni’s part. After all, the old claims have been resurfaced time and time again and Gafni had responded to them repeatedly over the year. People naturally assumed that unless there was something new to talk about, there is no way that this would be coming up again.

In fact, this resurgence was not brought about by anything that Gafni said or did. Rather, it was just the latest round, in
a highly-orchestrated campaign which started over a decade ago, and that, by most accounts, failed in its previous two attempts. It all traces back to the efforts of a handful of people who have long since covered up their true agendas, perhaps even from themselves.

These include, David Ingber, an obsessed ex-student who Gafni ordained and then dismissed, and Chaya Lester, an angry ex-wife who Gafni refused to remarry. Both played significant roles catalyzing a series of false complaints made against Gafni more than a decade ago in Israel.

The current smear campaign serves as a smoke screen to obfuscate their involvement in perpetrating the original false complaints, which came close to destroying Gafni’s life and livelihood. This cover-up is one the motives for the current smear.

Ingber and Lester are now joined by Stephen Dinan, a new-age CEO, who has bought into their demonizing narrative. He does not even know Gafni, and has, despite repeated invitation, refused to meet Gafni or to cross-check any facts or evidence.

None of this is immediately apparent—again, by design—yet understanding these inner-workings are key to deciphering the truth of who Gafni is and why a group of seemingly “heroic” organizers are so fanatically bent on taking him down.

They attempted a social murder in the past and they failed. From all accounts, driven by these hidden motives, disguised as victim advocacy, they are attempting to complete the botched job.

After all, it is Gafni who more than anyone can reveal their involvement in past attempts. He is the person who knows most directly the details of their attempted social murder. It is easy to see how the fear that he might indeed expose them might run very deep. Their only solution is to fully and completely discredit him.

In a forthcoming video response, Gafni introduces a helpful frame for understanding the nature of this smear. The adage, where there is smoke there is fire, is not the only explanation for the presence of smoke. Alternately, where there is smoke, there could also be smoke bomb, or there could be an ember that is intentionally being flamed into a fire by organizers with ulterior motives.

This frame is deceptively simple, but surprisingly effective in its ability to guide responsible inquiry. If we take this perspective, it immediately halts our tendency to assume that smoke must naturally and necessarily mean fire—or in the case of a smear, that allegations mean a crime has been committed. Further, it guides the responsible inquirer through a second important step, distinguishing between embers—e.g. grains of truth; a given person’s degree of responsibility in a contribution system, for example—and smoke bombs. As we’ll see here, the smoke surrounding Gafni is not the fire it’s often assumed to be; it’s mostly a smoke bomb, along with some embers that are fanned by malice into a fire.

To Right a Series of Wrongs

Over the past decade, at least a dozen articles have featured “anatomy of a smear” in their headlines. Yet not even one has taken up the project of establishing the components required to wage an effective smear. Most simply tell the story of a specific smear and avoid the trickier questions of how they work and how we as a culture ought to engage and respond to the them.

Through a detailed unpacking of the smear being waged against Gafni, I intend to address both topics. The components of a smear, while culturally important, are straightforward. Once they are pointed out, they are easy to grok.

Minimally, an effective smear campaign, in addition to the playbook outlined above, requires five essential components, each of which are discussed below: (a) an adequate target, (b) a distorted history of alleged indiscretion, (c) a supposed public authority who establishes (d) an apparent false pattern, which is then adjudicated in (e) a culture of colosseum “justice.”

Telling Gafni’s story, however, is a bit more involved. It requires something that neither he nor any of his supporters
I will name names, and I will connect those names with damning, as-of-yet unreleased evidence that reveals this smear as exactly that, an organized campaign with the goal of destroying a life, motivated by a host of ulterior motives.

As difficult as it may be to believe—and I do not expect anyone to take me at my word here—my intent is not to counter a smear with yet another smear. My intent is to right a series of wrongs by staying close to the evidence and minimizing speculation. And, in so doing, I hope to make at least a small contribution to raising the level of cultural discourse on this topic.

As such, the tone of this article is understated. You will not emerge with a complete sense of who Gafni is, nor will you fully understand why he is so compelling to so many people. These are topics covered in other writings, and will not be my focus here.

My intent is also not to pressure the organizers of this smear into a retraction. As far as I can tell, they've climbed way too far up that tree to find a way down. I hope I am wrong.

I do intend to sway the middle, not necessarily toward the position of Gafni’s supporters, who have the benefit of an extensive history of working with him directly, but toward a position of greater responsibility and deeper justice. I want to sway the discourse toward a stance beyond the polarized debate altogether. I intend to provide the information required to help a responsible person make an informed decision about whether they want to work with Gafni directly, or support his endeavors. A person of integrity cannot adequately do so if the canards of this smear remain intact.

I have known Gafni for almost 12 years. Throughout that time, I have chosen to move closer, closer to him, closer to the drama and to the complexity, closer to a situation that has regularly looked like rivalry and infighting taken to the extreme. This is a situation that doesn't involve me—or most of you. I have chosen to move closer because there is something to unlock here. Exactly what is not mine alone to say. I do not expect, nor is it required, that others move close as I have.

For readers who decide to read on from here, a willingness to tolerate dissent will be essential. In the words of Katie Roiphe, feminist provocateur: “Tolerating dissent is allowing for the give-and-take, push and pull of intellectual conflict; it is the willing suspension of disbelief in order to allow ideas that are not our own to sharpen our perceptions.”

In exactly this sense, I’d like to mention two decisions I have made that may challenge the perceptions of some readers. First, I use the real names of anyone who has publicly taken part in the smear against Gafni. For anyone where this is not the case, pseudonyms are used and indicated in endnotes.

Second, I have intentionally deviated from the common practice of requesting comment from people who are spoken about or whose public statements are otherwise referenced. My reasoning, while likely disagreeable to some, is straightforward. For over a decade, smear participants have regularly declined invitations to meet with Gafni in a mediated context, and yet, they continue to make claims, spread rumors, and publicly demonize him. They have regularly made their comments known.

Gafni’s “side of the story,” however, has not yet been given a full treatment. That is remedied here. Such a treatment is not, by design, a “balanced story;” it does not “meet his accusers and detractors half-way” in an attempt to find some contrived middle ground. Instead, it exposes blatant lies, hidden motives, and behind-the-scenes organizers.

This is appropriate, in my mind, because a “balanced story” often conveniently ignores facts. It often ignores natural hierarchies of truth, where some statements and claims can be legitimately judged to be more true than others. An “balanced story” is often just another form of lying; another form of untruth.

As I said, a few pages back, to be deserving of compromise, the positions advanced by both sides in a narrative ought to contain a similar degree of legitimate partial truth. A “balanced story” squanders this important distinction.

In this sense, a “balanced story” would be a ridiculous aim of this or any article on Gafni. What this situation truly needs, for all involved, is genuine healing and transformation. This requires careful fact checking and can probably only be generated in dialogue—real, face-to-face, mediated dialogue on all the issues, including the false complaints that have been leveled against Marc.
Genuine healing does not come from requests for comments, at least not at this point. By presenting the “other side of the story,” I will likely enrage all who are called out by name. So be it. I am not interested in comments at this point, because I am not interested in propagating the imbalance of “balanced stories,” nor do I want to encourage the use of articles as the appropriate forum for generating meaningful resolution.

If we can tolerate dissent—on these two points and countless others—long enough, we very well may come out the other end of this with a sense of how to approach this and similar smears with a greater capacity for discernment and a more authentic sense of fairness and appropriate outrage for injustice. Such discernment will act against our tendency to believe what we hear just because it was written or spoken. Such fairness will allow for the application of universal principles of justice, principles which can guide our collective actions away from misplaced outrage and toward the legitimate protection of all.

II. AN ADEQUATE TARGET

When I say that evil has to do with killing, I do not mean to restrict myself to corporeal murder. Evil is that which kills spirit. There are various essential attributes of life—particularly human life—such as sentience, mobility, awareness, growth, autonomy, will. It is possible to kill or attempt to kill one of these attributes without actually destroying the body.

—Scott Peck

The success of a smear campaign varies as a function of the adequacy of its target. This is our first essential component. Whether targeting an individual or group, the smear, to be effective, must select a target that is either susceptible, suitable, or subversive. Gafni is sufficient in all three respects.

**Susceptibility**

Susceptibility refers to the degree to which the target represents or can be made to represent something that society wants to disown. A susceptible target is connected to or evokes a particular cultural wound or societal upset. They often become a negative symbol or a scapegoat for that wound.

But susceptibility is even more so a function of the cultural listening that the smear is being spoken into than it is about the targeted individual’s characteristics or actions.

Justine Sacco was a susceptible target because she tweeted a politically-incorrect, racially-tinged joke about AIDS and Africa into a culture more concerned about race jokes than racism.

Judge Aaron Plesky is a susceptible target because his light sentence for rapist Brock Turner was seen, by the listening that judged it, as challenging the very claim that we live in a “rape culture”.

Michelle Gregg is a susceptible target because her negligence led to the death of the gorilla, Harambe, forcing a culture willing to overlook factory farming to confront the death of another innocent animal.

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are susceptible targets because they are politicians in a country where the cryptic analyses of tweets, not policy statements, lead to the most clicks.

Marc Gafni is a susceptible target because he is an edgy, larger than life, and sexually post-conventional spiritual teacher who has been subjected to allegations of sexual impropriety in a culture rightfully but not necessarily appropriately reactive to more than two decades of clerical sex abuse scandals.

While each of these targets may be seen as at least partly at “fault,” they each inspired paroxysms of democratized, “Internet justice” that were so violent as to be almost indistinguishable from abuse, harassment, and Internet vindictiveness. In a culture where everyone has a voice, and the content of their speech goes mostly unchecked, target susceptibility becomes a function of emotional climate, not facts.

Smears are largely indifferent to complicating factors like facts or evidence. If a target is susceptible, their motivations will be negatively ascribed and the nuances of their situations set aside in favor of the ideologically-charged story generated to take them down—always, of course, in the name of justice. Once the target has been deemed a cultural heretic, a new type of social jihad displaces justice.

In the modern era, this method was pioneered by Senator McCarthy against communists. Culturally, it’s now blindly applied in the realm of sexuality, as Alan Dershowitz so clearly points out. The tactic is to leverage a legitimate moral repugnance at a social evil—say sexual abuse or...
harassment—and then to use it as a smoke screen to disguise more personal motives.

Just as the legitimate aversion to the totalitarian shadow of communism was degraded into the Red Scare of McCarthyism, our appropriate revulsion at sexual abuse has degraded into yet another omnipresent moral panic, the “rape crisis” of “Sexual McCarthyism.” Because of this, even false claims of harassment, abuse, or worse have become culturally-accepted motivators of a takedown or smear.

Subversiveness
Subversiveness refers to the degree to which the target is seen as challenging important norms, conventions, or politically-correct truths. When someone subverts the closely-held ideas or values of society at large, or of a particular subculture, then it is easy for them to be smeared. The target is demonized and oftentimes murdered—either physically or socially.

Mahatma Gandhi was a subversive target due to his vision of religious pluralism. His campaigns to ease poverty, expand women’s rights, and end untouchability both undermined British rule and eventually led to his assassination.

Martin Luther King Jr. was similarly subversive. His civil rights activism undermined centuries of ingrained beliefs and cultural practices in the U.S. This led both to his eventual assassination and to a legacy with far-reaching impact.

As we’ll see in greater detail, Gafni’s teachings and beliefs directly challenged central tenets and practices of Orthodox Judaism. Even more importantly, his views on sexuality and embodiment of what he calls “Outrageous Love”, challenge broadly-accepted cultural norms.

A target can challenge social conventions in one of two ways. First, they can challenge ideas, dogmas, or beliefs, as discussed above. Second, they can challenge corruption, fear, or small mindedness through the natural life force and aliveness of their own being. Often, one figure will be seen as subversive in both ways.

Gafni is subversive in both his ideas and his presence. He has been called variously a poet and a prophet of Eros. I use the word prophet here, not in a religious sense, but in the sense of one who challenges established views by calling forth new possibilities. Like subversive prophets of Eros throughout history, Gafni is easy to misunderstand. That which we do not understand, we tend to fear. And that which we fear, we tend to degrade and demonize.

Both poets and prophets articulate a future that to many people appears subversive to current norms. In the case of a poet of Eros, the classic way to dismiss him or take him down is to call him a “predator.”

Suitability
Suitability refers to the degree to which the target’s intrinsic qualities and personal circumstances are inherently polarizing. Where susceptibility and subversiveness were about the culture, suitability is about the target’s themselves; their personality, values, beliefs, and affiliations all work together to determine their adequacy as the target of a smear. The more polarizing these characteristics are, the more likely the smear will take hold.

While a host of attributes are relevant here and context is an important factor in determining which attributes matter, I’ll discuss only a handful of Gafni’s qualities, starting with his stance on religious orthodoxy. Above all else, it is this stance which began to make him a suitable target.

A Post-Orthodox Mission
Despite his roots in Orthodox Judaism, Gafni’s work has been “post-Orthodox” since before his ordination. In 1986, he attended a lecture given by a well known Orthodox Rabbi, Berel Wein. The rabbi had cited “The Letter of Rav Shira Gaon,” which says that everything in the world is for the sake of the Jewish people. Gafni then asked the rabbi a simple question: “When a couple in China, on a beautiful moonlit night, feels a great physical attraction to each other and makes love, are they also making love for the sake of the Jewish people?” Rabbi Wein, in a long and, according to Gafni, more than somewhat convoluted answer, replied, “Indirectly, yes.”

It was at this point that Gafni’s view of Orthodoxy took its turn. In his words: “That’s when I realized that there was something flawed in this expression of Judaism that is incapable of seeing anything that happens in the world as distinct from it, but instead sees everything as somehow means to the ends of Judaism. To me, that means that in this version of being a Jew, you cannot see the Other, and I don’t accept that.”

The “other” here comes in many forms, but for Gafni, it was the feminine—both secular and divine—that was the most significant “other” that Orthodox Judaism had left behind. In 2000, he founded the Israeli retreat center Bayit Chadash, meaning, “new home.” This was his attempt to
create a new stream of Judaism, one which connected young, secular Israelis to the mysticism of their own tradition by “restoring the spark of holy paganism.”

For Gafni this meant an intentional and authentic balancing of the masculine God, what the Kabbalists called “Tiferet,” with the feminine Goddess or “Shekinah.” This entailed a coming together of Ethos with Eros, which had been, according to Gafni, intentionally obscured by the Prophets, and given rise to Orthodox Judaism. Gafni sought a Judaism that had both Ethos and Eros, the rational and the ecstatic, both masculine and feminine; a Judaism that was not so worried about the “provocativeness of a woman’s voice.”

His critique of establishment Judaism was both fierce and unequivocal—and, for many, heretical. Gafni directly and publicly questioned the purpose of Judaism, describing the standard argument—that Judaism must be preserved so that Jews will be preserved so that they will preserve Judaism—as an “enlightened racism.”

He challenged popular Rabbis for dealing with non-essential Jewish questions—whether the tuna was a kosher fish, for example—rather than confronting how Judaism must “fit itself to the needs of the world, in this generation.”

The real issue here was not ideological—traditional and mystical forms of religion have co-existed (not peacefully, mind you) for millenia. No, the issue was that Gafni’s form of mysticism was not relegated to obscure texts or private discussion with other rabbis.

It was featured on a highly-acclaimed TV show that Gafni hosted, a kind of Israeli version of Oprah that aired on Israel’s most popular station. It also ran in the mainstream press. In fact, all the above was reported in a 2004 weekend cover story, A Post-Orthodox Journey, in Ha’Aretz, the “Israeli New York Times.”

Gafni’s mysticism was real in both word and action. He let women approach the Torah, embraced same-sex relationship, admitted women to his ordination program, and presenced the Goddess when opening ceremonies or prayers. More problematically for his career as a teacher, he actively participated in the exploration of private post-conventional sexual relationships.

Gafni is not only an inspiring presenter. He has a capacity to enter a community as an outsider and naturally become the center of the scene. He successfully challenges established doctrine and offers what many describe as a more authentic and alive teaching.

All of this indicated Gafni’s positive breakthrough into Israel’s popular culture. He was even labeled by Ha’Aretz as the “minister of religion” to the new spiritual explosion in the country.

Unsurprisingly, all of this threatened the religious establishment, including Gafni’s own old Orthodox teachers who remained part of that establishment. It was no less threatening to other leaders in the Jewish Renewal movement where he took up so much space. Eventually, it directly precipitated a series of negative articles, which themselves foreshadowed the coming smear campaign.

Gafni’s well-attended brand of post-Orthodox mysticism, coupled with his broad public popularity, was thrust in the face of establishment Judaism (both Orthodox and renewal), and, perhaps beyond all other forces, this made him a target. This consequence was foreshadowed by Neri Livneh, author of the Ha’Aretz article, who warned that the “approach of Bayit Chadash could reopen the war between Hasidim and Mitnagdim [rabbinical opponents of the more ecstatic and boundary-breaking Hasidism], if it comes to be perceived as a real threat to Orthodox Judaism.”

Gafni’s mysticism was apparent on a TV special made about his meeting with the Dalai Lama, and on a weekly spot he did with an Israeli comedian. He irreverently poke fun at the rabbinic establishment, while providing progressive readings of the Bible to a hungry public. He was also on display at public festivals with tens of thousands of participants and packed lecture halls around Israel.

Gafni directly and publicly questioned the purpose of Judaism, describing the standard argument—that Judaism must be preserved so that Jews will be preserved so that they will preserve Judaism—as an “enlightened racism.”

In the Jewish Renewal Movement, after only a few short years, the popularity of his classes was second only to those of the movement’s founder, Rabbi Zalman Schachter.

According to many of his colleagues and associates, Gafni was able to read sacred texts in their original form in a way that almost no other Jewish renewal teacher was able to do.
He labeled much of Jewish Renewal as Buddhism with a Tallis (prayer shawl), or as “Left-wing Liberalism with a Tallis.”

He was also the only person within the Jewish Renewal movement who had begun to ordain students as rabbis outside of the common institutional channels. This challenged both the spiritual authority and financial structure of the Renewal community. At bi-annual Renewal events, he attracted significantly more students than other older and more established teachers. Key figures in the renewal movement at the time—folks like Arthur Kurzweil—have confirmed that this made other teachers intensely envious of Gafni.

As if all of this weren’t controversial enough, Gafni’s outlier appeal also manifested in his teachings, the largeness of the space he held, and the challenge that people felt when in his presence. This brings us to a second important quality, a natural and prevalent audacity.

A Natural Audacity

Years before he left for Israel, Gafni took over a youth outreach organization after its former leader left on maternity leave. According to a laudatory article that appeared in the Jewish Week in the mid-eighties, it aimed to reconnect alienated Jewish kids to their spiritual roots in dozens of public and private schools in New York. It became one of the most successful outreach initiatives at the time, increasing its staff four-fold and its budget nearly twenty-fold.

Gafni met the kids where they were at. He presented classical ritual in the context of a Billy Joel cover band and showed up at meetings with pizza, ecstatic love, and brash insight. Teens who were embarrassed to be Jewish showed up in large numbers.

This provocative audacity knew little bounds. He once walked into a Wall Street investment bank looking for a large donation to support this organization. The firm’s CEO gave him two minutes to make his case. Gafni did and the man responded, “I don’t believe in God. I think God is a crock of... So why should I give money to your religious program?” Gafni then made a bet with him. Ten-thousand dollars, if given an hour, he could convince the man that God existed. He left with the money and a new long-term friend.

The man, John Mulherne, a close friend of Bruce Springsteen and a controversial Wall Street trader who did time for insider trading, later told this story to a Wall Street Journal reporter.

Gafni was an outsider in the NY Jewish scene. He was not relying on a family name or family money or any longstanding affiliations. He relied on audacity and passion, and an intense schedule of hard work. He was an outlier, and that made him vulnerable.

Spiritual teacher Sally Kempton described his audacity like this: “Marc breaks boundaries, takes down walls, and introduces himself into communities and situations that most people wouldn’t dare to enter. He is post-conventional in his lifestyle. He comes on strong, and can be unabashedly direct.”

An Intellectual Empath

Gafni has been long-regarded by friends and his more honest foes alike as one of the most brilliant text scholars and thought leaders of his generation of Jewish teachers. But unlike most intellectually rigorous people he is also well-versed in the language of feeling. He’s been described as a person who feels ideas even more than he thinks them.

This is true in my experience, as well. Gafni has a unique ability to function simultaneously from the intellect and the heart. This is a type of character paradox that coalesces as the third quality that makes Gafni a suitable target.

Gafni has a unique ability to listen deeply and make people feel special. He is openly friendly and makes even strangers feel like they have known him for years. People often write this off as charisma—and in some sense, it is exactly that—but, in my experience, it’s rooted in his deep and authentic ability to see everyone he meets as worthy of real regard and even love.

This quality permeates Gafni relationships and it has made him vulnerable. Kempton captured it best in a biographical essay she wrote about Gafni: “When he says “I love you” (which he says often, and to many of the people in his circle), he means it. However—and this, for many people, is the rub— when he says ‘I love you’, he doesn’t mean “I love only you.”

As many who have worked with him will attest, Gafni has a post-conventional way of loving, living, and teaching about sexuality. Kempton observes that he falls in love with people easily and often. This does not at all mean that he engages with all of these people sexually. Obviously not. But there is a permeating sense of what Gafni calls Outrageous Love that is the core to who he is. It suffuses all his relationships.
both close and more casual. It involves an unnatural capacity to hold the other in positive, loving regard while still offering a penetrating critique that calls people out in a precise, potent, and sometimes painful way.

Add to that a post-conventional sexuality—including all the mistakes that might naturally entail—set in the context of classical Jewish orthodoxy (in which sex is supposed to be confined to marriage), and it starts to make sense why Gafni has become a suitable target in the eyes of many.

Understand though, that “post-conventional sexuality” is not another way of saying that Gafni is promiscuous or a libertine. It’s specifically meant to describe his polyamorous sexuality. According to Gafni, it took him years to evolve beyond the limiting cultural and religious beliefs that prevented him from embracing his sexuality in an unashamed way.

If you do not get Gafni’s larger-than-life qualities of both intellect and heart, and you do not get his post-conventional sexuality, then you cannot get the intensity of challenge that his audacity poses for some people.

One teacher who considers himself a close friend of Gafni’s and who asked not to be named, told me, “When I am with him on stage, I feel inadequate in the presence of his teaching and ecstatic flowing delight, which is strangely mixed together with a kind of in-your-face, unabashed confidence. I hate him and hate how I feel while listening to him. Until I remind myself that I love him, and he loves me. But if you are not willing to do some internal work around Gafni, you will feel small and want to lash out at him with all you got. Minimally you will seek out and exaggerate his every flaw and project any manner of imperfection on him.”

You’ll notice that suitability is presented here as a function of mostly positive qualities. Even though it is a distorted presentation of these positive traits that are privileged in a smear. For example, inspiration is presented as manipulation, audacity or confidence are presented as emotional coercion, and passion is cast as pathology. I am aware of those perspectives. I do not believe, as I will show in the next sections, that they are supported by the facts. My aim here has been to inquire into the positive qualities of this man—qualities which are being either ignored or blatantly spun as negative by the smear campaign.

All of this is secondary to a final attribute which renders a target ideal: a distorted history of alleged indiscretion. Not a history based purely in fact, as we’ll see, but one which is purposefully twisted to create the image of an irredeemably tainted past.

One incident is rarely enough to get a smear of this magnitude moving, but when there is a fabricated history of questionable behavior, it becomes easier to believe additional claims along the same lines. And, this effect is greatly amplified on the Internet.

III. A DISTORTED HISTORY OF ALLEGED INDISCRETION

To escape responsibility for violence we imagine it is enough to pledge never to be the first to do violence. But no one ever sees himself as casting the first stone. Even the most violent persons believe that they are always reacting to a violence committed in the first instance by someone else.

—René Girard

The success of a smear is largely dependent on the distorted compounding of indiscretions to create the illusion of a tainted or corrupt past. Some smear campaigns draw upon a legitimate telling of past behaviors, but, when the smear is orchestrated, the past is often taken out of context and systematically distorted to serve present-day aims. This is the second component of an effective smear.

The 2016 smear against Gafni’s is unique in this respect. It relies upon heavily distorted and falsely compounded indiscretions to manipulate public sentiment. A series of false allegations of sexual harassment from 2006 are being used to make two incidents from 31 and 36 years ago, even more compelling and damning, since they are made to appear to be the first in a longer-term pattern of problematic behavior.

In addition to relying on this distorted history, smear organizers have deliberately concealed the fact that they fabricated this history in the first place. Past articles by Sally Kempton22 and Mariana Caplan23 have revealed this ruse by exposing the false complaints upon which it was based.
Those false complaints were in large part organized or supported by the major actors in the current smear campaign. Nonetheless, both Caplan and Kempton chose, ineffectively in my opinion, to leave out key details, including the names of the organizers and private communications that reveal the extent of what’s been perpetrated under the banner of this smear.

That will not be the case here. Lies aren't corrected by offering an alternate version of events. Lies are insidious, and even when refuted, which will be the case here, the specter of the lie lingers on, distorting the meaning-making of everyone who’s been touched by it. In smears, it’s as if a Lie + Lie + Lie = Truth, but that’s just bad math, or, in the vernacular, bullshit. Repeated lies don’t add up to truth. They add up to a steaming pile of lies that deserved to be exposed.

Before continuing, it’s important to note that this pile of lies and all the details surrounding its creation are not the truth about Gafni’s life. As described earlier, this smear has, in a very real sense, created an alternate or fictional person. Or, more appropriately, perhaps, this smear, by launching this pile of lies across the Internet, has attempted to hijack the narrative of Gafni’s life.

It has replaced the truly edgy and post-conventional story of a real person who loves big and lives out loud, with a narrative that intentionally fans embers into fires, then piously proclaims that “where there’s smoke there’s fire.” In the following section, I will start deconstructing that false narrative and reveal the big lie upon which it is based.

A World Collapses
On May 11, 2006, Gafni landed in Israel after a long teaching trip in the US. While on the tarmac, he borrowed the phone of another passenger in order to call his program director. A woman’s voice he didn’t recognize answered the phone screaming, “You are over!” He was given the address for a lawyer in Tel Aviv and was instructed to be there at midnight.

He figured he must have dialed the wrong number, so he called again, confirming the message was intended for him, “Gafni! Do not call back. Be at the lawyer’s house. We are going to destroy you!”

A chill of terror went through him, that would not abate for more than a year. He had no clue what was going on. He could not imagine what it might be about. He knew he had done nothing wrong. He only knew that some horror was taking place.

Gafni charged his phone on the way to customs and made several phone calls. He was told that Mia Cohen, a woman with whom he had a short romance and Morgan Elster, a former employee, had registered complaints of sexual harassment against him with the police. It would be eight years before he found out that the police had not in fact—then or ever—registered complaints against him. More on this below.

Close friends advised him not to leave the airport, but to fly back to the US immediately. He called another friend familiar with Israeli law and explained that these relationships were mutual and consensual. She reassured him that “having an amorous relationship with someone in your employ is not sexual harassment unless you willfully use your authority as an employer to coerce relations.”

He breathed a sigh of relief, recognizing that he had hundreds of emails showing that the relationships were fully mutual. However, he also remembered that before leaving for Israel he had been unable to locate one that he was searching for. He also realized that he had left that computer in New York.

At this point, Marc realized that the reason he had not been able to locate the emails was that they had likely been erased. His heart sank as he understood that this had all been planned and that the emails had likely been deleted by Elster three weeks earlier when she had his computer.

Without evidence, he was advised, it would be his word against the women’s. And given the climate around sexual harassment—which, in Israel, is an “offense,” akin to a felony in the US, subject to both criminal and civil persecution—he’d be facing up to four years in prison. His advisor suggested he leave Israel immediately, recover his emails and not come back until he did.

Gafni wandered the Tel-Aviv streets until midnight. He arrived at the lawyer’s office to find Avraham Leader, his partner in Bayit Chadash and close friend, sitting with another faculty member and a lawyer who would let neither of them speak. Leader, in Gafni’s recollection, did not even look him in the eyes during the meeting.
They told Gafni he must resign his directorship if the organization was to be saved. Leader would not answer any of Gafni’s questions. He simply kept repeating, “Mordechai this is the only way—give it all up. Let it all go. That is the only way the movement will survive.” Gafni was in shock, feeling like he had walked into someone else’s nightmare.

Later that day, Leader issued a public statement in which he said that the women had registered complaints with the police, that he “read the depositions,” and that he would “willingly risk his personal credibility and integrity” on the fact that “they spoke the truth.”

Two years later, in July 2008, Gafni and Leader re-established email contact for a short time. Gafni had, through several different channels, pleaded with Leader to review the evidence his team had compiled—evidence, some of which is highlighted below, that showed Gafni’s relationships with the women to have been fully mutual and consensual. Leader refused to review the evidence, but he did reply to Gafni several times over email.

In these emails, he admitted to “not having ever read the women’s depositions.” He stated that he was not and is not “interested in the details of the relationships from the women’s sides.” He further explained that when he said he “believed the women,” he meant that he believed that there had been erotic relationships. He had not meant that he believed the relationships to be non-consensual.

Gafni pleaded with Leader to say this publically, and to explain how and why he said something completely different in public two years earlier. Leader refused. According to Gafni, Leader had no role in instigating the complaints. He responded “as best as he could” when he was presented with the situation. It is clear when talking to Gafni that, even ten years later, he is still torn by the loss of this friend.

The False Complaints
In Israel, the content of police complaints is not publicly available. The two major complainants, Morgan Elster (again, a pseudonym) and Mia Cohen, made statements directly at the Bayit Chadash meeting on May 11. The complaints were initiated by Mia, a close friend of David Ingber, Gafni’s former student, whom we will meet again below.

Dalit Arnon, a participant at this meeting, provided Gafni’s attorneys with an extensive affidavit as to what transpired at the meeting. The details she provided were consistent with those provided by others who were present that night.

Cohen was interviewed extensively by an Israeli spiritual magazine, Chayim Acherim. Elster’s “complaints” were later leaked to the press, and the story about both women’s complaints were represented to the press by their lawyer.

At the time, however, Gafni did not learn the extent of the claims made against him until they were reported in the press by Ahiya Raved and, over a month later, in Chayim Acherim.

The press accounts of the complaints were both unclear and contradictory. It was reported variously that Gafni had been charged with rape, accused of sexual harassment, sexual misconduct, indecent assault, and making false promises to marry in exchange for sex.

These claims were recounted to the press by Cohen and Elster’s attorney, Tami Olman. Olman openly criticized the police for letting Gafni leave the country. The women later fired her for telling the press the rape story, which, per Elster, was not a claim that anyone had made. Later, both Elster and Leader also wrote Gafni saying that no one had claimed that the relationships were not consensual.

Leader opened the 2006 Bayit Chadash meeting by explaining that the women had approached the police but were initially turned away because they said the relationships were consensual. Then, he reported, after securing Olman as a lawyer, and learning from her how to frame their allegations, the two women had returned to the police and made their complaints.

Leader clearly stated at the meeting and in his public statement that there were registered police complaints. It was that assertion, repeated by many other involved parties that dictated Gafni’s actions in those weeks, months, and years. Had he known that there were no registered complaints—had he known, for example, that he could not have been arrested upon arrival in Israel—he might have approached the whole story in a completely different manner.

Mia Cohen
Leader was followed by Cohen, who claimed that her only sexual encounter prior to Gafni was an attack during her teenage years. She stated that she only wanted to be sexual with the person she married and that Gafni had promised to marry her, which, she said, was why she had sexual relations with him. She portrayed their relationship as between a guru and disciple in which she was the obedient disciple and Gafni the all-powerful guru. She also claimed that she
was taken advantage of while a member of Gafni’s ordination program.

In the Chayim Acherim article, she offered further elaboration. She told the story of how they met at a retreat center in the US. Gafni was a guest teacher and she was the program coordinator. She met with Gafni to discuss joining his ordination program and described how he asked her a range of personal questions.

Later, she said, she had joined him for a car ride to clarify. “In the conversation, he outlined two possible tracks: One that I would study with him and the second a romantic relationship that would lead to marriage. This flattered me very much, but I chose the path of learning in his ordination program; I thought he was too old for me.” She claimed that she was confused by Gafni sending her “sexual emails” and “talking in metaphor.”

After several months of email-only contact, Cohen moved to Israel in October 2005. She took a job in Israel as the coordinator of a Jewish/Arab dialogue group in Jerusalem and was also studying at a Yeshiva in Jerusalem. She claims to have both joined the study program at Bayit Chadash and received “night lessons” from Gafni. She reports that they engaged in a several-months-long sexual relationships during which time she claims to have been unaware that Gafni was engaged in other relationships. Their relationship ended in January 2006, after a retreat in which she shared a room with Gafni and his son and claimed that he forced her to perform oral sex. She later confided in Elster and Ingber, who was a close friend.

Gafni reports a different story. Cohen attended a handful or workshops and studied privately with him sporadically, on not more than three or four occasions over several months. No funds were exchanged for these sessions.

In the summer, before she moved to Israel, the two of them openly discussed the multiple “tracks” upon which their relationship might unfold, including a sexual or romantic track. Cohen was interested in pursuing both tracks and sent him erotically-suggestive emails prior to her arrival in Israel. Once she arrived, their entire relationship took place over the course of six weeks. They also acknowledged the fact that they were both dating other people.

According to Gafni, Cohen’s claim about not having been sexual with anyone but him is untrue. She told him directly about men she was with before coming to Israel, including someone she met at the Isabella Freedman retreat center in 2005 and someone else from the Galilee in Northern Israel.
whom she was with at the same time she was involved with Gafni.

This undermines both the story she told at the Bayit Chadash meeting about Gafni being the only person she was sexual with after an early trauma, and the claim that she was only sexual with him because he had promised to marry her. This is further undermined in an email that I’ll present later.

They had three sexual encounters over a six-week period. Gafni reports, and the email record clearly confirms, that Cohen initiated each of their encounters, which are described in the emails as mutually positive. The tone of their relationship, again, as reflected in the emails, was one of equals; each partner with their own gifts and their own power. Cohen appears to be powerful, initiatory, and audacious.

The recovered email record is detailed and extensive. It indicates a normal relationship between mutually consenting adults while also confirming the details of Gafni’s reports. Evidence supporting Cohen’s claims of false promises and abuse appear nowhere.

This is an important point to note because Lester, in a 2008 public letter, refers to these emails, which she has never seen, and dismisses them by suggesting that even an abused wife might send an occasional loving card to her husband.

These emails do not read as a cherry-picked selection of “loving cards.” Rather, they offer a detailed and consistent picture of the several weeks of Cohen and Gafni’s relationship. And, importantly, they include communication from before and after each sexual encounter.

Rick Thaler, a lawyer who reviewed the email records in 2006, “All the evidence refutes the complainant’s factual allegations. . . the emails show that the relationship was pursued, initiated, and, in fact, enjoyed and appreciated by Cohen.”

A few weeks before moving to Israel and months prior to their first sexual encounter, Cohen sends an erotically-charged email that opens with a poem: “Dancing with you in the shadows, burn & rapture, fire into flame. . . into wax dripping down her thighs. . .” Many emails are similarly sexually suggestive. Another reads: “Lay down your body, feel mine begin to rise. . .” (see Exhibit 1)

She also foreshadows their coming relationship: “regardless of how we manifest as Mia and Mordechai in this lifetime, we have some beautiful and complex karmic chemistry at play.”

The emails continue before her arrival. Gafni expresses that he will honor her sacred autonomy. She replies, “Sacred autonomy – nicely put – what gives you the sense that autonomy is so important to me?! (she says with a slow spread of smile).”

This is followed by emails that discuss the different ways or “tracks” that they can co-create in relationship. She writes, “I come with an invitation: I would be most delighted if you would dance with me under the sliver of the waxing moon as she grows into fullness. . .”

This is one of several emails, the tone of which is co-creative, sexually-suggestive, and mutually-powerful. Further, it was Cohen who sent sexual, metaphoric emails and prose. And, she even confirmed that metaphor was workable, “we both work very well and joyfully in the world of metaphor,” and “grateful for the muse. . . easy to exist within poet mind and muse metaphor and eros.”

This refutes her claims that it was Gafni who sent sexually suggestive emails and that he confused her with metaphor. Cohen appears to have delighted and engaged in both.

In late November, she came to Gafni’s home to study. She sends an email beforehand in which she says, “See you Sunday. Do you drink wine, red or white. . .” suggesting that her intention appears to have been something more than study. It was during that meeting that Cohen initiated their first sexual encounter.

After this encounter, Gafni writes, “you are bold and engaged a second step – I honor and receive that – total good and total beautiful – you felt the moment and engaged – amen – I am glad you did.” Cohen immediately responds, “just got back, and wanted to respond quickly with a smile and lingering sweetness. . . bold and ballsy if I do say so myself. . .”

Two days after this encounter, she writes about it, and her deepening relationships with Gafni, positively, “Thought about you — I — we… so with the stroke of a paintbrush or the soft kiss of lips… I have faith in the vessel that is constantly being created unfolding and revealing new life and essence with each unfolding encounter. . . with infinite possibility. . . curiosity and gratitude for the moment.”
A week later, Cohen reflects positively their relationship and with apparent anticipation of their next encounter, “we’re on a journey together, you and I. . .and with pure heart and pure intention it will all be for the sake of heaven, of enlightenment, laughter and joy, and gentle mischief and play (as it organically arises). . .see you later. . .room 43, right?”

She follows up with an indication of their mutual desire to keep the relationship private and makes three requests to stay at his house, “So tonight. . .I’d be happy to stay [at your house]. . .but I must suggest in terms of appearances that it is probably better that I’m not getting in a taxi with you at the end of the night. . .right?”

The second sexual encounter is also well received by Cohen, who writes “Cleansing and renewing into life as she unfolds, undresses, and lifts her skirt, revealing and concealing. . .Thank you for your space, your bed, your late night hours. . .and I look forward to a drop of space in time where we again share in the crease of the smile and ocean filled blue eyed moment. . .”

In late December, Cohen refers again to the “various tracks” of their relationship and lovingly talks about the fact that they are both dating other people, making clear that her claim that Gafni deceived her with promises to marry in order to gain sexual relations was a deliberate lie: “Around our various tracks, my heart opened to you quite a bit and it totally surprised me. . .You’re wonderful. . .it’s easy to love you and it has been beautiful to discover you, to feel you, to explore you. . .you’re in a relationship with someone which is probably much more serious than it was before you left and i’ve been dating a few guys since you’ve been gone, one of which i see some potential with and will spend some time tomorrow. . .I pray for both of us that we love deeply – live fully – and touch the core of our essence – and I’m grateful that we’ve touched each other on this path…it’s been beautiful and I’m curious to watch the transformation that happens. . .” (See Exhibit 2)

Almost a month after their final sexual encounter, the only one referenced in her claims, she writes, “it feels as if my work right now is to pull back from you. . .to love you deeply, and to do so from a distance. . .will continue to love, and honor, and respect you. . .”

A month later, after their relationship has ended, she sends an email responsibly differentiating her emotions and seeking closure: “Some things are coming up for me and I think it would be good for us to take a few minutes in heart space to close this chapter in a way that really honors both of
us, our process together and our confidentiality.” (see Exhibit 3)

Warm and loving emails continue until April 2006, just before she approaches the police. This email record refutes the fabricated narrative that Cohen presented to the police, the community, and the press. And, in 2007, her false complaints were further revealed as such.

A few years after Israel, Gafni completed a polygraph examination that investigated four questions concerning Cohen’s claims: (1) Did you make any false promises to Cohen to have a sexual relationship with her? (2) Did Cohen initiate several of your sexual encounters? (3) Did you deceive Cohen in order to have sexual relations with her? And, (4) Did Cohen tell you that her sexual encounters with you were positive and desirable? 28

Dr. Gordon H. Barland, the former director of polygraph research for the Department of Defense, concluded that the probability of deception was less than .02 and that Gafni had answered truthfully.

What might have caused the dramatic shift in her story of their time together? Regret, anger, jealousy or anything else that might reasonably foreshadow her false complaints, were not revealed in any of their extensive communications.

In Israel, making false promises to marry is prohibited under the rape statutes. Yet, what these emails reveal to be a mutual adult relationship conducted with grace, dignity, and appropriate, adult sensuality, were construed and reported as rape by the Israeli press. The story of Gafni and Cohen’s relationship had reached competing extremes. Again, how was that possible?

As will be discussed below, Cohen is good friends with Ingber, the ex-student of Gafni’s mentioned earlier, who is also one of the key organizers in the 2016 smear campaign.

According to Gafni, Ingber exerted a great deal of influence over Cohen. She once told him that
Ingber was “enraged” that she was working with him and was “doing everything he could to poison the relationship.”

The other primary organizer, Chaya Lester, the ex-wife mentioned earlier, describes in one of her public smear letters Cohen’s six-week relationship with Gafni as a “long period of trauma and abuse.” The email record clearly refutes such claims, painting a picture that is diametrically opposed to them. Lester, whom we’ll meet below, is unfortunately prone to the telling of such blatant lies.

**Morgan Elster**

The claims made by Elster, along with the email record that refutes them, are far more colorful. At the Bayit Chadash meeting, her first order of business was to prevent anyone from picking Gafni up at the airport and bring him to the meeting. “He’s violent and is a danger to your children,” she tells Dalit Arnon, the woman who later provided an affidavit about what happened at this meeting. “Getting him from the airport would ruin our plans. . .he would come to the meeting and talk to everyone,” Elster continued, unconcerned about disguising her motives and manipulations.

She claimed that Gafni had slept with “hundreds of women,” and had a “sexual engagement with her.” She said that he forcibly ripped her shirt in one instance of assault, that he masturbated before services while viewing negative sites about himself on the Internet, and that he laughed behind the backs of people who came to share their problems.

She was described in the affidavit as trying to come across as “pure and holy,” admitting that her relationship with Gafni was consensual, but that she was “made to be sexual,” and that Gafni used his status as her employer to initiate a sexual relationship.

One of the facts that she failed to mention, which is made clear in the email record, was any of the details of her sexual predilections. She was active in the Tel Aviv S & M scene and claimed that she actively ran a porn site. She often made erotic slide shows for Gafni as a regular feature of their sexual play. She conducted telephone and web cam sessions of a sexual nature with several people, one...
of which Gafni walked in on when she was working in his office.

She left out several other important details: the fact that she and Gafni never had sexual intercourse; the fact that their erotic contacts began when she was not employed by Gafni or Bayit Chadash, and that she initiated the erotic aspect of their relationship. All of this is evident in the email record.

She failed to indicate that at the time she made the complaints, she and Gafni were coming off several months of bitter arguments (again, present in the email record) or that she had threatened to take Gafni to court over back compensation, in which she threatened to claim that “he used emotional pressure to force her to work.”

She also did not mention that her time as Gafni’s employee was due to end on May 1, (just ten days prior to when the complaints were taken to the police), or that she had told Gafni in an instant message that she was engaged in a sexual relationship with Leader. Nor did she apparently tell anyone that she had deleted correspondence which contradicted her claims.

According to the report of forensics and data recovery expert, Scott Tucker, the dates of the emails and their method of deletion suggested that the deletions were intentional and conducted by someone with knowledge of how to destroy the targeted data. Gafni had asked Elster, in April 2006, to clean up and delete specific, old email files on his computer, because they seemed to be slowing his email program down. She apparently took this opportunity to erase over a full year of emails and chat messages between the two of them. Many of these were recovered in the fall of 2006.

The once very close relationship between Gafni and Elster went bad toward the end. Gafni claims he fired her. She claims that she quit. Regardless, the emails indicate an emotionally-charged and sometimes volatile situation.

However, prior to that time, over one-hundred pages of email and instant message chat records reveal a normal, playful, and sometimes intense relationship. Elster acknowledges several times that
she is sexually involved with many people.

In one email and in one chat transcript, she speaks about going “hunting.” From the context of the chat transcripts, “hunting” or “live hunting” was Elster’s term for going out looking for sex in real-life as compared to sex on the Internet. In other emails she talks casually about intense sexual experiences she has with different partners. All of this is part of her natural and ongoing intimate banter with Gafni which takes place over a long period. (see Exhibits 4 & 5)

Contrary to her claim that she was “made to be sexual,” the chat transcript reveals that she was highly initiatory and needed no encouragement to be sexual with Gafni. She regularly sent erotic pictures and videos, which she called slideshows, to Gafni. In this chat transcript, her sexual play is unrequited but she is insistent.

In another chat, Gafni is apparently working, but she insists: "mmm. . .i’m thinking if should let you go back to work. . .or seduce you right back to the slut track. . .just because I know I can. . ." Gafni is engaged, sometimes actively, sometimes reluctantly, but the tone is always respectful, playful, and affectionate. In another transcript, the play is clearly mutual, which is the case in all recovered chats.

In February 2005—during the time that Elster is not employed by Bayit Chadash—the relationship between Elster and Gafni was on the rocks. Ten days later, she wrote to Gafni positively about their time apart, “Meanwhile I am enjoying freedom. . .trying new exciting things. . .Filling voids. . .so much to tell you. . .It’s good to release yourself from limits and responsibilities. . .But really just for a little while, otherwise you get lost!” (see Exhibit 6)

Two weeks after that she wrote about how much she missed staying with him, “Its hard being so deeply involved in someone’s life and suddenly it stops. . .I know that this is true in the world on many levels—but still hard for me to accept it. . .”

The email record continues like this for months on end. They have normal disagreements, argue back and forth, she threatens to leave their relationship, and then sends loving emails shortly thereafter. Sexual play continues throughout.

Elster returns to work with Bayit Chadash in September 2005. In none of their correspondence, before, after, or during her employment, is there any indication of coercion or manipulation related to the employer/employee relationship.

Considered together, the email record contradicts Elster’s description of events in both the Bayit Chadash meeting and in the press. The emails make it clear that the sexual play between Gafni and Elster started when she was not in Gafni’s employ. This clearly refutes her claim that she was sexual with Gafni because of the power he exerted over her as her employer.

Furthermore, the tone of the relationships is that of two people relating as peers. There is no indication of deference and no evidence of a one-sided power dynamic or an asymmetrical hierarchy. There is also no evidence of manipulation, harassment, or abuse—just a normal relationship, with normal ups and downs.

Again, these conclusions are reinforced by polygraph. Gafni answered the same four questions outlined earlier concerning the nature of his relationship with Cohen (since their claims were essentially the same). Dr. Barland
concluded that the probability of deception was less than .02. Gafni was telling the truth. He did not make false promises or use deception in order to have sexual relations. Elster initiated those relations and reported them to be positive and desirable.

**False Claims**
The claims made by these women in 2006 are unfounded. Much of what they have claimed is directly contradicted by their own words in emails. Evidence of abuse, harassment, false promises to marry, and any form of coercion, manipulation, or negative power dynamics just do not appear in any correspondence running right up until the time the complaints were filed.

While some might rightfully contend that email records can’t depict the entirety of these sexual relationships, it is reasonable to believe that, had the relationships taken place as the women claimed, indications of their claimed sexual harassment or power abuse would have been present in the emails or at least would have altered their content or tone. Again, it is worth noting that these are not a couple of sporadic emails over a week or two. They are a long-running, extensive, detailed and in-depth thread of communication which are entirely consistent with Gafni’s descriptions of the relationships.

**The Apology**
A few days after leaving Israel in May 2006, Gafni was facing what he thought were formally-registered complaints of sexual harassment. Since sexual harassment is a felony in Israel, he was told that he’d be facing up to 4 years in prison if the state elected to prosecute. His emails had been erased, so he had no evidence to refute the false complaints made against him.

Amid a lynch-mob-like energy, suffused with the shock of the prior few days, Gafni was also feeling the responsibility of a leader when things in his organization have gone really wrong. It was from this place that he opted to “fall on his sword.” In a public letter, he took responsibility for what had happened.

This letter, unsurprisingly, has been cited as evidence supporting the claims made against him. However, it’s important to acknowledge the context and circumstances within which the letter was written. For Gafni, the letter was penned from a place of “radical shock, confusion, trauma, and fear.”

He felt that as “captain of the ship” he needed to take responsibility for “any sickness that appeared in a system that he had created.” At that time, he found the notion of falling on his sword preferable to engaging in sensationalist conflict in the public realm.

He wrongly believed that by signing this letter, he would end the public attacks and allow time for more fact checking, evidence gathering, and ultimately, exoneration and healing. He also did not realize the extent to which the letter would be interpreted as a confession that the complaints were true.

In hindsight, this choice to fall on his sword was naive and simply muddied the waters. At the time, no one—not Gafni or his advisors—understood the depth of malice that was driving the attack.

In 2008, after recovering his inner center and his emails, he released two additional statements. In the first, he retracted the earlier letter for inappropriately taking responsibility for what had transpired. In the second, he apologized for his part in the contribution system that created some of the conditions that led to the false complaints.

He took responsibility for breaking the “boundaries of conventional relationships which might better have remained in place,” particularly since they were not held in a container that could reasonably bear such post-conventional relationships. He also spoke of his regret and sorrow for causing emotional pain to the people he loved. He apologized for asking for confidentiality in relationships.

It is interesting to note here that Gafni is the only person in this whole story who has actually apologized—not for the false accusations, but for, in his words, “any hurt I caused consciously or unconsciously in the normal arc of human relationship.”

Given the intensity of the attacks still being waged against him, one might argue he might be excused from such an apology—or, at the very least, that he was entitled to fight back. But for the ten years that I have followed this saga closely, no matter how vehemently Gafni has been attacked, he has avoided becoming bitter, closing his heart, or responding with attacks of his own.

In my experience, he continues to take greater and greater responsibility for how he conducts personal, professional, and student relationships. That he has somehow managed to grow from this situation, despite the hurt and the pain, is in my opinion no small testament to the resiliency of his character and mission.
The Organizers

These women claimed that they were sexually harassed in some form. Despite the emails which undermine their claims and show typical relationships between consenting adults, I contend that they were indeed abused and that they were manipulated...just not by Gafni.

This history of indiscretion was fabricated to further a smear organized by Gafni's ex-wife, Chaya Lester, and his ex-student, David Ingber. When the motives to make false police complaints are not present, they can be evoked, encouraged, and supplemented by motives that are far more sinister.

Both Lester and Ingber regularly claim that their attacks against Gafni aim to “protect future victims.” This is a classic example of Karpov’s drama triangle, where a perpetrator attempts to disguise him or herself as either a victim or a rescuer. The dark underbelly of their espoused motivation is the degree of victimization it has required to enact—they literally had to create false victims to further their attack.

The story of Lester and Ingber is far more dramatic than the story just told. Its details are sordid, but only by understanding their underlying motives and the degree of malice that drives them does this whole affair start to make a bit of sense.

David Ingber

Almost 13 years ago, Gafni and Ingber first met at Elat Chayyim, a Jewish Renewal retreat center where Gafni was teaching a workshop. According to Gafni, Ingber approached him at the start of the weekend, saying something akin to, “I have been afraid to come meet you for years. I finally had the guts to do it. I knew it would change my life.”

Ingber said he had enjoyed the weekend, expressing delight at the depth of Gafni’s teaching and presence. Gafni was drawn to Ingber, as well. Ingber came from orthodoxy, meaning he knew the tradition, and could likely honor its roots while embracing the post-orthodox stance that Gafni represented. Gafni is naturally drawn to people. He embraced Ingber and was excited to work with him as a student.

At the end of the weekend, Ingber requested a personal meeting with Gafni. He flew into a rage, comparing Gafni repeatedly to his father in a manner that did not make much sense. Gafni reports being taken aback by the depth of Ingber’s rage—it did not jive with the much more genial person he had met over the weekend. But he thought that by loving David, he could help him heal the source of that rage.

Gafni reports that he fell in love with Ingber, as he does with many people. This is a place where Gafni ought to be critiqued for his lack of discrimination—apparently, love cannot heal any wound.

In his own words, he was also “delighted to work with someone who could read text and had a feel for Orthodoxy and tradition well beyond the typical Renewal student.” He intuitively thought that he and Ingber had some shared destiny. In that sense, he was ironically correct.

What he did not know at the time, and what was only recently told to him by a colleague who knows Ingber’s parents, was that Ingber was allegedly abused by his father. This is salient for two reasons. First, Ingber may have projected issues with his father on to Gafni, and second, Gafni may have been unknowingly attracted to fixing Ingber’s father issues.

Despite Ingber’s outburst, Gafni was drawn to both his potential and his brokenness. They started working closely during a time when Ingber’s life was in crisis. According to Gafni, Ingber had left his Orthodox training and was floundering. It was at that point that Gafni decided to ordain him as a Rabbi—before he completed his studies—thinking that being a Rabbi would “call Ingber to his own destiny.”

The ordination took place at the end of a retreat in a private ceremony attended by about twenty people. In Gafni’s telling, he poured an enormous amount of time, energy, and heart into working with Ingber. Together, they spoke of Ingber being a teaching partner and potential successor.

Shortly after the ordination however, Ingber’s early outburst about his father began to resurface regularly. A darkness and rage came to characterize Ingber’s attitude toward Gafni. He began relating to Gafni with a kind of malevolence that a mutual colleague of both mine and Gafni’s, who discussed Ingber with Gafni at the time, described as “unyielding aggression.”

After many such instances of what Gafni describes as an “obsessive and dark hatred” directed at him, the issue came to a boiling point in May 2005. Ingber had been caught in a blatant lie, which he had perpetrated with the express intention of undermining Gafni’s teaching and person. This
was the culmination of a history of him bad-mouthing Gafni to many of Gafni’s students and colleagues.

In a tense conversation, Gafni cut off all ties with Ingber, removing him from his circle of colleagues. Following his dismissal, Ingber’s attacks against Gafni grew more fierce. About a year later, Ingber, who was close friends with Cohen, worked behind the scenes to help orchestrate the 2006 false complaints.

On May 12, 2006, when Gafni left Israel for the US, Ingber was on the phone with American philosopher, Ken Wilber, a close friend and colleague of both Gafni and myself. Joined by several of the women, Ingber tried to convince Wilber to sever ties with Gafni, making clear in the course of conversation that he had played a significant role in the false complaints. This only became clear to Gafni after Wilber relayed to him the role Ingber had played in the immediate aftermath of the complaints.

Wilber, whom I have worked closely with for the last fourteen years, reported to me at the time that Ingber’s intention was to ensure that “Marc would never teach again.” Despite the fact that the claims against Gafni were never checked for veracity, Ingber began using them immediately to destroy Gafni’s credibility and livelihood.

Ingber’s hatred for Gafni is evident from multiple sources, including oral and written statements, dating from 2005. It appears again in a 2016 video he launched on his anti-Gafni website, which was taken down for a time but is now back online. The transcript of this video can be found here. In this statement, he leaves out many relevant facts that demonstrate his obsession with Gafni, along with his role in orchestrating the false complaints. He describes his connection to some of the complainants—“[Gafni] seduced three of my dearest friends”—but mentions nothing of their later claims or his involvement. He works to hide his perpetration under the veneer of being a rescuer—“this is a warning, a warning to all those who are involved with Marc Gafni.”

Ingber has repeatedly played a leading role in the smear against Gafni, reappearing publicly as a primary face of the 2016 campaign. Compared to other organizers, he’s been careful to conceal his involvement, but his virulent 12-year obsession has proven impossible to fully or sufficiently disguise.

Chaya Lester
Gafni and Lester were introduced by a mutual friend in 1998. They were engaged to be married a week later. Lester was beautiful, enthusiastic, and excited about the work being done by Gafni in Israel.

Privately their relationship was tumultuous, characterized by Gafni as mutually loving and destructive, “we both loved each other and we both hurt each other.” By 2003 they were engaged in couples counseling. After meeting with Reb Zalman, the elder head of the Jewish Renewal movement, they agreed to explore opening their marriage to other sexual partners. According to Gafni, they explicitly discussed and agreed that Marc should only be involved with a type of person that would be non-threatening to Lester.

After this conversation with Zalman and during his time as a PhD student at Oxford, Gafni became involved with another student. When Lester asked him about it, he reluctantly admitted it, explaining to me that they had not yet worked out the rules concerning how they would be polyamorous.

Lester flew into a rage, repeating over and over, “I will destroy you. I am a princess. How dare you do this to me?” In exchange for her not attacking him publicly and destroying Bayit Chadash, she insisted that he let her hit him for as long as she wanted and as hard as she could. Gafni acceded to her demand. She wanted her pound of flesh and she got it. According to Gafni, this level of cruelty and violence was the final straw in their marriage.

Several years into their marriage, Gafni had met a woman I’ll call Mikaela Frazier, who was engaged. Gafni and Frazier fell madly in love. Gafni reports, and extensive email evidence corroborates, that they experienced each other at the time as the great loves of each other’s lives.

According to Gafni, he helped Frazier found a negotiation initiative at a major US university. They published two co-authored articles on negotiation and spirituality in professional journals, and they taught at each other’s events—Frazier with Gafni at Elat Chayyim and Gafni with Frazier at the university.

In a pivotal conversation, driving down towards Boulder after visiting Ken Wilber, Frazier asked Gafni to leave Lester and marry her. He agreed but not without a bit of ambivalence on both of their parts. They still felt connected to the other relationships they were in, so they soon separated, with the intention of taking time apart to see if they could repair their current relationships.
Gafni and Lester then made a commitment to reviving their marriage. But, it turned out that Lester was having an affair while they were in counseling with a man named Kendall Ross. Ross was a sex worker who eventually wrote a book about the affair called Sleeping with the Rebbe’s Wife. Gafni understood and forgave her for not informing him of the relationship—he had not informed her of his relationship with Frazier—but it was becoming clear to him that the relationship with Lester was likely nearing its end.

After they separated, Lester told Gafni that she wanted to seduce one of her professors at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). She asked him if he thought it was a good idea. He told Lester that this would be unethical and problematic on several grounds. According to Gafni, Lester was unmoved and even angered by his arguments. Gafni and Lester separated in 2003 and divorced in late 2004. This was followed sometime later, at Lester’s request, by an orthodox religious divorce that took place two months before the false complaints emerged in Israel.

Lester—over a short period of time, similar to Cohen and Elster—morphed from an ex-wife into an attacker without warning. According to Gafni, the the two had remained in friendly communication after they separated. They engaged in extensive therapeutic work and acknowledged that neither of them was a victim or villain. They agreed that they had left a marriage in which they each had stepped out sexually and emotionally before it was over, and that they had loved each other, hurt each other, and ended as friends once they realized it would not work out. By his account, they had reached a place of genuine resolution and mutual closure.

On May 9, three days before the false complaints were launched in Israel, Lester, being identified only as Gafni’s third ex-wife, published what she called a “deposition” on a blog for Jewish survivors of sexual violence.

In this post, she calls Gafni a sociopath and a predator who regularly manipulates people for money and sex. Using a common smear tactic, she diagnoses him as having both “narcissistic personality disorder” and “antisocial (or sociopathic) personality disorder.” (Lester had no credentials in psychology or psychotherapy, though she was in a graduate program at CIIS.) She cites the DSM criteria for these disorders verbatim and insists he exhibits them all. She doesn’t mention that she was not credentialed and was just learning about these disorders in the Masters degree program that Gafni was paying for. Nor does she acknowledge that ex-wives are not generally considered credible diagnostic sources about their former husbands.

She ends her letter with the following line, “May this whole fiasco pave the way for new standards of humility, sincerity and a genuine care for others.” According to the women, the complaints against Gafni were taken to the police the next day.

Then, in 2008, after Gafni recovered the emails necessary to refute the claims against him, she co-authored a 10-page letter where she attempted to raise the “standards of sincerity” by including new and even more vitriolic claims.

This letter is filled with malice and invective. It casts Gafni as a kind of evil genius. He is described as a predator who takes pleasure in seducing and destroying people. In this letter, Lester claims that she wrote large sections of his books, that Gafni “compulsively coerced women into non-reciprocal sexual activity,” and that he neglected and abused his kids. She also mentions that he “never prayed.”

Like Ingber, she assumes the role of the “rescuer,” claiming to serve all past and future victims of Gafni’s abuse. The level of vitriol in the letter makes it sadly clear that Lester is lost in a malice-filled projection. It is her, in fact, who has a history of seducing and destroying people.

Not too long after the false complaints were launched against Gafni, Lester, who was living in the San Francisco bay area, was the key complainant in a similar case that led to the dismissal of another Renewal rabbi in Berkeley, California. She claimed this Rabbi was sexually inappropriate with her. He adamantly denied this, as did his ex-wife and as does his current wife.

This rabbi discovered Lester’s role in the situation when the notebook of the person who mediated the negotiation with his synagogue found its way into a box of books that were returned to him. The notes clearly indicated that Lester was the complainant. Gafni knows this Rabbi and his ex-wife and is convinced that Lester, intoxicated with her power, lied about this as well.

The Big Lies
Clearly, Lester is not a fan of Gafni, but how does any of this connect with the 2006 police complaints? In 2006, not
long before the false complaints were launched and two years after their separation, Lester called Gafni and asked him to return to Orthodoxy and re-marry her. Gafni refused. She then confessed that she was involved with a new boyfriend, Hillel Lester, with whom she wanted to get engaged. They were later married. But, she said, Gafni would have to “die or disappear” in order for her to be able to be with someone else.

Lester was telling the truth here, and she went on to execute, together with Ingber, two big lies to make Gafni disappear. These lies were not revealed until 2014, almost 10 years after these events unfolded. Both lies were made in regard to the false complaints, which, as I have discussed above, were the original attack that necessitated these lies.

Let’s remember that everyone involved—Cohen, Elster, Lester, Ingber, Olman, the press, all of them—had either explicitly lied or implicitly misled the public and those involved, including Gafni, about complaints ever being registered with the police. For eight years, Gafni and the rest of his team believed that sexual harassment complaints had been registered by the police, as had been reported by numerous parties.

In 2014, Gafni hired Nitza Cohen to investigate the status of the complaints in Israel. Cohen is a prominent Israel attorney with strong ties to the Haifa police, which is where the women said the complaints had been registered.

Gafni hoped that since the statute of limitations had passed, he could return to Israel and seek closure without having to attack the women in a drawn out legal process. Cohen reported back: “Not only are there no present complaints, but there were never any complaints registered by the police against Marc Gafni.”

When Gafni received this letter from Cohen, he reports almost fainting from the shock. Not only had the complaints themselves been false, but the fact that they’d been registered with the police was also untrue.

The impact on Gafni of the lies about the police complaints being real can’t be overstated. Every action Gafni took since May 11, 2006, was dictated by his belief that police had registered sexual
harassment complaints against him. Again, in Israel, such charges are akin to a US felony, entailing several years in prison upon conviction.

In order to protect himself from potential wrongful imprisonment, and its implications, he left Israel. As it turned out, none of this should have been required. Had he known that there were not false police complaints, he would have made very different decisions along the way.

Moreover, Lester proudly admitted to a colleague of Gafni’s, Dr. Ruth Engle Eldar along with her husband, that she had organized the 2006 complaints. Eldar sent Gafni an email detailing the conversation, in which Lester admitted to knowing that “no complaints were never filed because the police did not register them.” (see Exhibit 7)

She also told Eldar that “she was the one who organized the women and pushed this all forward,” and that she, in a proud and delighted way, “was a prime organizer of the complaints.” She was surprised when Eldar wasn’t convinced to not work with Gafni. I suspect she will also be surprised that the details of her critical admission are now being shared publicly.

Motivated by Malice
Lester’s attacks against Gafni have continued well into 2016. When she was called out in the comments to one of her posts for self-indulgence and lack of responsibility, she admitted that she had used Gafni.

In her words: He was a “fast ticket to power.” I used him for “my own selfish, small-hearted, deeply-scheming need to be seen and drive for power. I wed him out of a whole retinue of ulterior motives.” Given this, it is somewhat unsurprising that she organized the complaints. Gafni had left her for another woman and refused to return to her or to orthodoxy.

Lester and Ingber’s original ulterior motives linger on, as both have played active roles in the current campaign against Gafni. I can only speculate as to what might be driving their ongoing attempts to execute the organized destruction of a life—besides, of course, the desire to complete the earlier failed attempt at social murder.

By demonizing Gafni, Ingber and Lester accomplish at least four distinct aims. I suspect these aims are essential for completing the original murder. First, they cover up the fact that the complaints in Israel were false. Second, they cover up their role as primary organizers in the perpetration of those complaints. Third, they drastically decrease the likelihood that anyone in the Jewish community would actually talk to Gafni, check facts, or seek to re-integrate him. After all, who would talk to a predatory sociopath?

I suspect their demonization also serves a fourth aim. It helps them sleep better at night. Otherwise, how could they possibly justify to themselves the degree of destruction wrought on Gafni, his children, family, colleagues, and his communities by their endless obsession?

Unsurprisingly, they can admit none of this. To admit to organizing false complaints might very well cost each of them, particularly Ingber, their careers. Besides which, who is willing to admit to the dark motive of malice? Echoing Kundera’s statement about revenge, malice can never admit of itself so it must always plead other motives.

According to psychotherapist and author Joseph Berke, “our capacity for destruction lies in the origins of malice.” For Berke, malice is not an ordinary emotion. It is not simply about hate or revenge. Malice has three components: perception, feeling, and action. Malice involves a forceful action—an acting out, attacking, and annihilating behavior. It is fueled by a “passion that may not have an obvious cause yet is very intense, deep-rooted, and associated with hate, rage, chaos, and evil.”

Such passions, according to Berke, are fed by an “inner world of fact and fantasy brought about by the interplay of perception, memory, and imagination.” Such passions, I contend, are what motivate Lester and Ingber.

Berke describes malice as arising from the interplay of three forces: envy, greed, and jealousy. Only one is required in a great enough force to evoke malice. Envy is the desire not to possess but to prevent the other from possessing. It attacks or destroys the goodness of the other, provoked by an overwhelming sense of inferiority, impotency, or worthlessness. Envy is rooted in imaginary conflict, while actual events can evoke it. An envious person will go to nearly any lengths to diminish such feelings.

Greed, in contrast to envy, is the insatiable desire to take for oneself that which another possess. Jealousy is concerned with relationships. It involves a rivalry with one person for the love of another. Jealousy is triadic where envy is dyadic. Love scorned is a central theme of jealousy.

For Ingber, malice is most likely driven by envy. For Lester, it is driven by jealousy. For both, a malice-driven quest for destruction has been evoked by these strong emotions.
Ingber had the opportunity to work with Gafni to pioneer a new approach to Judaism, but he wanted that mantle for himself. Something in Gafni apparently represented aspects of his father that he despised. Gafni also possesses intellectual capacities and a teaching acumen that Ingber, according to a simple review of public lectures, does not himself possess, and so he seeks to deprive Marc Gafni of that.

His initial intention, as expressed to Wilber, was to stop Gafni from ever teaching again. Only later did he take up the ostensibly righteous mantle of victim advocacy. If he was initially (or only) concerned with sexual harassment, then why the degree of obsession and why was there never any possibility for resolution? Note that because of the attacks, Gafni is no longer teaching in Judaism; Ingber, on the other hand, currently heads a large Jewish community in New York.

He now has what Gafni possessed at the time of their first meeting—you could say that he actually took Gafni’s place, and it wouldn’t be a stretch to impute that motive onto his actions from the beginning. But, based on his continued actions, it appears that he didn’t only want what Gafni had—that would be the motive underlying greed—he wanted also to deprive Gafni of having any place in determining the future of Judaism—which is the core of envy. This is likely why he continues his attack.

By her own admission, Lester rode her relationship with Gafni to positions of power and authority. How much of who she became was defined in exclusive relation to Gafni? Even after she found the love of another—a man who became her future husband—she asked Gafni to return to her.

When he refused, it was clear to both of them that it was because of Frazier. Lester had long known they were together. She even told Gafni that she went to Old Jerusalem to have a curse put on Frazier’s life. Frazier was also the only woman Lester named in her 2006 deposition.

When she told Gafni that she could not love another unless he “died or disappeared,” it’s now clear that she wasn’t speaking metaphorically. Motivated apparently by jealousy and the pain of love scorned, she moved to do exactly that.

She hasn’t succeeded, which may explain why she still identifies herself as Gafni’s third ex-wife.

Malice requires action. It is unrelenting in its pursuit of destruction. It’s the ideal motive for driving the creation of an organized history of indiscretions. But, when a smear is unsuccessful, even after 10 years, malice provides the power and motivation to sustain over the long term.

IV. AN APPEAL TO AUTHORITY

You think the end justifies the means, however vile. I tell you:

The end is the means by which you achieve it.

—Wilhelm Reich

By most accounts, the 2006 organized false complaints against Gafni were a failure. They had a massive impact, to be sure, but after a few years, much to the shock of the organizers, Gafni re-emerged in the US. He was teaching once again, writing new books, and creating a community of colleagues and practitioners that eventually became the Center for Integral Wisdom, a think-tank he co-founded with Ken Wilber.

By any reasonable estimation, the attacks against Gafni, while they succeeded in taking down his community in Israel, had only expanded his reach from an exclusively Jewish to a far more universal stage.

This seems to have inflamed the passions of Lester and Ingber, who continued sending letters attacking Gafni to different institutions where he was asked to teach. Then in 2015, a new organizer and ally in this campaign, Stephen Dinan, emerged. Dinan is CEO of the Shift Network, a New Age organization with a stated mission to “share the very best in personal and societal transformation” in order to create “a sustainable, peaceful, healthy and prosperous world,” what they sometimes call “heaven on earth.”

When a smear campaign falters—if its fabricated complaints fail to have the intended effect or if they have been revealed as actually fabricated—then the next two components of an effective smear promise to breathe new life into the campaign. The next efforts of the smear organizers focused not on the now discredited complaints, but on another Big Lie. They suggested or implied that Gafni is a child rapist or...
 predator, and they got such claims to appear to be backed by an assumed authority—major media, like the New York Times.

**Stephen Dinan**

Lester and Ingber had largely failed. Their continued efforts to subvert Gafni’s ability to teach had been only minimally effective. They needed an ally, and they found one in Dinan, whose capacity to organize was rivaled only by his willingness to buy into a malice-driven narrative, without talking to both sides. However, as we will see below, this narrative supported some of his own hidden agendas.

It’s important to note from the outset that Dinan and Gafni have never met beyond a passing hello in the halls of a conference. But, from a distance, Gafni has apparently threatened something fundamental to Dinan’s efforts to save humanity.

Dinan now denies having orchestrated the 2016 smear campaign. When approached for comment on a recent National Coalition for Men article on Gafni, Dinan said, “My comments about Marc Gafni hardly evidence a smear campaign, but instead reflect my personal opinions about a public person and many matters that were already part of the public domain.”

That, however, is far from the truth. Dinan does more than issue public comment. He pours enormous energy into organizing a boycott of any and all of Gafni’s teaching or programs. He attempts to persuade many of his colleagues to break ties with Gafni. He writes public letters which show his primary role in this campaign.

While contemptible, Dinan’s public comment in this article is not the issue. It’s his private comments and behind-the-scenes actions that most clearly indicate his orchestration of the 2016 smear. In leaked emails and conversations, Dinan expressed his intention to develop “a strategy” to destroy Marc, to protect “the world” from Marc, and to “stop him in his tracks.”

Requests by two CIW board members for him and Gafni to meet have been denied. Dinan refused one by saying that his “energy people unanimously said he should not meet with Marc.” What makes Dinan immune from fact checking or from meeting the man he seeks to “protect the world” from? Is this how one achieves "a sustainable, peaceful, healthy and prosperous world?” Only in a twisted, post-truth culture, I would argue.

Why is Dinan so against Gafni, recommendations of energy people aside? Not surprisingly, it all started with a woman. Her name is Barbara Marx Hubbard, and, at 86 years, she is still one of the most vibrant spiritual and evolutionary visionaries of our time. Hubbard was a featured teacher on the Shift Network, and she and Dinan had collaborated on a global event called Birth 2012.

Hubbard, envisioning a follow-up event in 2020, began gauging interest among her colleagues, including Marc, whom she invited to join a conference call with philosopher Ervin Laszlo in August 2015. Following the call, they sent out an announcement publicizing their coalition and describing the event to come. Hubbard had not mentioned Dinan’s name to Gafni or Laszlo, so neither Dinan nor Shift were mentioned in the public announcement released by the Center for Integral Wisdom.

Dinan was furious. Dinan contacted Barbara to demand that she work under him and Shift for the 2020 event, as she had done in 2012. She replied that she would be his partner but not work under him. “No,” he replied severely.
I have the structure. You will fail. You must do it under me."

Hubbard again insisted she would be his partner and invited him to meet with Gafni. Dinan refused, saying, "I must not under any circumstances have anything to do with him." Dinan then gave Hubbard the numbers for Lester and Ingber, requesting that she call them, and indicating that he had been in touch with them.

Dinan then shifted his tactics, recruiting (in)famous cult-buster, Steve Hassan, to work through Hubbard's daughter, to excise her mother from what he seems to have believed to be the Cult of Gafni. This email reveals his intention, not merely to protect the Shift Network, but to save the world from Gafni. The fee? Only $10,000 to get started. (see Exhibit 8)

Hubbard's daughter ultimately refused to work with Hassan, but not before having several exchanges with Dinan, including one in which Dinan indicated he was organizing an article with a NYTimes reporter, as part of his strategy to, in Hassan's words, "stop Gafni in his tracks."

Hubbard's daughter initially thought Dinan's motives were sincere, but she eventually realized otherwise. She later described Dinan's as a "jihadist" who was behaving in a "diabolical" and "criminal" manner.

In Hubbard's telling, she was the "soul of the Shift Network," and Dinan was furious with her for cultivating the kind of vibrant partnership with Gafni that he himself wanted with her. When she refused to work with Dinan on the 2020 event, his rage exploded.

Dinan then went on to fire Hubbard from the Shift Network. He later emailed her Shift network students, attacking her for working with Gafni. He then refused her access to the same email addresses so that she could issue a reply.

Hubbard then became the co-board chair of the Center for Integral Wisdom in May 2016.

Emails and phone calls that took place throughout October 2015 indicate that Dinan initiated contact, directly or indirectly, with New York Times columnist Mark Oppenheimer, whose Christmas Eve article publicly initiated the most recent round of the smear against Gafni. Oppenheimer first emailed Gafni about the article on October 13th.

Oppenheimer represents authority, by virtue of his NY Times affiliation and publication record. He is known for taking down the Roshi of a famous New York Zen center. In terms of garnering public support for a cause, the NY Times is far more effective than a post on some obscure Jewish blog site. In this sense, Dinan exhibited a far greater strategic mind than his fellow organizers had in past efforts.

V. A FALSE PATTERN

*A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is still is putting on its shoes.*

—Mark Twain

*And that was before the Internet.*

—Warren Farrell

In mid-December, Oppenheimer contacted me with a request for the report that I wrote for Integral Institute in 2007 concerning the false complaints in Israel. I sent a summation of this report, but never received a reply or request for an interview or comment.

The 2006 complaints were not featured in his article. Oppenheimer simply ignored the fact that false complaints were made, ignored Lester and Ingber's connection, ignored the fact that they were reported as complaints registered to the police, and ignored the impact they had on Gafni and his colleagues.

Whether that was because he saw them as the fabrication they were, or because he had been enrolled—by Dinan, Lester, or Ingber—to focus on establishing a false pattern of repeated behavior instead, is impossible to say.

Regardless, the smear against Gafni adopted a darker tone. In this one article and the nearly 50 follow-up articles and posts made in the subsequent 3 months, the false claims against Gafni intensified in their malice. In some of their key lines, the claims against Gafni changed from accusations of sexual harassment to actual crimes of rape, pedophilia, and child molestation.

These articles gave the consistent and self-evidently intentional impression of newly revealed claims that Gafni, an adult, is now involved with minors. This became a core facet of the smear. Gafni received numerous inquiries asking what happened—all of which assumed that he had recently been involved with teenagers and it was just coming to light. Most of the people who were exposed to these articles did not bother to call. They have likely just written him off—again, the purpose of the smear.
These seemingly new claims are based on painfully distorted stories from 31 and 36 years ago that were first publicized in 2004 by Gary Rosenblatt in the Jewish Week. Gafni had responded to these stories many years ago. They were recycled here to establish the sense of an ongoing pattern of behavior, furthering the present smear campaign. The stories involve two women, now in their late forties and fifties, Sara Kabakov and Judy Mitzner.

**Sara Kabakov**

Kabakov was recruited to take part in the 2016 smear. She published an article on January 13 in the Jewish Forward that speaks of her "alleged molestation, starting at age 13, by former Rabbi and spiritual guru, Marc Gafni."45

Curiously, most articles that reported on the Kabakov story have failed to mention that Gafni was 19, a recent high school graduate, when he met Kabakov. He started dating Kabakov, when she was 14, sometime around Christmas in 1979. Her birthday is Nov. 30th.

It’s important to note here that Gafni was not a rabbi, or a guru, or a 55-year-old man at the time. However, numerous articles—taking as their starting point Oppenheimer’s misleading report—have explicitly claimed that Gafni was Kabakov’s rabbi or spiritual guru. Gafni was 19 when he met Kabakov, a fact that she herself has confirmed. He was neither a guru nor a rabbi or even a rabbinical student, as has been claimed. However, this has not stopped the spread of this canard.

It’s grotesquely convenient to leave such details out when telling this story. It makes the pedophile narrative so much easier to perpetrate. It is also worth noting that Gafni states he had no idea that there was such a discrepancy between his memory of what happened and Kabakov’s retelling—until almost twenty-five years after their relationship had ended.

Gafni recently published a response to Kabakov’s claims.46 Their stories diverge greatly. Kabakov states that from the start of their relationship Gafni was “grooming her into being silent and fearful.” Gafni remembers a friendship that turned into a 6-month romance. He recounts a relationship that included a few instances of “teenage necking,” a version of events that is validated by polygraph, as I’ll discuss below.

Gafni would stay at her parents’ house on Shabbat. Kabakov claims that “he started coming into my room after I had fallen asleep, and waking me up. I remember clearly that when he tried to touch me, I pushed him away, repeatedly. I remember saying ‘No!’ over and over again.”

In her Forward article, Kabakov does not provide details of the contact between her and Gafni; she simply refers to it as “molestation,” letting the reader fill in the relevant details depending on, I assume, their degree of dislike for Gafni.

Interestingly, 75% of this article is identical to the statement she made in 2004 to blogger Luke Ford.47 In that telling however, she is much more graphic. She describes an exaggerated and specifically detailed story of abuse. It is noteworthy that this claim, as well as the graphic description, which should be the most damaging, is left out in Kabakov’s most recent telling of the story. Is she trying to spare Gafni some additional degree of embarrassment? Doubtful. Or is her story changing for other, deeper, reasons?

Again, Gafni tells of several instances of “teenage necking,” which he described as follows: “based on all of the verbal exchanges between us, there was no indication—not even an iota of an indication—that our contact was anything less than fully mutual and an expression of our love.” In both Kabakov’s and Gafni’s most recent recounting, there were no oral or genital sexual relations, yet claims of rape persist all over the Internet.

Kabakov writes that Gafni expressed remorse and did teshuvah (ritual repentance) after each encounter. Gafni concurs, saying that he ultimately broke up with Kabakov because “at 19, [he] did not know how to resolve the contradiction between [his] actions and what [he] was being taught [in Jewish orthodoxy] was immutable divine law.” Jewish law forbids any physical contact before marriage.

According to Gafni, the fact that he was 19 and she was 14, and therefore a minor, was just not in their awareness at the time. These distinctions were never discussed between them and indeed never occurred to either of them 36 years ago.

Several months after they broke-up, Gafni reports receiving a love letter from Kabakov “affirming that we were each other’s one true love, speaking of the depth of our love, that we were intended for each other, and that it would be tragic for us not to spend our lives together.” The letter indicated that at the time of their relationship, it was experienced by both of them as a positive, loving experience.

Kabakov denies writing such a letter, but Gafni took a polygraph confirming both the existence of the letter48 and the nature of their sexual contact.49 He responded to the
following questions: (1) Regarding Sara Kabakov, have you ever had sexual intercourse with her? (2) Did you ever masturbate Sara? (3) Have you ever had oral or anal sex with Sara? (4) After your relationship with Sara was over, did she write you that you were her one true love? And, (5) After your relationship with Sara was over, did she write you that you were meant to be together forever? Dr. Barland concluded that the probability of deception was less than .01 and that Gafni had answered truthfully.

What are we left to conclude? We have the case of two competing stories—a classic he-said she-said, with one story backed by polygraph. I understand that it’s politically incorrect to question the first-person narrative of an alleged abuse victim, but how might have Kabakov arrived at her story?

In this regard, Gafni’s response raises some compelling questions. He notes that in a statement Kabakov made in 2004 to blogger Luke Ford, she said, “After talking with counselors, lawyers, and professionals who advise and counsel sexual perpetrators, I learned that in 99% of cases, people who compulsively sexually abuse girls or women, especially those who were abused themselves as children, don’t stop.”

These lines were removed from the 2016 article. Why might that be the case? Do they, as Gafni argues, ‘indicate too directly that these ‘counselors, lawyers, and professionals’ may have played a significant role in helping Kabakov ‘understand’ [that is, interpret] her experience or ‘tell’ her story?”

Kabakov certainly has learned the language of the victim narrative. “Grooming,” “brainwashed into silence,” “child predators target families in crisis,” and “breaking the silence” all tell of a learned victim vocabulary.

This argument might seem entirely too convenient, especially coming from Gafni, but it starts to make a bit of sense once we learn that a woman named Vicki Polin was one of her counselors.

Why is this relevant? Polin once ran a site called the Awareness Center, which collected stories about rabbis accused of abuse. In a 2004 Israeli article, an unnamed rabbi was quoted as saying that Kabakov had come to Polin, and that he and Rabbi Yosef Blau—a key, long-time detractor of Gafni’s and one time board member of Polin’s—“helped [her] through [her] silence.” Moreover, Polin herself references this process in a blog she wrote in 2006, a few years after first connecting with Kabakov in early 2004. According to Polin, who offers support and counsel to “survivors of sexual abuse,” she worked with Kabakov regarding her relationship with Gafni over a period of what appears to be at least several years.

Polin’s credibility is shaky at best. She has baselessly claimed that Gafni is “attracted to pre-pubescent boys,” and, in the late eighties, she appeared on Oprah claiming to have been part of a Satanic cult that sacrificed babies. She claimed that she was raped on Torah scrolls, was forced to murder an infant, was impregnated multiple times by her father, and developed multiple personality disorder because of this abuse. In the late eighties, the FBI investigated and generally dismissed claims concerning such Satanic cults.

Polin later claimed to have recovered these memories through therapy, which, in the late eighties and early nineties, was encouraged by many therapists as recovery of “repressed memories.”

This was apparently instigated by Polin’s therapist, Tina Grossman, and by an ex-detective turned Satanic ritualistic abuse “expert,” Jerry Simandl. A close relation of Polin’s alleged in an unnamed affidavit that they had used Vicki to prove a theory of suppressed memory syndrome. While I cannot verify the veracity of these claims, it’s not entirely unlikely that Polin may have “treated” Kabakov in a similar manner, helping her to “learn” that what she once thought was young love was actually systematic abuse.

What’s more likely? That Gafni is a predator or that Kabakov learned to recast her memory of the relationship? The truth is that we’ll never know beyond the shadow of a doubt. But it’s unlikely that Gafni could game a leading polygraph expert, and it’s pretty well documented that Polin is more than a bit questionable in the credibility department.

By all reasonable standards—including psychological evaluation by some of the most credible experts—Gafni is not a predator. Moreover, as Gafni pointed out in his response to Kabakov, her story has changed dramatically over time. In 2004, she told at least one reporter (Rosenblatt of the Jewish Week) that Gafni had sexual relations with her, but then told another reporter the same year (Sherri Makover-Balikov from Maariz), that he did not. The texture of her story—which is a recounting of a few events from 1979—has changed significantly since 2004, lending further credence to the polygraph-supported version of events.
The above question however is rarely asked, and that’s the larger issue here. Given the already established smear, many people simply bought into the false pattern and concluded that Gafni is a predator or worse.

However, there is another group, mostly comprised, I suspect, of people like the friends and colleagues I have spoken to about this very topic, who readily admit to having had similar relationships with underage girls when they were over the age of majority. Because of their own experience, they do not buy into the rape narrative, but they do assume that Gafni is a scumbag—why else would there be so many stories?

This is exactly how a smear is designed to work and is a prime example of the impact of false pattern recognition. Even when Gafni admits that a relationship with a freshman in high school was inappropriate for a 19 year old, it doesn’t count for much; his character is already too tarnished.

The nature of false pattern recognition is to cherry-pick events, string them together and create the image of a pattern—or in this case, a person—that does not actually exist.

The truth of who a person is in relationship is all about proportion. False pattern distorts proportion more than anything else. Everyone who presently works with Gafni, affirms that he works with dozens of people in the context of loving and supportive relationships.

To create a false pattern, simply pick out the mistakes or failed relationships in a person’s life and then distort and exaggerate them. An Internet-driven smear campaign can then be used to amplify and perpetuate a story based on distorted these “facts,” which are given a weight disproportionate to the many examples of successful relationships and ethical choices in the person’s life. If assertions of a (false) pattern combine with the tendency of most people to believe what they read online, and thus to fail to cross-check facts, it’s easy for the false pattern to take hold, becoming the ostensibly “true” version of reality.

For example, the claims concerning the events in 2006 and the 1980s are often used as evidence to support the veracity of each other—timelines be damned. Furthermore, in the 2016 smear, Kabakov was actively recruited. She was featured as a heroine stopping a serial abuser, intensifying her own questionable narrative, and reinforcing the pattern being perpetrated by the smear itself.

Maybe Gafni’s decision at age 19 to have a relationship with a freshman in high school set her up to re-experience the relationship years later in a distorted and painful way. If so, he should be held accountable for that, but only to the extent that any 19-year-old would be held accountable for the same, given all mitigating factors and the era in which their relationship took place.

If we indeed hold him accountable—as he himself certainly does—for this relationship, it doesn’t make her version of the story undeniably true; nor does it make all the subsequent claims more likely to be true, which again has been the effect, and the point, of this smear.

Judy Mitzner
This false pattern effect is amplified when the story about Judy Mitzner is added to the list of allegations. At 16, Mitzner took part in a Jewish Youth Program where Gafni, then 24, was the youth director. She reports that her home life with her adopted parents was rough at the time—her mother had fallen and broken her hip and her father was recovering from a quadruple bypass—so she went to live temporarily in Gafni’s house.

In a 2004 response to Ford, Mitzner describes a total of two encounters with Gafni. She alleges that he came into her room and touched her above and below the waist and forced her to help him climax. She also claims that after these encounters, he regularly placed prank calls to her and breathed heavily on the phone. Then, she claims, he took out a personal ad in a gay men’s magazine using her address so that she would receive sexual pictures of other men.

Gafni denies nearly all these claims but acknowledges that he and Mitzner had a brief one-time encounter that involved no sexual intercourse or penetration.

He describes Mitzner as a mutual participant who came on to him aggressively, requesting during their encounter that he have intercourse with her. He refused and stopped the encounter. Again, his version of these events was subjected to polygraph examination and no deception was indicated.

In regard to his actions, Gafni reports “deep regret for my lack of judgement and restraint.” He acknowledges that he “was Judy’s youth advisor—I had primary responsibility for the setting of boundaries, so I am responsible for that mistake.”

In the days following their encounter, Mitzner told several friends and colleagues that her relationship with Gafni was ongoing and that he was going to leave his wife so that they could be together. This story got back to Gafni, who
affirmed again to Mitzner that what had transpired between them could not happen again, and that he was not going to have a relationship with her.

In hindsight, Gafni acknowledges that he could have handled the situation more delicately; he realizes that Mitzner took his actions as rejection. Mitzner then approached a colleague of Gafni’s who took the issue to Rabbi Joseph Blau, who worked at the university where the youth group’s offices were housed.

According to Gafni, Blau and his wife were well known for intensely disliking him. When he heard what had happened, Gafni approached a woman who was a respected feminist educator and a good friend of both himself and the Blaus’. He told her exactly what had transpired between himself and Mitzner, along with how Mitzner had distorted the story. He asked her to approach Blau to see if they could meet in order to create appropriate resolution. After contacting Blau and his wife, this educator called Gafni back and reported that “Blau hates you. . .particularly his wife does.”

To complicate matters, Gafni was a student of another rabbi, Steven Riskin, with whom Blau had significant animus at the time. This was well known in the community. The educator told him that, “Blau wants to use this story to destroy you. Given Mitzner’s distortions and Blau’s venom the only thing you can do is to move on with your life.” Based on this and other advice he had solicited, Gafni painfully concluded that there was no reasonable way dialogue with Blau or to appropriately heal the situation.

The fact that Gafni was brash, charismatic, irreverent, and already considered to be somewhat heretical, didn’t help to further the relationship between him and Blau. A few weeks later, Gafni encountered Blau in the halls of Yeshiva University and asked him to discuss the situation. They had a sharp exchange. Blau refused to discuss the situation, lost his temper, and took a swing at Gafni, telling him that he was going to “bring him down.” Blau later connected Mitzner to Polin.

Once again, we have a situation of competing stories that are impossible to reconcile. One is backed by polygraph and one is not. Further complicating the matter is the fact that, in a recorded conversation with Gafni’s team members, a source who had a close personal relationship to Mitzner said that she thought Mitzner’s claims against Gafni “raised a lot of red flags” and were in all probability, “bullshit.”

This person also said that Mitzner “admitted to lying about Gafni after he rebuffed her advances and refused to leave his wife for her.” These details had not been made public, suggesting that the admission could only have come from Mitzner herself.

This same source provided information revealing that Mitzner has been hospitalized for “depression and sex addiction,” that she had “solicited sex off Craigslist,” that she was “collecting disability payments while working,” and that she admitted to having “slept with many rabbis,” along with many other personal details that are frankly too graphic to disclose. Another source who was personally close to Mitzner reached out to Gafni’s team, saying that Mitzner had very recently exposed herself to the source’s husband and son-in-law.

Much of this material suggests that Mitzner’s credibility is dicey at best; still, there is little doubt that this episode is Gafni’s most significant mistake—something he himself acknowledges and deeply regrets. It’s important to recognize that this was a one-time mistake. Gafni stopped the interaction immediately and refused her request for intercourse or for a continued relationship.

The nature of Gafni’s encounters with Kabakov and Mitzner need to be considered in light of the established meanings of the labels that have been attributed to him and not the preferences of smear organizers or the feelings of detractors.

Neither of these relationships involved rape, statutory or otherwise, nor could they reasonably be described as child molestation, which is defined as sexual acts directed at children 13 years of age or younger. Nor is it pedophilia, a psychological term which concerns sexual desires directed at children under 13. And limited physical contact with a 14-year-old does not make Gafni—who was 19, not 55, at the time—a sexual predator, as many have suggested. Such claims are simply loaded rhetoric.

Gafni refuted Kabakov’s story in 2004 and many of the articles written about him in the last ten years correctly cite him as admitting to the mistake with Mitzner. (He has not, however, admitted to her version of the event, which is rife with distortions.) Yet, the stories about Kabakov and Mitzner continue to resurface. This is not incidental. It is tactical. The need for a believable false pattern was strategically crucial to forwarding this smear.

The extent of Gafni’s mistake was immaterial, as the cultural listening that was judging it—a listening that’s been tempered by over a decade of clerical sex abuse scandals—
has been largely unconcerned with statutory definitions, fact checking, or corroborating or exculpatory evidence.

The fact that Gafni admitted having physical contact with these two women has been cited as justification for calling him guilty of pedophilia, molestation, and rape. This is absurd. By soliciting an “authority” like the NY Times to allege such crimes, Dinan, Ingber, and Lester established a false pattern and moved forward their long-sought character assassination. But without the final component of an effective smear campaign—a culture of regressive, colosseum justice—their efforts wouldn’t have been nearly as effective.

VI. CULTURE OF COLOSSEUM JUSTICE

I once said, ‘If you want to liberate a society, all you need is the Internet.’ I was wrong. Today I believe if we want to liberate society, we first need to liberate the Internet.

—Wael Ghonim, Egyptian Google employee who helped launch the Arab Spring

I’ve made several references to the cultural listening into which a smear is spoken. Perhaps the most essential component of a successful smear is the degree to which it can engage a culture defined by what we might call “colosseum justice,” a culture where easy outrage can fuel gleeful Internet jihads, witch hunts, and takedowns.

In 2016, Lester anonymously published three blog posts on Gafni. The second, called To the Woman Who Slept with My Husband, was published on January 26 by Heriva.

The post, filled with vitriol—“If I had it my way, every morsel of guilt that rests on your shoulders would be hoisted squarely upon his sorry neck til it breaks,” she writes—makes what has probably been the most regressive and morally reprehensible claim of this entire smear. It speaks directly into the listening which has prosecuted this decade-long smear.

Toward the end of her post, in which she infantilizes both herself and everyone else that Gafni has ever had a relationship with, she laments that Gafni’s behaviors can’t be tried in a known “court of man.” Instead, she claims that, this hearing (referring to her post) is now happening in the “jury box set up in the international courthouse known as The Internet.”

The international courthouse known as the Internet? Is she f*cking serious? When contemplating the benefits of the Internet, this is the last thing that comes to mind as a positive benefit of this technology.

If you are rightfully enraged by abuse, and are searching for a likely poster child to take it out on, the Internet allows you to weigh in and cast a vote for the prosecution of anyone who ends up in the crosshairs of our “takedown culture.” And, what’s best, you can do it all under the veil of anonymity. This is exactly what Lester “attempts” to do here.

But even if you do not choose anonymity, if you use the “courthouse of the Internet,” you can certainly choose immunity from accountability to any form of due process or minimal degree of fairness. You can garner accolades for “breaking the silence” in front of a cheering, though often ignorant, Internet mob.

A Frenzied Mob

It is critical to scrutinize who is involved in this particular mob and who is not. Gafni works with dozens of people who, by their own accounts, honor, respect, and love him. Their sentiments are well captured in dozens of blog posts that were published in March 2016 in a statement from the Center for Integral Wisdom published in March 2016.

As these testimonials show, the overwhelming majority of the people who have interacted with Gafni almost daily over the past several years are firmly supporting him. Unsurprisingly, the attacking mob is made up largely of people who do not know Gafni at all, or who have significant social ties with the organizers of the smear campaign or the false complaints, or their friends.

None of them have checked facts or examined any of the evidence presented here. Many have not seen Gafni or talked to him for a decade or more. During that time, the time he went silent following the 2006 complaints, the demonizing meme was intentionally crafted and spread by Lester, Ingber and their colleagues.

Gafni’s peers—both rabbinic and from many spiritual communities—have been fed on this very same diet of false allegations and demonization. Problematically, the false claims have gone largely unchallenged by Gafni, who for many years—wrongly, I believe, took the high road and refused to respond.

Importantly, Gafni has shifted his position on this. Several CIW board members have recently been made aware that smear organizers are upping their victim recruitment efforts. They are aiming to create a series of “victim voices” videos to further this negative meme.
In light of this, Gafni has made a commitment to respond directly to any claim that has been made or will be made in the future. In his words, “I feel in complete integrity around all of these issues and now realize that taking what I thought was the high road, was in fact out of integrity.”

Presently, a set of video and written responses, directed at each individual who has thus far made a public claim, have been prepared or are in preparation.

The demonizing meme created a climate in which it was relatively easy for the smear organizers to foment a mob. They drew upon the very same false and negative meme that they had cultivated a five and ten years earlier. This points directly to the insidious nature of the orchestrated smear which, according to Lester, is heroically culminating in a trial by Internet.

The frightening proposition of a trial by Internet is made possible by the degradation of truth in the information age. Katharine Viner wrote a stirring article for The Guardian in which she observes that, “When knowledge was delivered by means of the printed page, readers were encouraged to believe in stable, settled, and vetted truths.”

But, she points out, with the rise of the Internet, and in particular social media, the currency of fact has been radically debased. This leaves it up to the reader to decide whether a given fact is true. Without reliable information or a desire or even ability to conduct research, most readers make that determination based on mood or instinct.

As Viner notes, “when a fact begins to resemble whatever you feel is true, it becomes very difficult to tell the difference between facts that are true and ‘facts’ that are not.” This is less of an issue if the facts in question concern some stupid viral story launched solely to generate clicks—not the case if the facts concerns someone’s life and livelihood.

When the facts in question are used to establish the so-called truths upon which the “jury box of the Internet” adjudicate someone’s life, the issue of technology’s impact on truth takes on a much darker tone. The diminishing status of truth in the information age almost wholly enables the trial-by-Internet perpetrated by smears like the one Gafni is facing. And it drives the culture of regressive justice that allows such trials to operate.

The final component of the anatomy of a smear shows up as a double-sided pattern. First, we see a culture too eager to participate in “colosseum justice,” and second, we see how the distorted calculus of an Internet mob unabashedly repeats lies as truths, and then administers a regressive form of justice. Both these factors are operating here. Above all other factors, they give this smear traction, but they do so while pointing directly at how we can opt-out of future smears that rely on similar tactics.

While many of his detractors will likely appreciate a comparison of Gafni to a gorilla, I still insist that the fall out over the death of Harambe is one of the more recent notable examples of Internet mob action.

In addition to online harassment and shaming, more than 400K people have signed a petition calling for the Michelle Gregg to “be held accountable for the lack of supervision and negligence that caused Harambe to lose his life.” The signers of this petition “actively encourage an investigation of the child’s home environment in the interests of protecting the child and his siblings from further incidents of parental negligence that may result in serious bodily harm or even death.”

Like the originators of the anti-Gregg petition, Ingber created a petition about Gafni. Even though only 3500 people have signed it, it is offered in the name of over 100 rabbis, the majority of whom haven’t met Gafni and likely have done little, if any, fact checking. Not one signer has talked to Gafni in the last 10 years, and none seem likely to be aware of the hidden motivations and involvement of folks like Ingber, Lester, and Dinan. But that’s exactly how a mob works.

In the anti-Gafni petition, the signers claim, “we do not constitute a panel of judges nor do we seek retribution,” yet they “share this statement in order to prevent future harm to those who may be exposed to him, and as a protest against any individuals, organizations, or institutions that support or endorse him as a teacher or leader.” I am not sure what type of retribution they are not seeking, but the attempted destruction of a person’s life, life work, intellectual and spiritual contributions, relationships, alliances, and livelihood seems to be an attempt at retribution. These are typical—and in this case, clearly intentional, impacts of such an Internet mob.

Internet mobs are amorphous. In the case of smear campaigns, what seems like a spontaneous joining of forces, is often a strange mix of purposeful actors—allies in the smear—joining with random followers swayed by what looks like exposed misconduct.
The players intermix in a nebulous upswell of outrage and anger. In some instances, the mob is intentionally inflamed. Early this year, Dinan penned a public letter, signed by 25 teachers, leaders, and authors, calling for the community to join them in refusing to endorse Gafni as a teacher.

Very few of the signatories have ever met Gafni and none of them have engaged in dialogue or fact-checking with Gafni or anyone on his team, despite their claim to have “investigated” the issues. One prominent signatory recently indicated to someone who reported the following to me in confidence: He said that he “liked Gafni,” had checked no facts, had no real idea what he was signing, and had felt coerced into signing it.

In other instances, the mob’s allies appear to act of their own accord. Consider Nancy Levine, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere to orchestrate a series of articles against Gafni. She has never met him. There is little doubt, however, that she was in some way enrolled by smear organizers to systematically send self-referencing, distorted emails to the boards, funders, and executives of high-profile organizations and persons associated with Gafni.

As of August, Levine calls herself a freelance journalist (though she has written no journalism aside from her attacks on Gafni) as she attempts to monger fear with the employers of Gafni’s colleagues and students.

Others who have spoken into the smear include the well-known spiritual author and teacher, Andrew Harvey, who derives an income from Dinan’s Shift Network. Whether persuaded or coerced by peer pressure, Harvey has claimed —on no evidence whatever—that Gafni exercises nefarious occult powers. Are we to believe that he uses his occult powers only to manipulate women, but can’t muster them to stop the smear against him? The logic of Harvey’s claim, if one can even call it that, has moved from the bizarre and absurd to the tragic.

Then there are folks like Devaa Haley Mitchell, wife of Dinan, who wrote and later deleted a condemnatory blog post, which cited as evidence material that we know to have been fabricated by smear organizers. For example, she cites Gafni’s Wikipedia page, which was edited at the start of the 2016 smear, to suggest that Gafni, as an adult, has admitted “to having sexual relationships with 14-year-old girls and to molesting a 13 year old.”

She further cites an article in the Huffington post which was written by a woman named Carolyn Baker, another self-styled “freelance journalist.” In this article, Baker says “Gafni is not like the rest of us”. . .he has no conscience. She then calls him a sociopath. Baker has never met Gafni, has checked no facts, and appeared suddenly at the beginning of the smear campaign.

When her article was published, a member of Gafni’s team called her to offer access to material for fact checking. She hung up the phone as soon as she heard Gafni’s name. Yet Devaa Mitchell does not hesitate to cite such manufactured stories in order to demonstrate that the smear is true. This kind of deception is called “dog piling sources.” You create a source which tells a lie, and then you cite that same source as evidence that the lie is true—propagandist tactics at their most fundamental.

Then there are others, like Robb Smith, CEO of Integral Life, an organization that previously partnered with Gafni. Smith, who seems driven by an aspiration to be seen as a consummate community leader, turns to spreading lies, disseminating false information, and stoking anger and resentment on Facebook. He collaterally attacks the reputations of mutual colleagues (associated with both him and Gafni), and then wonders why those colleagues want nothing to do with him.

Finally, there is the host of nameless followers, who comment on the posts made by others. These comments are typically aggressive, dehumanizing, objectifying and often anonymous. One commenter said, “this is fun. . .glad to be talking about this. It is better than looking at news about global warming or the GOP.” Another said, “if you see Gafni, put a bullet in his head,” and a third suggested “he should have a baseball bat shoved up his ass.” Mob justice at its finest.

As my colleague and CIW Academic Director, Zak Stein, reflected, “the actual people involved have been transformed from factual reality into abstract spectacle. Total strangers have been making use of other people’s tragedies simply to
fuel personal arguments and agendas and to engage in acts of conspicuous self-display.” In this sense, Internet mobs are vicious, mendacious, and self-aggrandizing.

Those with alternate or differing perspectives—like Gafni’s friends and supporters—often stay out of these Internet conversations entirely. Reasonable questions and countervailing perspectives, in the words of LA Times columnist Meghan Daum, aren’t only pointless but are also threatening in such an atmosphere. As she says, “The very act of questioning someone’s outrage is often taken as an act of aggression, one that just leads to further outrage.”

Mob Justice

Most troubling, however, is the nature of the “justice” that Internet mobs seek. Justice typically implies a baseline degree of fairness afforded to all, including the accused, regardless of the alleged crime.

Using largely objective factors such as the impact on society, comparison to other crimes, and the degree to which the charges are supported by evidence, modern justice systems evaluate alleged crimes, along with the punishment they deserve. The results of such assessments are subjected to numerous checks, balances and other safeguards—including arraignments, juries, and appeals. Most importantly, they start with the presumption of innocence.

Mob justice is concerned with none of this. It denies the accused rights in almost every aspect of this process while disparaging the legal maxims upon which it is based. The accused are rarely allowed to explain their case, and there is immediate presumption of guilt and a frenzied cry for excessive punishment.

Mobs determine the severity of the crime based on subjective factors, which, according to Max Fisher, writing at Vox, depend upon “how likable they find the victim, and the degree to which the alleged crime fits into their preconceived beliefs...not to the crime’s impact on society, but rather the degree to which punishing the crime will feel good for the punishers.”

Fisher continues: “The formal justice system derives its decision-making from written laws and generations of precedent; it is adjudicated in a highly formal and regulated environment...Mob justice, meanwhile, is derived from the collective feelings of whoever happens to be participating. The mob’s case law is limited to whatever its participants happen to remember and care about in that moment.”

This in-the-moment adjudication based on collective feeling is the primary reason why Lester’s desire to adjudicate the Gafni situation in the “jury box set up in the international courthouse of the Internet” is painfully flawed, dangerous, and deeply regressive. The international courthouse of the Internet has no regard for due process, which has been at the heart of all modern justice systems with roots in English common law. The signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 was the first to codify that a free man shall not be taken, imprisoned, exiled, ruined or dispossessed of land or property except by “legality judicio parium suorum” or “legume terrae,” that is, by the “lawful judgement of his peers” or by the “law of the land.”

This protection, echoed in the Fifth Amendment, embodies the principle of fairness that due process has aimed for centuries to protect. In 1970, in Goldberg v. Kelly the US supreme court ruled on the elements of procedural due process to include: (1) adequate notice, (2) an opportunity to be heard, (3) the right to present evidence, (4) confrontation of opposing witnesses, (5) the right to cross-examine those witnesses, (6) disclosure of all adverse evidence, (7) the right to an attorney, (8) a decision based solely on the evidence produced at the hearing, (9) a statement of the reasons for the decision, and (10) an impartial decision maker.

In Gafni’s situation none of these elements have been met or even approximated. They have been denied simply because mob justice is incapable of protecting or promoting the fundamental fairness due process preserves. Mob justice is ultimately unconcerned with fairness.

In the words of Fisher, “It treats justice as a sort of random lightning bolt from the sky: one is reminded of the vengeful but arbitrary gods of Greek or Roman lore.” Mob justice has replaced due process with vengeance. Or, as Yale Professor Thomas Pogge noted in his response to his
accusers, "At its worst, trial by Internet is as haphazard and unfair as stonings in Afghanistan."74

Mob justice has replaced the procedural and substantive affordances of due process with a regression toward colosseum justice. If the mob gives a “pollice verso,” (a turned thumb) the accused is killed; a “pollice compresso” (compressed thumb; or thumb inside fist) and they are spared.

It’s wild to note that the image of the “turned thumb” is still a present-day cultural force, codified in the “like” icon on social media. If the Facebook mob is deciding your fate, enough “turned thumbs” and vengeance is dispensed.

Wilhem Reich, Austrian psychoanalyst and protégé to Freud, spoke eloquently of this type of mob vengeance, which he called the emotional plague. For Reich, this sort of mob justice is used to murder the figures whom we find larger-than-life or subversive to our smallness. The quote below captures with startling accuracy the details of this smear campaign.

When the Emotional Plague strikes its victim, it strikes hard and fast. It strikes without mercy or regard for truth or facts or anything else except one thing: to kill the victim.

There are public prosecutors who act as true lawyers, establishing the truth by evidence from many sources. There are other prosecutors whose only goal of the prosecution is killing the victim, no matter whether right or wrong, just or unjust . . .

When the emotional plague strikes, its victim is exposed to everybody’s eyes and judgment; all accusations against it are spread out in full daylight. The victim stands naked before its judges like a deer in the open clearing in a forest ready to be shot by the hunter well hidden in the bushes. The real accuser rarely appears on the scene, his identity is kept secret until very shortly before the final kill. There exists no law to punish the sniper from ambush.

To be standing in the middle of an open clearing in a dense forest, widely visible to everyone, and to be shot at from the bushes on all sides is the situation of the victim of the emotional plague, no matter what form it has.

Mob justice has replaced the procedural and substantive affordances of due process with a regression toward colosseum justice.

When the emotional plague strikes, justice quietly recedes, weeping. There is nothing in the ancient books for justice to call upon to prevail. The sentence of death is perfected before the investigation of the crime. The true motive of the prosecution never meets the cleaning force of God’s daylight. The reason for the killing remains in the bushes well hidden from anybody’s eyes.

When you meet the accused but not the accuser, the charge but not the defense, the exact point of formal law but not the true reason for the accusation, you are dealing with a killing by the plague.

When the plague kills, it kills for wretched reasons. Therefore, to assure the murder, it will not permit weighing accusation against the true, full being of the victim. It will tear down the victim’s honor, besmirch every bit of innocent intention or act; it will pronounce innocuous details in a tone and with a slant of intonation which is meant to kill the last vestige of love or esteem for the victim in the hearts of most devoted friends.75

VII. FROM BEHIND THE VEIL OF IGNORANCE

The sense of justice is continuous with the love of mankind.
—John Rawls

Smear campaigns flourish in cultures of regressive justice. Assuming that the other smear criteria are at least partially present—a suitable and susceptible target who is subversive to conventional values, a fabricated history of alleged indiscretion, and an authoritative presentation of a false pattern of behavior—the frenzied mob is left unchecked to adjudicate claims and dispense its vengeance at will.

In campaigns like the one against Gafni, the false claims made against the target will rarely enter the formal justice system. They are left to languish in the nether regions between formal and informal justice, where few safeguards exist to influence the manner of proceedings, and there is nothing but decency or a sense of fairness to guide appropriate action.

Can we rely on our inbuilt sense of justice as fairness to generate a set of principles for conducting our behavior in situations like this? The answer to this important question is “yes,” if we take up, for assistance, a thought experiment
advanced by preeminent American moral and political philosopher John Rawls.

By adopting Rawls’ original position, we act, as free and equal persons, from behind the “veil of ignorance,” where all parties are deprived of the knowledge of which role they will take in the situation.  

We do not know our personal characteristics, social roles, or our natural assets, abilities, intelligences, or fundamental interests. Imagine that it is 2002; all of us, acting from behind the veil, do not know which role we’ll play in this situation—we could be Gafni, an alleged victim, a supporter, detractor, or bystander.

We also don’t know anything about our personal abilities or place in society. All we know is that these same allegations and the resulting smear are set to unfold over the next 15 years. Rawls’ thought experiment asks us to generate a set of rules or principles which apply to all of us as we proceed without knowing who we’ll be in the story.

These principles must ensure fairness. Once the veil is lifted, even the worst off amongst us must occupy a position acceptable to any of us were we to occupy that very same position.

From behind the veil of ignorance, what principles would we generate? I’ll propose a non-exhaustive list of five principles, not because it is appropriate that I alone determine these, but simply by way of illustrating how this thought experiment might work and, more importantly, to encourage this type of discussion as we all move forward in culture with this or any other smear.

First, we agree to engage in responsible speech. We will resist dehumanization and demonization, of both the accused and of victims. We allow for space in our discourse for competing perspectives; we don’t attack them or marginalize them simply for being contrary to our own.

We move to dialogue and check facts before we take action against an individual or group, particularly when faced with complaints or allegations of problematic behavior. We authentically consider the impact of our actions on others before we speak into a public space, and we take responsibility for the impact of those speech acts.

Second, we agree to differentiate the personal and the political. We respect these domains without collapsing or conflating them. We understand that the personal is indeed political but that it is also differentiated from it and involves the perspective of actors whose values may be different than our own.

We recognize the possibility for what Rawls called overlapping consensus, where even seemingly irreconcilable conceptions of justice can find common ground in compatible judgments on specific issues. We recognize that this is possible, and we move intentionally to discover the overlap, not to destroy, discount, or politicize our differences.

Third, we agree to treat even those people who have done wrong with a baseline level of respect and compassion. We recognize that the measure of a just society is best seen in how they treat those people who have fallen short of their mutual expectations. We honor the humanity in each of us, and we meet it with compassion, even if faced by its darkest expressions.

Fourth, we don’t assume that a popular narrative is true just because it is popular. We embrace the possibility of innocence until guilt is established and we do so not as a function of formal justice but out of an authentic epistemic responsibility for how we make meaning and establish shared truth.

Fifth and finally, we agree to hold our leaders to a higher level of transparency and privacy, particularly when they engage in unorthodox practices in their public and private lives. We recognize that this does not mean that they disclose everything to everyone, but we expect that they enlist trusted advisors—compromised of the most appropriate people for their specific situation—with whom they share appropriately and fully.

And we expect that these advisors will work actively—with these principles in mind—to preemptively ensure the safety and integrity of all the work done between our leaders and any individual or group with whom they work.

From an original position behind the veil of ignorance, are these principles of justice ones that we can get behind? Do they ensure that, once the veil is lifted, the worst off amongst us, however we define that, find themselves in a position acceptable to all of us at this time?

If not, it is imperative that we generate their replacements and supplements. It’s the only way that we can claw our way out of the colosseum justice that currently dominates our takedown culture.
Unfortunately, none of the first four principles are or have been active at any point during the smear campaign against Gafni. Had they been, perhaps there would have been a collective reduction in suffering—or perhaps we might even have avoided this debacle altogether. The fifth principle, as it turns out and as I’ll describe in a moment, has, to a large extent, been deployed by Gafni over the last five years.

VIII. THE PLAYBOOK FOR A SMEAR

*Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.*

–Cornel West

A few days before finalizing this article, I had a final interview with Gafni. I wanted to fact check a few remaining items, but I had two other intentions. First, I wanted to get his take on the five components of a smear, and second, I wanted see if he could get behind the fifth principle generated from my thought experiment.

Gafni pointed out that addressing the first question was part of the core mission of the Center for Integral Wisdom, which is committed to understanding how memes develop in society and how they can be positively evolved. He sent me a video response that he had prepared in response to the controversy. In this clip, he outlined 8 conditions and 6 steps that comprise what he called “the playbook for smear.” The conditions should sound familiar.

**The Eight Conditions**

First, you need a leader. A strong character or entrepreneur, someone who inspires others to participate in the creation of something big, something important.

Second, naturally, this person should be working at the leading edge of their profession, meaning that they are often thinking or acting from a step beyond their community of collaborators. This is needed because this dynamic creates a gap and in that gap there is a natural tension.

Third, this leader should be one who has a generally positive impact on the people they touch. Ninety percent ought to be drawn to them, while ten percent may have a neutral or negative experience.

Fourth, this 10% can be distilled into a group of disaffected people who form the basis for a smear. If this leader has worked with 4000 employees, there is a high probability that 40 of them had a negative experience, or can at least be convinced that they did. Perhaps they were passed over for promotion, or had a series of awkward encounters, or maybe even they were fired. Forty disaffected people is only one percent. Four hundred would be ten percent.

Fifth, on the surface this number of disaffected folks can come across as large, while statistically, the group is actually quite small. However, if you add condition five—the Internet—to the mix, then if just one or two of them want to bring about a lawsuit, or make claims of sexual harassment, they are easily and instantly connected to the other 40 disaffected people. Some of the disaffected will naturally know each other by virtue of being involved in the same professional or cultural networks, but the rest are easily connected to each other via the web. The Internet makes building a coalition of the disaffected a simple proposition.

Sixth, at least one of these people, likely the organizer, will be driven by malice, which will likely stem from what Rene Girard calls mimetic desire. Mimetic desire evokes the negative side of imitation. For Girard, humans naturally imitate the desires of others. If those desires overlap, and two people are pursuing the same goal or object, intense rivalry and conflict can emerge. Such rivalry is often characterized by malice and routinely results in some form of verbal or physical violence.

Seventh, because malice cannot admit of itself, it often pleads other motives. Typically, they claim to be motivated by the desire to protect victims, rather than desiring the prosecution of the alleged victimizers. The classic perpetrator disguises their motives as rescuer.

The eighth and final condition is sexuality. If this leader has even slightly stepped outside typical sexual conventions or norms, the entire process is amplified, and the smear is super-charged, fueled by society’s untransformed wounds around sexuality. With these conditions in place, a smear is likely to unfold through a playbook that has at least six steps.

**The Six Steps**

Step One: The smear gets started when a trauma or shock appears in the system. This can take several forms—a lawsuit against the leader or spate of public complaints. This is especially true when those complaints are filed, or are thought to be filed, with the police. That kind of complaint threatens the safety and freedom of the falsely accused.

Step Two: These complaints force the accused to go silent and expend a great deal of time and resources preparing a defense.
Step Three: The falsely accused responds from a place of fear. They seek advice from friends, colleagues, and a lawyer. If they are not careful, they take bad advice and simply fall on their swords in an effort to halt the virulent mob that is pressing in around them.

Step Four: The organizers gather victims via the Internet. A society of the disgruntled takes shape and new contrived victims come out of the woodwork, forming a victim group and furthering the negative narrative against the accused.

Step Five: Because the accused is still silent, there is no opposing voice, allowing the organizers to further demonize the accused in an attempt to complete their character assassination. Driven by social reward and social pressure, a collusion emerges, aligning narratives and blending them into one.

Step Six: The voices filled with the most invective and malice dominate the conversation, because they are the loudest and also the most motivated. These voices color others’ interpretations of their interactions with the accused. A negative prism of interpretation, as well as the rewards of social acceptance and approval, begin to further seed the appearance of new victims.

By way of summary, the parallels between Gafni’s frame and the central frame deployed in this article should be apparent. Each of the eight conditions have shown up throughout this discussion. Gafni is an adequate target. His natural audacity and post-conventional sexuality satisfy conditions 1 thru 4 and 8. The Internet’s role in the degradation of truth and the creation of a mob reflect condition 5. The underlying motives of Ingber, Lester, and Dinan reflect Gafni’s conditions 6 and 7.

In terms of the playbook, Gafni’s steps are specific to his situation, but are reasonably well reflected in the smear components covered here. Cohen’s and Elster’s false complaints, organized or supported by Ingber and Lester, were the shock to the system. Because of the threat of legal complaints, Gafni was forced to go silent, and the demonizing narrative grows in the vacuum of his presence and any countervailing narrative which would demand the checking of evidence.

Lester’s and Ingber’s efforts to gather the victims, together with Dinan’s efforts to further the demonization through the 2016 smear, reflect the final two steps. Their virulence became the defining prism which drove the smear and heavily influenced how many people defined their own experience or opinion of Gafni.

In final reflection, it’s interesting to note that two people coming at the same topic have largely converged on a similar series of conditions, steps, and components. This effort is notable to the extent that it is elucidating something of critical importance in our culture today. The phenomena of the Internet-driven smear has become an unfortunately prominent meme.

The act of elucidating the inner-workings of such a meme is essential for shifting our collective orientation to its tactics and methods. At stake is the evolution of public culture and the creation of a more just and ethical society.

Of arguably greater importance in evolving public culture are the principles of justice that guide our actions—not necessarily in response to a smear, but in order to prevent the emergence of a smear in the first place. In this respect, I asked Gafni to share his thoughts on the fifth principle outlined above. Again, this principle calls on leaders to submit to a higher level of transparency and privacy, particularly when they engage in unorthodox practices in their public and private lives, and to engage trusted advisors with whom they disclose appropriately and fully.

To me, this decision stands out clearly as a move in the right direction. It is a clear step toward acting from the place of a more universal principle of justice, one which seeks to more deeply safeguard the integrity of individuals and the community.

When discussing this with Gafni, he expressed his commitment to continue working with people in the areas of sexuality, love, and relationships. According to many, this is an area in which his teaching is seminal. His commitment to continue this work, despite the events of the last decade, is not, in my mind, an expression of foolhardiness. Rather,
it is a testament to his courage and his devotion to the integrity of his teaching.

In conclusion, I urge Gafni’s detractors—and the smear organizers in particular—to question the integrity and the alignment of their actions with their espoused motives. And, I offer another challenge to all who have been involved in this story: If we were going to do this over again from the start, and you didn’t know what role you would take, and you still wanted to protect future victims, as you claim—what principles of justice should guide your actions?

* * *
Over the years, CIW has attracted the likes of Ken Wilber, John Mackey, co-CEO of Whole Foods, Ben Jealous, Tony Robbins, Dave Logan, Michael Murphy, Michael Bernard Beckwith, Sally Kempton, Mariana Caplan, Tony Hsieh, Ariana Huffington, Jack Canfield, John Gray, Richard Barrett, Richard Schwartz, Elliot Ingersoll, Zachary Stein, Daniel Schmachtenberger, Jack Canfield, Warren Farrell, and dozens of others who collaborated with Gafni, contributed to Center programming, appeared at its events or served on its board. The Center’s first board chair, Rev. Sam Alexander, was followed by the famed trauma therapist, Lori Galperin (who is also Gafni’s partner). Galperin was succeeded by John Mackey, who successfully completed a four year term during which the Center’s activity noticeably increased. Kate Maloney co-chaired with Mackey, who was recently succeeded by the leading evolutionary philosopher, Barbara Marx Hubbard. CIW is producing leading-edge thought in several key fields including, education, mental health, sexuality, relationships, and most importantly, the creation of a new narrative of cultural meaning that suggests a transformation in personal identity is essential in creating a new politics of love. At the center of this effort stands Gafni, who according to some has positively magnetized the leading edge of the human potential movement and according to others negatively divided the very same.

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13 see www.whoismarcgafni.com


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Name has been changed


Thaler’s quote taken from his written conclusions concerning the evidence about Cohen. This material is not publicly available. Contact Gafni directly to discuss access.


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