

# JUSTICE

Fixing the world, and fixing ourselves **BY BEV GOLDMAN**

**“THE LACK OF REAL IDEOLOGICAL SUPPORT** from the USA is creating an existential threat to the survival of Israel. The country is facing a catastrophic monsoon both now and in the immediate future, but is there a solution, and if so, what is it?”

Very powerful words from a very powerful and dynamic supporter of Israel. Amy Neustein PhD has written extensively on a number of topics including The Dangers of the Far-Right; Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism; Sexual

Assaults on Israeli women; The Sociology of Orthodoxy Today; Hamas, Hostages, and Heroism; Speech Technology and Sociology; and Political Activism. She has received numerous awards and citations; her writings have been published in local and international print media; and she has made multiple appearances in broadcast media.

During my recent discussion with her, I was enormously impressed by her insights, her perception, her vast knowledge, and her unerring commitment to the work she does. Passionate about Israel, she is deeply concerned about the Jewish future. She feels strongly that if a formidable and influential group of people from around the world, top Jewish minds in all spheres of business, religion, politics, sociology, history, and more, combined

their expertise, they would be able to confront, challenge and ultimately, hopefully, resolve the crisis. “Only those who think out of the box, who have superior intellect and genius abilities,” she declared, “can pull this looming disaster together.” Amy added that both San Francisco and Chicago “have voted for a complete ceasefire. In Chicago today there is only one Jewish alderman; and the city has a huge and ever-expanding Palestinian population, earning the name of ‘Little Palestine’ on its southwest side.” This in America, the bulwark of the state of Israel.

Amy is the editor of *Tempest* in the Temple: Jewish Communities & Child Sex Scandals (Brandeis University Press,



PHOTOGRAPH: SUPPLIED

2009). This book, the first critical study of child sex abuse committed by Jewish clergy, broke new ground on a previously taboo subject, combining important work from practicing rabbis, educators, pastoral counsellors, sociologists, mental health professionals, and legal advocates for abuse victims, each of whom offers insights into different facets of the problem. In 1986, Amy's life changed drastically when she learned that her 6-year old daughter had been sexually abused by her father, Amy's ex-husband. The case she laid against her ex-husband dragged on through the court system for years, with Amy being accused of lying, despite extensive evidence of the abuse, which included eye-witness testimony and corroboration from one of New York State's leading experts on sexual abuse. She placed on record that "there were over 50 hearings on whether or not I had lied, but not one hearing on whether or not my child was abused." The final outcome of the trial was that the court awarded her ex-husband sole custody of their daughter. Amy has not seen her since.

"Dr Neustein," wrote Rachel Bluth and Susan Rosenbluth in *The Jewish Voice and Opinion*, March 2005, "has fought for nearly two decades to publicise the truth ... She has devoted much of her professional training ... to exposing the maltreatment accorded to mothers who lose custody of their children, having long chronicled what she says is a family court system stacked in favour of the wealthier partner in custody battles, which often leaves women (and occasionally men) at a distinct disadvantage." Amy's case drew intense media attention for decades, and its outrageous facts prompted multiple legislative hearings (in New York state and in Congress) and angry comments and letters from "legislators such as former New York State Senator David Paterson (now

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Governor of New York), Andrew Stein, Congressman Major Owens, Congressman Jerrold Nadler, and others, all of whom recognised wrongs inflicted on the mother and daughter in this case by the child welfare system." Between 1988 and 2020, a multitude of articles dealing with Amy's case in particular, and the plight of so many mothers in America losing custody of their abused children through the family courts, exposed these injustices in various publications; and an Instagram page set up read: "In a system that supports the abusers and neglects the abused, that champions malicious fathers and oppresses honest mothers, Neustein is a voice for change and a crusader for #justice."

Amy is a direct descendant of Rabbi Yisrael Friedman of Ruzhin, referred to as the Heiliger Ruzhiner, "the holy one of Ruzhin", who was addressed as "royalty" of the Chassidic movement. Born on the 3rd of Tishrei 5557 (1796), he was the great-grandson of Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, the successor of the Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Chassidic movement. Amy's late father was a prominent Orthodox rabbi – Rabbi Abraham Neustein, religious leader of the Jewish Centre of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn for many years, and a well-known educator. It must have been terribly difficult for her finally to publicise her story and then to research and expose the stories of so many other mothers; but it was her pain and suffering that gave her the strength to nurture and support those mothers, and other mothers of all faiths, who had fallen victim to the same tragedy.

During our talk, Amy described at

length the difficult challenges she had faced in her life around the loss of her daughter, and her need to do whatever she could to alleviate the pain of others in the same circumstances. These challenges, however, she insisted, "fortified me with the sense that I could overcome them, because above all I am an optimist, I am tenacious, and I cannot bear injustice. My own family members have dealt with numerous problems over the ages and managed them in the best ways possible. I am always aware of the privilege I have of being a descendant of a premier dynasty and I will therefore not let anything stand in my way to obtain justice for those most deserving of it."

Across the globe and in all spheres of life, the law and justice are practised in ways which should be absolute and pertinent to the claimants. But Amy found herself up against numerous obstacles in the American family courts, and she described them openly and honestly. In many cases of child abuse perpetrated by fathers, these fathers, she said, would hire "the most expensive legal firms to defend them, high-priced lawyers with sway over the bar community and ensuring that the viability of the judges was dependent on these law firms." The judges needed the law firms; they were tied to them financially; and corruption was rife. Many of the offenders were labelled by Amy as "white supremacists, drug addicts, criminals, fascists, neo-Nazis with no moral structures, freely violating all laws, feeling empowered by their cocaine habits and their alcoholism, and resulting in judges and courts not willing to challenge them and simultaneously fearing retaliation from them."

Amy discovered that many other mothers nationwide had the same experience with the family courts. She has become a beacon of light for numerous mothers who have lost their rights to their children, and has had to confront

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the sadness of so many of them committing suicide. Many of them were forced to experience supervised visitation with their children, while others were barred from their children's lives, "eviscerated, simply because they were seeking the justice that was rightfully theirs". Determined to help them, she organized these "protective mothers" into a national movement, founding HURT (Help Us Regain The Children) – a legal research and advocacy centre – to inspire social change by lobbying state and federal leg-

islators to investigate the problems in the family court system. Over the years, Amy has used her training to help mothers crushed by an unfair court system. She gave expert witness testimony in child abuse/custody cases on the evidentiary weight of medical and psychological terminology. Often her services as a consultant for lawyers, and as an expert witness, were rendered pro bono to mothers who were already bankrupted by a hostile court process.

In one of the many articles Amy wrote,

she noted that New York was the first state in the country to hold legislative hearings on the family courts stripping innocent mothers of their children. She herself brought to the legislature numerous case files she had collected on mothers who had lost their children, mothers from as far away as California, Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia to testify. Attorneys and mental health experts, she added, also flew in from distant places to testify to the scandalous abuses in the family courts. "It was a cathartic event to see that activists were digging in their heels and challenging the family court status quo," she wrote. "In the years that followed, the New York State Assembly Judiciary Committee, headed by Nassau Assemblyman Charles Lavine, would hold hearings focusing on the tragic deaths of young children who would be shot, bludgeoned, or beaten to death because of courts so hostile to mothers that they had to denigrate their earnest pleas for protection of their vulnerable children from drug-addicted, alcoholic fathers with a history of severe domestic violence toward their ex-spouses or partners."

Referring again to the unimaginable terror of the attack on Israel, Amy explained why she has dedicated so much of her life's work to helping these mothers. "Hashem won't judge us with kindness if we do not act properly in this matter," she said. "But perhaps this crisis in Israel, this unspeakable tragedy of 7 October 2023, will be a catalyst for us all, encouraging us to clean up our houses, our souls, ourselves, both physically and spiritually ... We have created a group of victims who deserve to be acknowledged: children need to be returned to their mothers, and mothers need the support of their community, in reuniting with their children. We need to pray for restitution; as women and mothers we need to ... stand up for those who deserve justice." "Part of our *tikkun olam*," she added, "is also *tikkun* within ourselves and our souls, repairing and healing ourselves. We cannot sit back and do nothing, especially those of us blessed enough to have our beloved children as part of our lives in every way." ■