

Response to Sara (Written April 2016)

By Marc Gafni

For the last many months, I have been attacked on the web and in the press. I have been falsely accused of everything from sexual harassment to plagiarism. My character and work have been demeaned. These attacks have unfolded across a series of articles—published mainly in the Jewish press—reaching back to the end of 2015. These articles are the result of a highly-organized smear campaign.

At the end of this post, I will speak about the origins and motivations for this smear campaign. It will be discussed in greater depth in a separate article. Here, I want to directly address a particular false story that is not only being used not only to destroy my reputation, but now has become the basis for a wider campaign to destroy the reputations of people who associate with me and my work.

The series of articles and blogs I'm referring to, particularly the ones published in the Jewish press, cite the alleged "molestation of Sara Kabakov, starting at age 13, by her former Rabbi and spiritual guru, Marc Gafni." They present this false claim as if it were an established and self-evident truth. It is not.

Speaking the truth about this story is not only crucial for me personally. It is also important if we are going to stand for the evolution of public culture in the Internet age. Fact checking and fair process are at the core of democratic society. How we manage conflict tells us much about who we actually are as human beings and as a society.

Our culture must protect against all abuses of human rights and dignity. That includes racial and class-based abuse, and it also includes all forms of sexual harassment and abuse. At the same time, we must be alert to all forms of false complaint, cyberbullying, and name-rape in any form. Cyberbullying and false complaints create trauma, sometimes leading to suicide and always defacing human dignity.

This response is the first a series of detailed refutations of the false and distorted claims being circulated about my actions and character. These issues have been extensively and directly addressed on the Facts page of my personal website. However, it now feels necessary to go one step farther. I have, together with counsel, committed to publicly responding to anyone who posts false claims or narratives about me. In all these posts, I intend to speak with complete transparency. All this will be published in the Facts section of my personal website, on the Who is Marc Gafni? website, in my Huffington Post column, through other appropriate social media, and in the comments sections of the articles that contain the false claims.

What follows is my direct response to the assertions made by Sara Kabakov in her opinion piece, published by the Jewish Forward on January 13th of this year. I am writing about this relationship not out of a desire to attack Sara, but for two important reasons. First, her story significantly distorts key details about our relationship. And secondly, as I mentioned above, her false claims are being actively and intentionally used in some of the most malicious elements of the smear campaign against me. I will start with that, following the flow of Sara's article closely, before turning my response to the campaign that's taken her claims as verified truths.

Sara's article describes a highly distorted and often outright false narrative about our relationship from 36 years ago.

Our Relationship

In her Forward article, Sara introduces herself as “the woman Gafni molested when she was 13 years old,” reinforcing, from the very start, the prominent negative meme that implies that I, a 55-year-old man, have abused, or have in any way had intimate relationships with teenagers.

At the time I met Sara, I was a 19-year-old boy—not a rabbi, a “spiritual guru,” or the man who writes this response today. Moreover, I was not then, nor am I now, a “child rapist”, “statutory rapist,” or a “pedophile,” as some of these attacks claim. These claims result from the on-going recycling of the falsehoods about this relationship.

I met Sara toward the beginning of her freshman year of high school. I was one year out of high school. Our relationship began some time later, in the fall of 1979. Sara says she was 13 when we first met through her older sister, but, according to what she told me then, she was 14 during the time of our active relationship. Her birthday was Nov. Thirtieth. Our relationship began around Christmas time. I was 19 when I met Sara. This brief, several-month-long relationship took place thirty-six years ago.

The first sentence of her article, significantly disguises the fact that ours was a relationship between two teenagers. The portrait of me as a sexual predator is made much more credible when she is described as a 13-year old and there is no mention of my actual age at the time.

Relatedly, Sara claims that when we met, “he offered to tutor me in Talmud,” a subtle distortion that sets up a formal authority relationship, which also strengthens the abuse narrative. Such a relationship never existed. It is true that we discussed the Talmud—I was an orthodox yeshiva student, and discussing Talmud was what we did. But I was never her tutor in either a formal or informal sense.

What is also of critical importance is the fact that, 36 years ago, neither Sara nor I had any awareness that her being a minor was an issue in terms of *legal* consent. Again, we were 14 and 19—teenagers, who had no knowledge of such things in 1979 New York, when, culturally, such topics were far less discussed than they are today. Indeed, neither these words nor this topic ever came up between us—not even once during the few months of relationship. It was just not in our awareness. We did acknowledge, however, that the age difference made our relationship edgy, simply because Sara was too young to marry me at that time—though, had she been old enough, I would have been eager to marry her.

As a committed orthodox Jewish boy, I had been taught that romantic relationships were to be pursued only in the context of future marriage. Orthodox law also forbids any form of physical contact—including holding hands or even casual touching—before marriage. At the time, I was dedicated with the passionate fervor of an orthodox teenager to adhering completely to what had been presented in my education as God's law. So I felt an intense conflict over the fact that I wanted to pursue my romantic feelings for Sara. This a topic that I will return to below.

But let's get to what is far more important, and let me state it very clearly. I was deeply in love with Sara. And, at that time, she claimed to be deeply in love with me. What once was a mutual expression of love has somehow, over the course of many decades, become, for Sara, a story of abuse. This is the heart of the matter. I will now discuss this in detail.

In describing the start of our friendship, Sara states: "He proceeded to tell me how "special" I was, and that he really liked me." While I don't remember the exact words used, this is true. I was falling in love and we shared our feelings with each other directly. She then says that I suggested we "keep our friendship a secret," and that I was "grooming [her] into being silent and fearful." Nothing could be further from the truth of my recollection. Our friendship was not a secret, and I never suggested it be kept as such.

As Sara correctly states, I stayed at her house on Shabbat, with her parent's permission and with their full knowledge. I also stayed over many times during the week, which she does not mention. Their house was like a second home for me, and I had a good relationship with her parents. Again, there was nothing secret about the fact that we were close friends or that we spent a lot of time together. We never shared that we were romantic—but not because I asked Sara to keep a secret. We knew it was edgy and naturally did not share it with parents, as is the case in many teenage relationships.

As for "grooming her to be silent and fearful," as much as it pains me to say this directly, this description sounds like the words of a grown woman re-scripting her memory of long past events. She also states: "I was silenced before the abuse even began." This only make sense in the context of premeditated abuse and under the trope of a victim narrative. It paints me as a predator who intentionally and carefully prepared for future abuse. If that were true, it would indeed be horrifying. But in this case it is simply and categorically not true. A discerning reader, familiar with first-person narratives in this field, may have already sensed that this is a "memory" re-narrated decades after the event. Why and how this happened will be taken up later.

Love or Abuse?

Most of my relationship with Sara had nothing at all to do with sexuality. I remember our first meeting. Noach Wienberg, an Israeli Talmudist, had just given a talk at her house. As everyone left the room, she and I were left standing there. We talked. She was radiant. My most beautiful memories of her had to do with art and music and the delight of loving each other. Sara loved the classical guitarist, Andres Segovia. I had never heard of either classical guitar or Segovia. She would play classical guitar for me in her room. I would listen and watch with delight in her devotion to the music. Several times, on Sabbath afternoons, we crossed Fifth Avenue (where she lived) and lost ourselves walking all around the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Again, I knew little of museums, but Sara loved to walk in its long hallways, and I loved that we were walking together. I also remember distinctly being on a roof; I believe the roof of her apartment building. We declared our love on that rooftop. It was a perfect moment.

Our nickname for Sara at the time was "Little Wokabok." I never called her Sara but Suri. These were our private terms of endearment. "Little Wokabok" is the name that Sara signed to a love letter she sent me after our relationship had ended. At the time, there was no indication whatsoever from Sara that she was anything less than fully in love with me, as I was fully in love with her. We talked about our love all of the time. It was the air we breathed and the constant nature of the space between us. There was never any sense that we were having a sexual dalliance. The teen age necking that we had was—according to the way we spoke about our

relationship at the time—not at all the primary quality of our love.

I am not making up the memory of these stories. And, I would be shocked if Sara could not, even now, get in touch with similar memories. Sadly, nothing like this appears in her article. Everything normal and unique about our relationship has been replaced by a narrative that recasts it as abuse. After recalling that I started staying over at her house, she states: “It was then 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.”

None of this ever happened. Had it occurred, it would have been the behavior of a predator, which Sara’s current narrative suggests that I am and which the smear campaign has simply taken as true. However, to repeat, none of this ever happened. My physical contact with Sara was limited to teen age necking, on just a handful of occasions. I did not sneak into her room every Friday night, as she suggests. That is utter nonsense. Nor did I stay in her brother’s room, as she claims. I slept in the living room, which is where most of our physical contact took place. In one instance, we made out on her bed in the middle of the day. I remember the light streaming in from the window.

In both my experience and my memory, our contact was always loving and honoring. At the time, 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.

Was this love or abuse? Was this normal teenage behavior or, as Sara describes it, was it “molestation?” In her article, she never describes the nature of our contact. The reader is left to broadly interpret what my actions must have been as an alleged “molester.” These interpretations have been both broad and vicious. Based on this story, I have been characterized as “a confessed child rapist,” “a pedophile,” and “a child molester.” That would be bad enough. But to make it worse, the stories that are regularly circulated imply—either subtly or overtly—that I am currently or recently involved with teenage girls. I repeat: most references to my relationship with Sara treat it as though it happened yesterday. The relationship happened thirty-six years ago, when I was myself a teenager. Even on the rare occasion when my age at the time is occasionally mentioned, it is done in such a way that it has to be read very carefully to recognize that the relationship did not take place recently.

Moreover, in many of these stories, what Sara calls “molestation” is either implied, overtly stated, or otherwise taken to mean that Sara and I had genital or oral sex. None of this is true. Our contact was limited to teenage necking, which we both experienced at the time, and referred to verbally, and in written notes, as mutual and loving. As I have already said, I met Sara when I was a teenager myself and I took all of her expressions of love, mutuality and affection to be genuine. I am certain that they were at the time. It is only in hindsight and with the wisdom of deeper cultural wisdom around these topics - of the kind we did not have the late seventies - which I realize that this relationship was inappropriate and deeply regret it.

So, as has been asked by others, was this relationship one of love or abuse? I recognize that even for open-minded readers—that is, anyone who hasn’t already assumed that the story told by Sara, or the organizers of the larger smear campaign is true—this question is impossible to answer definitely. There are two opposing narratives, and there is no easy way to *directly* establish the veracity of either. This is why, almost a decade ago, the last time Sara’s claims

were used to mischaracterize me, I did the only thing I could do to demonstrate that the story I am telling here is *not* a lie.

I took a polygraph—the results of which are available online—to affirm my claims. It was completed by Gordon H. Barland, PhD, the former director of polygraph research for the Department of Defense. I answered five questions about aspects of my relationship with Sara and the nature of our physical contact. No deception was indicated for my answers to all five questions. In fact, Dr. Barland assessed the probability of deception at less than .01. He concluded that I had answered each question truthfully.

Despite all of this, the claims that Sara and I had sex and that I am a child rapist or pedophile persist. The counterclaims I have made and repeat here, along with the polygraph results supporting them, are simply ignored. This says something about the nature of the smear campaign and the underlying motivations that drive the actions of its organizers. They seem to be not the least bit disturbed by what are clearly egregious levels of distortion. They seem to feel that if they repeat the vicious canard enough times, it becomes true.

Our Break-up and the Letter

In her article, Sara correctly says that each time we had physical contact, I would express deep remorse through an act teshuvah (i.e. repentance), because I knew that such contact was in violation of Jewish Orthodox Law. This is true. I spoke to my teachers at the time, and they affirmed the “absolute biblical prohibition, according to Maimonides, of any physical contact between unmarried people.” At 19, I did not know how to resolve the contradiction between my actions and what I was being taught was immutable divine law.

When I first read the section of Sara’s article describing my teshuvah, it was the only part of what she said that I recognized. What I did not realize until I read it in January was how my internal turbulence was experienced by her in such a painful way. I desperately wish I would have recognized this at the time.

Sara also correctly states that we broke up sometime in the spring, several months after the relationship had begun. But, again, the details are distorted. She claims that I said I needed “a proper outlet for my sexuality,” that I was terrified that “I would get [her] pregnant,” and, if so, there would be “no way to keep [my] secret.”

Once again, none of this is even remotely true. I broke up with Sara because I was committed to Orthodox law and practice, which prohibited all physical contact before marriage, including even holding hands. I was internally tortured by the fact that I could not hold this line with her. As a 19-year-old Orthodox Jew, I understood this law as a direct divine obligation; one which I had transgressed.

I ended the relationships because I couldn’t reconcile my beliefs with my feelings about her—not because I was afraid of her getting pregnant. That, of course, would have required us to have been having sex, which was well beyond both of our boundaries. Remember, I was tormented by the fact that we had been kissing—even that physical contact was in violation of Orthodox law. Sex would have been unthinkable. The notion that I thought she might get pregnant from what we were doing is an obvious falsehood.

After we broke up, Sara wrote me a very beautiful love letter. It arrived about six months after

the breakup at the place where I was staying in Riverdale. It looked tattered and was covered in postmarks and other stamps, like it took several attempts before it was finally delivered. Sara's letter was long and detailed, 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. I cried for what felt like two hours after reading it. I remember this as the first time I had actually, truly cried. I felt like I was crying for all the times I had never cried before. I was devastated, and I can still feel that moment of sharp pain in my body.

I called her immediately. The call was answered but she would not come to the phone. In that moment, as I wondered if she thought I had ignored her letter, which very well may have arrived months after she wrote it, I felt that ending our relationship was the biggest mistake of my life. I missed her for years afterwards.

In other publications, Sara has denied sending this letter. In the polygraph mentioned earlier, two questions directly concerned the letter and its contents. "After your relationship with Sara was over, did she write you that you were her one true love," and "After your relationship with Sara was over, did she write that you were meant to be together forever." I answered both questions as "yes," and no deception was indicated. Again, Dr. Barland concluded that I had answered truthfully.

In her article, Sara describes our break up as follows: "You might imagine that I would feel great relief; in fact, the full weight of the abuse I had endured in silence came crashing down on me. I was left with this horrible experience, yet with no one to talk to about it, with no language to express it...Yet I also felt elated that I had survived and that the psychological reign of my abuser was over."

These lines are very difficult to reconcile with the confirmation of me having received this letter. I have no doubt that they capture how Sara came to feel at some point in the last 15 years or whenever the facts of the relationship began to distort in her memory, but they are radically out of alignment with the very beautiful and seemingly effortless language she used to express herself in the months following our break-up.

About twenty-five years after we broke up, Sara responded in writing to blogger, Luke Ford, who requested comment about Gary Rosenblatt's 2004 article that first alerted me to her allegations. Because I did not keep mementos from that long ago, and because there is no electronic record from those pre-internet days, the best I could do to repudiate the allegations at the core of Sara's account was to take a polygraph with the most rigorous and authoritative expert I could find.

This concludes my direct response to Sara's allegations and distorted claims. We are left with two very different stories about our relationship, and I am left with a very difficult question: When and how did her story shift from teenage romance to one of savage abuse? It pains me greatly to even write this line for, as I said, my intention here is not to attack Sara. But, the current smear campaign has so heavily relied on her allegations, that I am left with little choice but to reflect on this at deeper level.

Creating a Victim?

Sara's October 2004 written response to Luke Ford—published anonymously, but in-full, on his website—is at least 75% *exactly the same* as her January 2016 article in the Jewish Forward.

The flow of her narrative, her words, the sentence structure, and main points—all of it is nearly verbatim. The 2016 article is a lightly-edited reproduction of something she wrote almost 12 years ago. However, there were, two differences—one concerning details that were removed and the second concerning details that were added. These changes begin to address the question posed above while pointing to the malice underlying the organized smear being waged against me at this time. I will reflect on the details that were removed first. I'll return to the details that were added a little later.

In her 2004 account, Sara describes an even more vicious and exaggerated story of abuse. She claims she “pushed me away repeatedly,” but that “after a huge struggle” she was “overcome by [me] physically.” She describes, in graphic detail, the alleged nature of our physical contract, including claims of “forcible touching” and “digital vaginal penetration.” She also attributes to me outlandish, explicit justification for the abuse. For example, she claims that I told her that my brother and I were abused by my mother (we were not). Because of this, she claims, that I said I couldn't help myself in abusing her, and that she needed to “understand that, have compassion with [sic] [me], and comply.” I never said anything like that to her.

The events she describes in both accounts, but particularly these events from the 2004 account, would have been reprehensible had they occurred. But, they simply never happened. And Sara, at least at some level, seems to agree. All of these details were removed from the 2016 account. In their place, she propagates a comparatively tamer, but still reprehensible, narrative of me as a molester. Were these details removed because she felt they were just too untrue, too exaggerated and aggressive? She has clearly stuck with the story of abuse, but, in 2016, were the earlier descriptions judged as too far from the truth, even for her? Whatever the answer to these questions might be, it's clear that the violent predator narrative from 2004 is the one that persists in the minds of many to this day, despite Sara's having backed off from these more virulent earlier claims.

Sara also told the editor of a leading Jewish Publication who relayed to me that I had sexual relations (intercourse) with her when he interviewed her for his article. How do I know this? I had called the editor, deeply hurt and outraged that his article was sufficiently ambiguous to allow a reader to think that I might have had sexual relations with Sara. I requested in writing that he change and clarify this in a correction to his 2004 article. He responded by saying that Sara claimed that we had sexual relations. And yet Sara told an Israeli newspaper reporter in 2004 in a published interview that I did not have sexual relations of any shape or form with her. As I indicated above our contact was limited to occasional teenage necking in a context, which we experienced at the time and constantly spoke to each other of, as loving and affectionate. All of this is but another example of Sara changing her story over the years. More of Sara's shifting narrative is evidenced below.

After Ford posted her 2004 account, I made several attempts through third parties to contact Sara, wanting deeply to meet in mediated context, to resolve and heal the vast discrepancy in our narratives of the event. Most importantly, I wanted to clarify with Sara the confusion that had entered into her memory of what had happened between us. I wanted to beg her forgiveness for my part in the pain or misunderstanding that arose. Instead of meeting me (which I understand), Sara seems to have recast her memory of the relationship as a form of deliberate and systematic abuse.

How Sara developed those memories is not necessarily for me to conjecture—in fact, it pains me deeply to go here—but, as I said, I feel I have little choice at this point. Two of my closest associates are among the leading sexual trauma experts in the world. They do beautiful and

brilliant work in healing sexual trauma every day. They have helped me to understand how the details of our relationship might have become distorted in Sara's mind.

Sara herself provides some insight here. In her 2004 account, she says the following: "Unfortunately, I knew Mordechai very well. He told me a lot about himself, and I knew him as a sexually compulsive, sexually violent man. 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 are dangerous people. The more we are silent about them, the more they have the freedom to act out their sexual compulsions."

All of these lines have been removed from the 2016 article. Why? Do they indicate too directly that these "counselors, lawyers, and professionals" may have played a significant role in helping Sara "understand" her experience or "tell" her story?

While I don't know the details of who exactly she was referring to here, I do know of one of the people she approached for counsel. She was in contact with a woman named, Vicki Polin, who until 2014, ran a site called The Awareness Center. Vicki's site collected stories about rabbis who allegedly have had sexual relationships outside marriage or with members of their congregation. In the 2004 article, *Way of Pleasantness*, a rabbi, whose name was removed by the editors, states that Sara came to Polin and that he and Rabbi Yosef Blau—a man who has been a virulent detractor of mine within Orthodoxy for over twenty-five years and was a former board member of The Awareness Center (as documented on Polin's site)—"helped them through their silence." According to Ford, it was Polin who connected Sara with him—indeed the only other place that Sara's 2004 account appears is on Polin's site, under an assumed name. It is highly significant that Sara had connected both to Polin, who serves as some sort of therapist to her and other abuse victims, and to my most virulent detractor, Rabbi Blau.

Vicki Polin's dicey credibility can be assessed by the fact that in the late eighties she appeared on Oprah's daytime show claiming to have been part of a Satanist cult that sacrificed babies. She claimed that she was raped on Torah scrolls, forced to murder an infant, impregnated multiple times by her father, and developed multiple personality disorder as a result of this abuse. The FBI later investigated and dismissed the claims of satanic child sacrifice, and other investigations have discounted her claims altogether. The episode was removed from the Oprah Winfrey Show. Vicki herself later claimed to have recovered these memories through therapy, instigated by her therapist, Tina Grossman, and an ex-detective turned satanic ritualistic abuse "expert," Jerry Simandl, who together allegedly used Vicki to prove a theory of suppressed memory syndrome.

I obviously do not know how and when the memory of our relationship began to shift for Sara. I have no authority to definitively suggest that this is what happened here, but there is a reliable body of psychological literature on false memories and how they develop. It does not strike me as unreasonable to believe that is at least possible that Polin, a licensed therapist, "supports" people who come to her for counseling in ways that she was once supported.

I do know that in a number of Sara's published descriptions of her own process, she describes talking with therapists, and I suspect that they may have told her that she had been abused. It is clear, as I indicated in the following paragraph, that that Vicki Polin, along with the other therapists and professionals Sara mentions, played at least some role in helping her construct the memories her story is built upon.

In the late eighties and early nineties, many therapists encouraged this kind of recovery of so-called “repressed memory.” Many of those therapists have been appropriately sued or censured since that time. The phenomenon is now called ‘false memory syndrome.’

Vicki Polin herself has published an account online where she indicates that she was Sara’s counselor and worked with her directly in regard to her relationship to me. When I first heard of Sara’s account I was shocked and devastated and attempted through third parties to reach out to her to create clarification and resolution. Polin’s online post confirms my attempt to do so in 2001 and then mockingly refers to such attempts saying that Sara refused to meet with her rapist. She cites Sara as referring to me as her “rapist”.

Here again Sara’s story - according to Polin, is significantly different than her later account. Sara is telling one story to the Editor of a Jewish Newspaper and to Polin in 2004 and a different story in 2015. I of course do not know if this is an accurate quote or not. Mutual teenage necking in New York law was and is not rape – not “actual” rape or statutory rape or anything of the kind.

Sara’s own words, which reflect common jargon in contemporary discussions of sexual abuse, further demonstrate the influence exerted on her by the people she has consulted. Across both accounts, she claims that I was “grooming” her, that I “brainwashed her into silence,” and that I am a “sexually compulsive, sexually violent man.” She says that “child predators target families in crisis,” that she was “breaking the silence,” that I, “like your classic pedophile,” was blaming the victim, and that she was suffering from “post-traumatic stress.” Of course teenage necking when Sara was 14 and I freshly out of high school is not pedophilia by any definition. But Sara seems to have been guided and coached in her language in ways that are highly disturbing.

All of these statements represent a learned language—the language of professional abuse literature and counseling. It is also crucial to reiterate that, for decades now, I have likely been described to Sara in demonizing terms by the people that surround her. It would be entirely unsurprising if she was repeatedly and directly told that our love was not love, but abuse. When such a characterization is repeated often enough by authoritative “experts” is it surprising that it would come to seem true for a person, particularly if it is being spoken into a listening colored by regret or shame? If the relationship between us were repeatedly described in this way, this would have served to reify her re-built and re-scripted memory of our relationship.

Responsibility and Regret

In retrospect, I deeply regret my involvement with Sara. I take full responsibility for my role in this youthful mistake. I apologize fully and with all my heart and soul for any hurt that I caused Sara, when I was 19 and we were in relationship. This hurt was unintentional. I regret enormously anything in my words or actions that caused Sara pain.

Indeed, the idea that our relationship caused her pain, that in her experience it changed the course of her life, is devastating to me. Since reading her account of our relationship some fourteen years ago, I have tried to understand, as best I could, how Sara could have come to feel this, and how we could heal the huge truth gap between what happened and the story she has been telling. One of the things that my close women friends have helped me to understand is the possibility that at the time, Sara did not actually share with me that she felt uncomfortable with our limited sexual contact. When I knew Sara, I was completely inexperienced with girls,

and the possibility that she might be more ambivalent than she let me know, never occurred to me. As I noted above, I also did not understand how my shame about our physical contact, as mediated through Orthodox law, might have been internalized by Sara and created shame around her own experience of the two of us.

Finally, as I mentioned earlier, neither Sara nor I had any idea 36 years ago that there was any issue around her being a minor. I understand now that this is problematic. Under current NY state laws, Sara would not have been old enough to consent to any physical contact at all. However, no aspect of our relationship could justify claims of “pedophilia,” or “statutory rape,” as has been often claimed.

I am always available to take responsibility for any actions for which I am indeed responsible. I am always responsible for any mistakes that I have made. I strive to consciously ask for forgiveness for any hurt I have caused, including inadvertent hurt. I am always available to meet one-on-one, in a mediated context, with anyone who is willing to sit with me, talk, compare facts, and openly engage in a process of clarification and resolution. If in the course of such a conversation, something emerges for which I should make amends, I will do it in an instant, with no resistance. That is my obligation and duty as a human being. I have offered this kind of meeting, in a face-to-face or facilitated forum to most of the key actors in this story. I have done this numerous times in documented communication, but all my requests have been ignored or refused. I wish such a meeting would have been possible with Sara. I regret that this was never able to take place.

I am outraged by sexual harassment and sexual abuse in all of its forms. This includes, however, the abuse of sexuality that occurs when one person significantly re-narrates a relationship in ways that are entirely different than how it took place. And, it specifically and directly includes the pain caused when that re-narration is uncritically cited and re-cited as an established truth by others. I want to be very clear on this point, and I care little that it is not politically correct in certain circles. Sara’s false re-telling of this story, for close to twenty years now is also a form of abuse. It is the abuse of sexuality through the public telling of false narrative that concerns sexuality. It has enabled a form of name rape, particularly when taken up by the smear organizers and their cadre of irresponsible reporters. Sara is a 50-year-old woman today and not a 14-year-old girl. She must take responsibility for the way she has told the story, and for the way she has allowed herself and her story to be used by people with significant hidden agendas; people who seek to hide their own motivations for using her story.

I have attempted to take full responsibility for any mistakes I have made in the normal arc of being a human being engaged in human relationships. I continue to do radical teshuvah for all my mistakes, as must any human being. But the fact that I, like all humans, have made mistakes, has little to do with the malice-filled distortions which characterize how the orchestrated smear campaign has used Sara’s story. Notwithstanding anything I have said here, I simply cannot accept responsibility for actions or motivations being falsely attributed to me.

An Orchestrated Smear

Next, I would like to turn to the nature of this organized smear directly. I will discuss three brief examples of how it has operated in regard to Sara’s story. Then, in closing, I will reflect on it from a larger cultural perspective.

First, as I mentioned above, when comparing Sara’s 2004 and 2016 statements some details

were added to the recent article that did not appear in the original. These details, unlike the ones discussed earlier, do not concern me directly—or, at least not on the surface. In the 2016 article, she included more detail and a bit more drama when describing how she attempted to report the alleged abuse over the past 30 years. Initially, in 2004, she mentioned that she told her siblings, a male counselor, her parents, and Rabbi Riskin. She simply describes these people as ignoring her or as being shocked.

In the recent article, she has added a harrowing scene in an elevator with a teacher, a troubling, shame-inducing response from her parents, who asked her “how could you let him do that to you,” a list of rabbis who, in her telling, supported me without so much as a second thought, and a discussion of how the NY statute of limitations “ensures that the abusers will be able to terrorize more children.”

Now, I can’t say how these people responded, and I am *not* suggesting that she is lying. Nor am I making an issue out of her wanting to expand the end of the article to speak, as I will be doing in a moment, about larger cultural issues.

The reason I am raising this is because it points to other underlying motives, and because I truthfully wonder if these details were added by Sara acting alone. I arrive at this question because, on May 4, a few months after the 2016 article was published, Jan Eisner, editor-in-chief of the Jewish Forward, which is the outlet who published Sara’s 2016 article, published another article about the Jewish effort to change NY abuse laws. And, not surprisingly, Sara’s story appears to be the poster child of this campaign. What’s particularly troubling, however, and the reason I am discussing this example, is how Eisner introduces me in the third paragraph of the article. She writes: “Last January, Kabakov shared her own story of sexual abuse at the hands of Marc Gafni, the former rabbi and spiritual guru. ‘I am the woman Gafni molested when she was 13 years old,’ she wrote in an exclusive essay for the Forward.”

Eisner, who is clearly familiar with the Sara’s story, chooses to include a line that once again implies that Marc Gafni, a 55-year-old adult male, molested a 13-year old. My actual age is never stated but is only implied later in the article, after the image of “predator” and “pedophile” is evoked. Note as well, that not once does Eisner describe the abuse as “alleged.” This, unfortunately, is only the most recent example of how this smear utilizes Sara’s claims.

Relatedly, many of these articles also get the facts surrounding the Sara’s allegations all wrong, as well. Or, to put this key point more directly, the authors of such articles simply make up “facts” about objective events that are easily verified. For example, an April 7th article published by the Jewish Week, it is stated that “After initial allegations surfaced that he had been involved with a 13-year-old as a young rabbinical student, Gafni, then known as Mordechai Winiarz, left for Israel.” Here, the false narrative is that I fled these allegations. This too, so like much of the “facts” in these articles is simply made up.

I did not even know that there was a “Sara story” until sometime in 2003, just before the allegations became public in 2004. This was about, twenty-five years after the relationship took place. Moreover, I moved to Israel in 1989, an easily verifiable fact present in numerous easily-findable online publications. I moved to Israel some 15 years *before* I ever knew about the allegations, 15 years before anyone, except perhaps Sara’s therapists, I presume, knew about the allegations.

Despite this fact, and despite my attempts to correct these distortions and many other instances of “fact construction,” the distortions have remained in place. In this instance, we reached out to

The Jewish Week directly. None of these details have ever been changed. We have also reached out to other smear writers and asked, for example, that my age at the time of my relationships with Sara be made clear. Our calls were not returned. Our letters went unanswered. Journalism has been replaced with op-ed—and, apparently, with a culture in which checking of even the most basic details ostensibly does not matter. If you are labeled a “predator,” objective facts about your life events are no longer yours.

Second, there are now dozens of posts on the web that advance the same canard as Eisner. When you follow them, you realize that the smear is organized at a much deeper level. For example, at the beginning of 2015, someone re-edited my Wikipedia page to state, “Marc has admitted to having had sexual relationships with girls as young as 14, and was also accused of molesting a 13-year-old girl.” This radically distorted statement is then linked to other articles, whose authors are recruited by the organizers of the smear campaign.

In one instance, the author happens to be the wife of the current campaign’s primary organizer, Stephen Dinan, CEO of the Shift Network. On January 27, Stephen’s wife, Devaa Haley Mitchell, wrote a condemnatory blog post about me. She admits in a passing parenthetical that she has never met or talked to me. Stephen, however, has never admitted the same, despite having directly turned down repeated invitations to meet and have genuine conversation about the claims he’s propagating.

What is Mitchell’s evidence for making such a public indictment of my essential being, considering the fact that she does not know me? Of course, she cites as evidence, my Wikipedia page, which just a few weeks before had been altered by “smear activists” involved in the very same smear campaign that her husband, Dinan—by his own admission in emails that have been forwarded to me—has co-organized, at least since late last year. They changed my Wikipedia page to include lines such as Marc “has admitted to having had sexual relationships with girls as young as 14,” and “he was also accused of molesting a 13 year old girl over a period of nine months.”

The very Wikipedia page that was falsified by proponents of the smear campaign is cited as evidence of truth and authority by proponents of the smear campaign. This is called the dog-piling of sources. It was a classic technique used in campaigns waged during Stalinism and McCarthyism.

Third, Dinan—again by his own admission both in emails and in conversations with my colleagues—enrolled, directly or indirectly Mark Oppenheimer, the author of the Dec. 25, 2015 New York Times article that kicked off the recent round of this smear. This goes a long way toward explaining why Oppenheimer, an ostensibly credible reporter, failed to mention my age at the time I knew Sara. While careful reading infers my possible age, Oppenheimer, shockingly, is journalistically negligent in leaving my age out. This is but one piece in a long string of evidence in regard to Oppenheimer intentions in writing the article which have little to do with fair, and some might say, ethical journalism. Moreover, Oppenheimer and I never had a serious conversation about Sara. Just to get a final, quick sense at the level of malfeasance at play here consider this: Oppenheimer called my publicist some time ago and asked, “How do you wake up in the morning representing Marc Gafni.” That he could then pretend to be writing a fair story defies credibility. But, maybe that was never his intention from the start—and that’s my key point here.

Oppenheimer also propagates some problematic “evidence.” In his article, he reproduces a publicly-contested misquote of me as saying, in reference to Sara, “She was 14 going on 35

and I never forced her." He does this without referencing any of the ways that this quote has been contested, leaving me to explain it once more.

This long-circulated, horrendous misquote was taken from a recorded phone call with Gary Rosenblatt, who published a 2004 article in *The Jewish Week* about the allegations against me. At the time the original misquote was printed, I called Rosenblatt to object to the quote, which grossly distorted the intention of my statements on this topic. First, because the words he imputed to me implied that I had had actual sex with Sara, which was not the case, as I told Rosenblatt in an earlier interview. To my shock, he told me that Sara, in her interview for the article, told him that we indeed did have sex—a claim that she didn't even include in the 2004 account sent to Luke and Vicki—justifying, I presume, his construction of the "quote."

Even worse, however, is the vulgar implication of the quote. My intention was to characterize Sara as I knew her, which was as a beautiful being who was mature beyond her age. My words were meant in a way that was fully honoring; they were not used as a defense of our age difference. The "I never forced her" part of the quote was an angry and defensive response to any suggestion that aspects of our physical contact were *not* mutual or were in any way forced. I now understand that his line of questioning likely came from Sara's more severe account at the time.

Back to Oppenheimer: In one very short mention of Sara, I completely renounced that horrific and distorted quote. Oppenheimer ignored me and used the quote without providing context, without directly mentioning my age, and without referencing the polygraph results mentioned earlier. Then, all the other smear activists, in their numerous blogs, articles, and letters to my colleagues and organizational partners, linked to Oppenheimer's "respectable," "well-researched," and "fair" *New York Times* article as a credible source. This propagated the myth of "adult rabbi Marc Gafni having sex with 14-year olds." This is just one of many illustrations of how name rape is a core, likely intentional, outcome of this smear.

As I have explained, there was not a word spoken or an indication given by either myself or Sara at the time of our relationship that suggested it was anything less than an expression of mutual love. To continually repeat this line—she was 14 going on the 35 and I never forced her—which has been done by more than just Oppenheimer, is a repeated egregious distortion of my words.

Hidden Motivations

It is this particularly pernicious kind of abuse that is being perpetrated against me in so much of what is happening now. False or distorted stories have been repeated again and again until they are assumed to be true—no critical engagement, no balanced fact-checking, and no need to consult alternate narratives. Were it just me, I would be inclined to walk away and ignore it, as I have largely done over the past 30 years. However, the issues at stake are so much larger than I have recognized over the years. If this kind of abuse via the Internet is allowed to go unchallenged then we destroy the very heart of a good, true, and beautiful, civil society.

What is at stake here is not merely my public reputation (in the Jewish community and elsewhere), which frankly, I care less and less about with each passing day. The intense betrayal of the core Jewish values of justice—driven by a mix of the personal agendas of a very few and supported by other peoples' fear of being on the "wrong side" of a sensitive issue—is beyond devastating. One Jewish leader and friend once said to me, "Mordechai, we are post-

holocaust Jews. We no longer believe in justice.” I replied to him, “Dear friend, the essence of the Jewish idea is justice itself.” His eyes widened. His discomfort was palpable, so we changed the subject back to the discussion of a Hassidic text.

What is at stake is not only the irreducible value of one person’s life commitment and contribution—though that by itself, I hope, would be enough to demand our attention—but also the nature of truth and justice in our internet-age society. The integrity with which we gather information, and how we form and communicate judgments about our friends, beloveds, leaders, and teachers is a core concern of a civil society.

In societies governed by democratically-created rule of law, such crucial judgments—whether legal or moral—cannot be crowd-sourced by an internet swarm. When this happens, individual actions and judgments often appear spontaneous or uncoordinated. But, in most instances, there are figures behind the scenes, orchestrating and influencing (and in some ways largely determining or attempting to determine) those individual actions. Such expressions are the manifestations of a cultural shadow and they form the basis of an unfortunate, often hidden, societal corruption. In a just society, we must rely on fair processes of deliberation, insulated, to the extent possible, from the influence of ulterior motives and hidden machinations of ego and malice.

Malice, as noted psychologist Joseph Berke, is nearly always hidden under a fig-leaf of “righteous judgment.” And, as Milan Kundera reminded us, malice can never admit of itself so it must always plead other motives. What are these motives? Internet abuse in the form of an orchestrated smear campaign, like what is happening here, is most often inflicted when perpetrators take up the mantle of either “victims” or “rescuers.” This is a well-known dynamic, extensively documented in psychological literature, and often referred to as the drama or victim triangle.

The three or four organizers of the current campaign—some of whom were named here and others of whom will be named and discussed in forthcoming responses—hide their true motivation under the veneer of protecting “future victims.” Ironically, these rescuers use their victim’s narratives to perpetrate their own forms of abuse against the alleged, original perpetrator.

It is upon these hidden motives that the 2015/16 smear campaign is based. It’s important to note that the events of late 2015 were not triggered by any action of mine; there are no new complaints, and I certainly haven’t slept with any teenagers. Instead, the organizers recycle old stories, including Sara’s, which are rife with false or deeply distorted claims.

Once an alternative narrative is established and behind-the-scenes connections and hidden motivations exposed, this veneer can be seen for what it is: A fig leaf covering malice. Malice is often rooted in a series of past events and actions that engendered envy or rage in the malicious person—the story of Iago and Othello being the classical example in literature. In this case, two core faces of the smear campaign—David Ingber, a former student whom I ordained and later, as noted above, dramatically distanced myself from and Chaya Lester, my former wife, whom I divorced in order to marry another woman—seem to have experienced a great deal of each of these emotions, driving them to work together over the last decade to develop, organize, and execute this campaign. In past iterations the campaign waged by Ingber and Chaya has featured false complaints of sexual harassment in the Israeli legal system, where such offenses are felonies.

I spent my entire life savings to recover from my computer the email records that showed the complaints to be false. (These records had been intentionally deleted by one of the complainants, who had access to my computer). In 2014, I found out that no complaints had actually ever registered with the police. In short, the people involved lied not only about the facts behind their “complaints” but about there even being complaints. The false story that I was subject to police complaints was widely circulated by them. It appeared on the Internet and in the Israeli press. This earlier campaign, if it proves necessary, will be discussed, in detail, in forthcoming responses.

Toward a Higher Clarification

There is so much real and terrible sexual abuse in the world. We all must, with deep integrity, fight against such abuse in any and all instances. However, it is also abusive to create a false narrative and to construct false complaints, particularly when such efforts intentionally aim to cause personal and professional damage or to evoke strife in someone’s relationships with friends, family, and colleagues. Such constructions, as I have said, are also terrible abuses of sexuality in a time when, rightfully, the culture is primed to rage against all forms of actual abuse.

I stand, as I have always stood, against any form of sexual harassment or abuse. Sexual abuse, like all abuses of power, is a pervasive problem, too long ignored by society. The fact that victims of sexual abuse can speak out against their perpetrators is one of the great advances in modern society. I stand against all practices and behaviors that seek to shame victims who chose to speak out. In speaking out about this, I have no intention to shame Sara. My intent here has been, first, to respond to allegations made against me—as is my right as a human being, and, second, to briefly reflect on the orchestrated campaign that is taking such allegations as truth. Yet, Sara has, for nearly twenty years been perpetrating as false and distorted story about our relationship. This tale has had damaging and traumatic effects on my life, on my children’s lives, and on the lives of my partners and friends. Sara should not be able to hide from this truth and her own profound responsibility in perpetrating gross and horrifically damaging falsehoods, by claiming that she is being subjected to victim shaming.

Wrongful accusations, leveled by either an individual or by a group, in a trial-by-Internet atmosphere represents a regressive movement toward pre-democratic consciousness. There is, however, another potential move. There is another vision. In this moment, it seems impossible, but it is my dream and commitment. I will conclude with my dream, which I hope is not an impossible dream: What if the result of this campaign was the seeking of a higher clarification? What if, over time, all the parties, with all their narratives could sit together, compare facts, talk, and seek genuine truth and reconciliation?

Some of the key actors in my story are the same people who demand that Israel sit and negotiate with the Palestine. I understand that demand. Despite the terrorism, killing of each other’s children, and the countless atrocities, Israel and Palestine must make peace. But how can we demand that either side make peace if we cannot even make peace amongst ourselves? I am ready and willing. I invite those who are driving this campaign to honestly and authentically inquire as to whether or not they are willing as well.

