

Trial by Internet?

An “archetypal spiritual drama”

BY JEFF BELL AND GRETA DEJONG



A coalition of women accuse a charismatic spiritual leader of sexual misconduct. The stories sound convincing. The leader falls.



Marc Gafni could well turn out to be the hero of a spiritual epic—or, at least, a psychosexual whodunit blockbuster.

A rabbi and Biblical scholar with several published books and a recently approved doctoral dissertation from Oxford, Gafni presently lives in Salt Lake City. (He anonymously authored "Spiritually Incorrect," an occasional column that appeared last year in CATALYST.) He came to the new Zion two



Gafni teaching in happier times.

years ago from Tel Aviv, Israel, where he led a large, vibrant movement of Jews who lived on the alternative edge, beyond the fringes of organized religion. Perhaps too close to that edge, where dangerous things can happen—and for Gafni, they did.

Talking with people about Gafni, a certain pattern emerges: Here's a guy you've hung out with, watching TV and knocking back almond crunch, someone who calls up in the middle of the day and talks your head off, someone who has the usual knotty relational history. He's a friend of yours, a normal, somewhat eccentric guy. Then, little by little you realize that there's something kind of, well, saintly about him.

Stories about Gafni's actions lean toward the saintly as well: People say they have seen him go out of his way to bring estranged friends together. They've seen him take an entire room full of people through a journey of laughter and tears. They've felt an atmosphere around him so affectionate and wild that it sparks off energy most haven't felt since childhood. They've heard him speaking about God and human responsibility and what it means to take care of others with a wisdom

and nuance that makes them search their souls.

And even wilder—they know he is the subject of Internet stories that paint him as a guy who "harasses" women, a "sexual predator."

Everything you observe and intuit about him says "Really good person." The Internet gossip sites say "Really bad person." Then you get to see hundreds of documents proving the Internet stories run the gamut from distortion to out-and-out lies, reflecting all the most shadowy sides of the blogosphere. It begins to occur to you that something deep is going on here.

On the surface, it's a common story: A coalition of women accuse a charismatic spiritual leader of sexual misconduct. The stories sound convincing. It must be true. The leader falls.

Examine the evidence in this case, and you see something quite different: Years of recovered email and instant messages from the women involved, some as recent as three weeks before complaints were filed, flatly contradict their own stories. The messages show that every one of the women was quite enthusiastically involved with Gafni on her own initiative. What happened that caused them to band together and file complaints of harassment? And what caused their complaints to do so much damage? Spiritual politics, "victim feminism," Gafni's human complexities, and the Internet.

The more you get to know Gafni, the more you suspect he is being put through an epic spiritual test, what we might call the Test of Slander. It's actually part of the biography of countless other teachers whose lives didn't fit the "normal" social pattern and who ended up redefining a spiritual tradition. Gafni's story is still in process. Perhaps 25 years from now it will be told as a saga of purification, trial by fire and, hopefully, ultimate liberation.

In the meantime, Gafni—this larger-than-life presence tucked into the compact body of a playful 47-year-old—is living more or less anonymously in Salt Lake City.

The story we're about to tell has certain all too familiar elements: one more example of how, in the Internet age, false accusations can become as established as fact, and how a gifted teacher with an anti-establishment bent and a bohemian lifestyle can find his private life subjected to what legal scholar Allen Dershowitz called "sexual McCarthyism."

Rabbi Gafni—author of seven books, including the best-selling "Soul Prints," and a popular lecturer and workshop leader—was founder of Bayit Hadash, an alternative spiritual movement in Israel. The organization held retreats, classes and massive services, often gathering hundreds of enthusiasts for Gafni's celebratory Sabbath services, which included music, chanting and dancing. His lectures and classes on Jewish texts, and on the interface

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between spirituality, ethics, sexuality and what Western moral philosophers have called "the good life," were not only widely attended, but had brought thousands of disaffected young Jews back into conversation with their tradition.

Rabbi Gafni meets with the Dalai Lama at his residence in Dharamsala in 2005.



"Rabbi Gafni was doing something that had not been done in modern Israel," says Dr. Gabriel Cousens, who attended his teachings in Israel. "He was presenting the traditional Jewish teachings in a way that revealed not only the mystical experience embedded in the tradition, but also offered a powerful experience of ecstasy and community. Most importantly, however, he was the first modern Jewish teacher I met who taught that Judaism was at its core a path to liberation."

Born in Massachusetts in 1960, educated in a yeshiva (a Jewish religious high school), Gafni began teaching in the Orthodox community around New York City. From his early days as an apprentice rabbi and youth group leader, Gafni had a gift for bringing together the spiritual with the secular, working with people who wouldn't normally talk to each other, and creating communities. He was known as a passionately committed teacher. He spent time as a rabbi in Florida, tripling the size of a young congregation. Then he moved with his second wife and two children to Israel, where he was rabbi in a settlement on the border of the West Bank. In the '90s, he emerged as a popular public teacher in Jerusalem and then in Tel Aviv, writing books, lecturing to packed houses, and appearing at conferences and spiritual venues in the United States and Europe.

Gafni hosted a weekly hour-long national TV show in Israel for several years. In the U.S., he led crowded workshops on the alternative Jewish and spiritual scene. He taught

Gafni's former teachers and colleagues denounced him for promoting "pagan Judaism."

around the world, including appearances at important synagogues and the Harvard Negotiation Project. When terrorists blew up school buses in Israel, he presented a series of spots on national television urging people to hold on to their humanity in the face of horror. He has recorded dialogues with the Dalai Lama, Byron Katie, Ken Wilber and other spiritual and philosophical leaders. "Soul Prints" was a best-seller in this country, won the prestigious NAPRA Nautilus award as the best spirituality book of 2001 and was made into a PBS special.

And in a conservative society, he supported gay rights and the ordination of women. His teaching pointed out the presence of a hidden goddess element in the Jewish religion, and called for the re-emergence of the feminine in spirituality.

A career like this tends to arouse envy—even, or perhaps especially, in spiritual communities. "People would complain that Gafni took up too much space," says Gershon Winkler, himself an important Jewish teacher and author of many books, including "The Magic of the Ordinary." "After he fell, one guy told me that he was actually relieved, because some of Gafni's people now



Gafni among his students in Galilee, Israel

came to him." There appears to have been a cadre of colleagues, older teachers and even a few students who wanted him out of the way.

Gafni's main vulnerability was his counter-cultural and often bohemian lifestyle. Throughout his career, Gafni had several love affairs outside of marriage. "I tried to push the boundaries of what was possible. I experimented," Gafni admits. "I sometimes chose a moment of love over other loyalties. Sometimes I was right, sometimes dead wrong. Where I was wrong, I've tried to ask forgiveness."

During the period following his divorce from his third wife, his lovers included a few women who had worked with him in his community, taught with him, or served on the board of his organization. "I was working literally 24/7, teaching and traveling around the clock," he says. "It seemed natural to be involved with people who were part of my circle. At the time, in my hubris, disguised even from myself, it felt to me that there wasn't a moment free for anything like normal dating or personal life."

He says he kept these relationships private, not because they seemed inappropriate or "wrong," but because, like many people in his position, he preferred not to have his personal life the subject of gossip or attack.

One lover wrote after their relationship was over: "It's easy to love you and it has been beautiful to discover you, to feel you, to explore you." And added, "I'm grateful that we touched each other on this path." She then thanked him for being in "full intention and clarity" in their relationship and honoring her "sacred autonomy."

This woman would later file a complaint on the advice of a lawyer, saying that Gafni had promised to marry her to gain sexual relations—a felony in Israel, where they lived. This claim, and the claim that Gafni somehow manipulated her, is refuted by both the tone and content of literally hundreds of her emails to him.

In 2005, Ha'aretz, the leading Israeli newspaper, ran a glowing article on Gafni's work, stressing his belief that the feminine godhead and the softer, more erotic aspects of spirituality need to be restored to contemporary Judaism. The article was widely quoted, causing an incendiary reaction among rabbis in the Orthodox community. Traditionalists who felt threatened by his influence and provocative personal style objected to his stress on the goddess in Judaism, and some of Gafni's former teachers and colleagues denounced him for promoting "pagan Judaism." The Wikipedia entry on Gafni credits him—or accuses, it depends on how you read it—with leading the movement to bring eros back into Judaism.

At about that time, and some say as a direct result of the Ha'aretz spread, a rabbi who had clashed with Gafni in his youth gave a story about him to the proprietor of a website devoted to outing Jewish clerics alleged to be sexual predators. The site collects rumors, innuendos and complaints about rabbis, some of whom are undoubtedly people who indeed abused their position. But the site is also known for its maliciousness, venomous language, and for mixing fact with outright fiction.

The site's proprietor is Vicki Polin, who in 1989, under the name Rachel, presented herself on national daytime television as the survivor of a Jewish satanic cult which sacrificed babies. She

On the 'net: Lies Live Forever

BY JEFF BELL



the Internet, and a few "move ahead at any cost" bloggers, the story would have faded away.

What has both haunted and hunted Gafni is the relative ease at which rumors and lies have been mixed with more accurate information to paint a picture of Gafni as evil and predatory. Blogs index on the search engines far faster than then traditional websites do. Repeat a phrase or a name, over and over again, link it to other blogs, stories and other articles, and it jumps to the top of the search results in a short amount of time.

The nexus of the Gafni story would appear to be women falsely claiming victim status, bent on exacting some form of retribution which, in their view, matched the suffering at having not obtained exclusivity to Gafni and his affections. That is the center and the catalyst of Gafni's current nightmare. But it is, by no means, the whole of the problem.

Without the women who filed complaints against Marc Gafni, there would certainly be no story, at least not a story of this depth and magnitude. But without

Take a moment and think about search engine results. The majority of Internet users look no deeper than the first couple of pages of their search results. Top searches have a false weight of authority that can easily lead a reader to unconsciously lend credibility where none should exist.

The strange union of self-proclaimed advocate for The Awareness Center, Vicki Polin, and porn industry gossip blogger Luke Ford and their mutual effort to assail the reputation of Rabbi Gafni, and to continue those attacks despite the lack of anything new to write about, is bizarre at best and nefarious at worst.

A vocal member of the Memory Recovery Movement, which ruined thousands of lives in the 1980s, Vicki Polin has wrapped a skein of respectability around herself that, when viewed through the prism of her attacks on Gafni, seems patently false and hypocritical.

Polin maintains that she is the child of Satanic Jews who raped her on a regular basis and made her eat her own babies. She now claims to be a victim's advocate; but her advocacy seems to have taken all

the aspects of vigilante misanthrope, and the power of the blog is her weapon. Polin has a singular focus to not only expose, but to destroy the life and reputation of whatever person that falls into her sights, regardless of facts. Any Google search on her name serves up a fairly even return of Polin's attacks on rabbinical leaders, and pages written by victims of Polin's tactics.

Luke Ford has made a living as one of the world's foremost porn industry gossip columnists and, over the years, has owned and operated several different sites full of lewd pictures, stories and first person familiarity with the adult film industry. Ford also has an alter ego in which he calls himself "Luke Ford: your moral leader," and represents himself as a beacon of decency and Jewish activism.

Somehow, Ford and Polin have become compatriots and often work together in boosting their ratings. The cross-indexing between these two and their blogs has, most especially in the area of posts about Gafni and other Jewish leaders, helped push them further and further upward until, for the last two years, they've had ownership of the first page of most engines

Continued: SPIRITUALLY INCORRECT

When a woman retells the story of a sexual encounter and claims harassment, the man—if he does not have physical proof to the contrary—will likely be in deep trouble. The woman doesn't even have to seek legal redress—the complaint alone can sometimes be enough to get a professor or executive reprimanded or even fired. To complicate matters for the man, in Israel, sexual harassment is a criminal offense.

claims to have sacrificed—that is, murdered—at least one baby herself. She considers it her mission in life to report those whom she calls “Jewish abusers.” Ironically, the site so evokes the energy of anti-Semitic hate sites that several such hate sites link to hers.

In Gafni's case, the stories described two relationships, one when Gafni was 19, the other a one-time encounter when he was 24. Gafni insists neither involved more than petting, and that both were mutually engaged. Couched in the hate-speech style that has become so familiar in the blogosphere, the stories called Gafni a “known predator” who had “molested young women” and included purportedly first-person interviews with both of these women by Luke Ford, a former pornographer and a gossip columnist for the porn industry. Gafni's version of these

events is supported by two polygraph tests administered by Dr. Gordon Barland, one of the world's leading experts in the field.

The stories on the website make no attempt to distinguish fact from rumor, distorted memory, or skewed interpretation of events. Polin and Ford painted a teenage romance between 19-year-old Gafni and his 14-year-old girlfriend as “child molestation,” and among other things, accused him of changing his name to avoid his past. (In fact, Gafni had followed the common custom of hebraicizing his name when he moved to Israel, and always referred to his family name in his books and other publications.) All of this forms the complex background for what happened next.

On an evening in May 2006, Gafni landed in Tel Aviv after a 10-hour flight returning from a teaching trip to the United States. He expected to be met at the plane by his girlfriend.

As his plane touched down, he dialed the number of his program director to discuss logistics of a workshop scheduled for the next day. Instead he heard an unidentified feminine voice screeching, “You are finished! Go to [a certain lawyer's office in Tel Aviv] at midnight, or go to jail.” Gafni thought he had the wrong number. He called again. The same message. He began to tremble as he realized that something terrible was going on. Over the next several hours, he began to piece things together. A former personal assistant, who had been threatening the organization with legal action over back pay, and who



“His best friends basically left him for dead,” says Gershon Winkler.

over the previous year had sent him dozens of abusive emails, had gotten together with another woman to discuss Gafni. They discovered that Gafni had been intimately involved with both of them. We can't know what exactly motivated them from there. We do know what they did: They went to the Tel Aviv police and filed a complaint.

Sexual harassment laws have given women much-needed legal protection and gone a long way to support civil treatment of women everywhere. But when a woman tells the story of a sexual encounter and claims harassment, the man—guilty or innocent—will likely be in deep trouble if he does not have physical proof to the contrary. The woman doesn't even have to seek legal redress—the complaint alone can sometimes be enough to get a professor or executive reprimanded or even fired. To complicate matters for the man, in Israel, unlike anywhere else, sexual harassment is a criminal offense.

The women told the police that Gafni had, in one case, used his authority as an employer, and in the other, promised marriage to persuade her to have sex with him. They convinced other women, whom they discovered had been involved with Gafni over the years, to sign their affidavits. In fact, none of the women had been

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when their targets' names were searched.

What emerges on the Internet is a false image, based on rumor, presented as fact; all in opposition of the axiom “innocent until proven guilty.”

What makes Gafni's story so interesting to me is not so much that, with hundreds of pages of evidence that exonerate him from these false allegations, he can clear his name in a fair-minded setting, but, on the Internet, it will take him years of

expression. The growing influence of blogs and bloggers over the last handful of years speaks volumes about dissatisfaction with the media and generic culture. There also seems to be a need, sometimes nearing addiction, for mass distribution of self-expression held by these exhibitionists of the written word. The acceptance as “meaningful” granted to them by their own ever-expanding membership roster fuels the rapid growth of this amateur medium.

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Despite the potential to harm, blogging is the quintessential and idyllic evolution of American and international freedom of

I wrote my first blog post in 1996; long before, in time measured by Internet standards, the word “weblog” or “blog” was universally known and accepted into the mainstream lexicon. At the time, some were calling the very public self-publishing

of one's own opinions, criticisms, thoughts and life stories to the Internet a “vanity page,” an “online journal.”

My early posts were mostly lengthy, often ranting missives about politics with a lot of time, effort and kilobytes dumped into the 1996 Presidential race. It wasn't long before I received calls, during political primary season, from two different Republican campaigns asking who I was, who I worked for and what my website was about. They didn't like my analysis and they wanted me to stop.

These two different campaign representatives could not wrap their heads around the idea that I was just a guy, sitting in his Denver basement, self-publishing his opinions and analysis on the field of Republican candidates fighting for the GOP nomination. While the number of readers I had at the time would be laughable by today's standards, in 1996 it was enough to garner the attention of two presidential nomination campaigns.

There is power in the written word and that power is intensified when any person, from any background, can release those words, unfettered and unregulated, into

the world for anyone to digest.

Telling the truth, no matter how partisan your opinion, is an awesome responsibility, if you choose to view it that way. As the community of bloggers and online journalists continues to grow, so, too, do the numbers of the nefarious, the deluded and the predatory. For every handful of personal, political, entertainment or technology blogs online, whatever their motivation may be, there are always some who use their writing for some form of gain at the expense of others. That would appear to be the case regarding Gafni.

Reputation has always been a fragile thing, but the future of reputation is uncertain. Blogs have emerged as a quick, cheap and anonymous means of mass communication that can be used to further an agenda, talk about politics, share pictures of your family picnic or a weapon to destroy someone else's life. Things on the Internet never go away. Once you've been dragged through the mud, no matter how innocent you may be, somewhere, on the Internet, you're guilty forever.

Jeff Bell is the author of JMBell.org, one of the highest rated political blogs in Utah.

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John deJong

Marc Gafni today, living in Salt Lake City

"And I was here on the back roads of Utah to discover something about the divine feminine so that I might speak of her in new ways. I danced in real ecstasy for hours on end."

either employees or students of Gafni at the time the relationships began.

By the time Gafni arrived in Israel that night, the women had convinced his co-teacher, as well as key members of his staff, that they needed protection, and cited others as possible victims. Members of the community were prevented from speaking to Gafni by the women, who claimed that he was a danger to the community.

Gafni says no one asked for his side of the story or checked any facts with him. "It was like a weird dream. I had never sexually harassed anyone. I had proof. I went to my computer for the emails I'd exchanged with these women—there were tons of them."

To his shock, a key batch of relevant emails and other correspondence between himself and one of the complainants—his former assistant—were gone. They had been erased from his computer.

Worse than a weird dream, it was now a nightmare. He had no way of refuting the complaints. By this time, the story had been leaked to the Jewish press. Though many people in his community felt that Gafni was being railroaded, hysteria prevailed. Without consulting Rabbi Gafni, without cross-questioning the complainants or checking into their motives, a chain reaction was set in motion which resulted in the dissolution of Gafni's movement. Several newspapers published sensational articles chronicling Gafni's "downfall." One reported (falsely) that he had been

Sally Kempton, a former journalist, leading spiritual teacher and second wave feminist was asked what good might come from this story. She responded, "Marc has gone through a deep purification. He will be an even deeper, better teacher in the second half of his life than he was in the first. The question is, can the people involved move from victimhood to power and responsibility? If they can, then Marc, the women, and all the shadowy players behind the scenes, will offer us great hope for healing in our world."

accused of rape. Another (again, falsely) claimed that he had made promises to marry five women. Within a few days, Gafni's teaching work and the organization to which he had dedicated his life had been discredited and destroyed.

A group of Salt Lake attorneys helped Gafni recover the deleted data from his computer and then carefully review his correspondence with the women. "There is not a credible basis for legal action against [Gafni]," writes attorney Fredrick Thaler of Ray, Quinney Nebeker, a Salt Lake law firm, in a letter posted on Gafni's website. "The complaints have no merit," writes Charlotte Miller, who also served as Gafni's legal council.

However, like the many commentators who assumed that the accusations against the Duke lacrosse team were true, people moved to distance themselves from him immediately.

According to feminist writers such as Dafna Patai, Cathy Young, Laura Kipnis and Bell Hooks, the key reason for this distancing is fear. In a culture where truth is less important than perception, people are afraid to be associated with someone accused of sexual misconduct, even when they know the accusations are untrue. Associates fear liability, or being perceived as not protecting the ostensible victims—two consequences of defending the accused in a culture that assumes that women or groups of women always tell the truth about sexual harassment.

This belief persists despite data to the contrary, including the recent collapse of the case against the Duke lacrosse players, not to mention the historic experience of black men lynched because a white woman interpreted a casual glance as sexual harassment.

Feminist writers such as Laura Kipnis and Cristina Hoff Summers have written extensively to expose this kind of "victim feminism": a stance which assumes that in situations of this sort, the woman is always a helpless victim of male desire.

"His best friends basically left him for dead," says Gershon Winkler.

Gafni felt he had no choice but to return to the

United States to think through what he should do. In the pain and sorrow of those first few days, he decided that as the creator of the organization which had turned on him, he should take on himself responsibility for the dysfunctions that had led to the situation. He wrote a public letter claiming all spiritual responsibility for what had happened. Accepting the advice of a friend and mentor, he took personal responsibility for the "sickness" behind what had happened and volunteered to seek treatment. This seemed, at the time of trauma and confusion, to be the only way to defuse the growing frenzy. Without the missing emails, he had no proof of his innocence, and at that time he had no idea the disappeared computer files would be restored.

Gafni refused any interviews and for the next two years maintained public silence, allowing the stories that were circulating to stand as "truth." In the meantime, he began an intensive formal process of self-examination and inner work.

It was about this time that Gafni came to Salt Lake City at the invitation of a friend and teaching colleague, mediator and Zen teacher Diane Hamilton and her husband, former Utah chief justice Michael Zimmerman. Gafni was living quietly in a small home in Sugar House. Soon after we met, he told us about a pivotal event that had shown him both the depths of his fall, and the painful but spiritually profound path to turning the pain into compassion.

He had gone several times to Sabbath dinners at the house of a local family, mainly for the sake of experiencing community. One night, the host took him aside. "One of our guests read the Internet and says she can't sit at the table with you. I know it's not true, but she thinks you are a child molester," he told Gafni. "I have to ask you to leave and not come back. I'm sorry. There is nothing I can do."

Gafni realized that he—who just six months before would have been an honored guest at such a gathering—was in essence a pariah. "I was stunned at first to realize that people were looking at me through the lens of a hate site, and couldn't see who I am," he said. "That night, I was up all night, meditating about it, awash in agonized tears. Suddenly, in the midst of my grief, this profound feeling of joy came over me. In Hebrew wisdom, we speak of how the divine feminine, the Shekhinah, has been exiled by God, and lives as hidden sparks inside human souls. I realized that I was participating in the pain of the exiled Shekhinah, the sorrow of the divine feminine thrown out of the kingdom. I, like her, was wrongly exiled and sat in dust and ashes. We were together. As I realized this, my heart became so ecstatic that I began to dance."

"Then I remembered the hidden teaching about the old Hassidic masters. These famous rabbis would sometimes discard their robes and wander as beggars through the villages of Western Europe, knocking on the doors of wealthy devotees. Invariably, they would be thrown out by people who, if they had seen them in full regalia, would have honored them."

"It all fit together for me then."

"I had spent my life seeking after the goddess, trying to return the feminine to her place...and

Former SLC Mayor Rocky Anderson is founder and president of High Road for Human Rights and a nationally known anti-war activist. He is no stranger to character defamation, online and off. Anderson has read the documents on Gafni's situation and has this to say:

A sign of the escape from personal responsibility is the astounding incivility displayed when people can hide behind their anonymity or disregard the truth with reckless abandon. The ability to mislead, whether about one's identity or about the facts, seems to neutralize a sense of moral responsibility for many people.

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For those people, the truth be damned. And the reputations of others be damned. The Internet has opened the door to the most boorish, nasty, infantile instincts of people, most of whom would never have the nerve to say what they do if they were required to back up what they say with any facts.

Rabbi Marc Gafni has been a victim of a spiraling abandonment of responsibility. After emails from women with whom

he had relationships were deleted from his computer, complaints were made by the women that make it appear they were helpless, obtuse, easily fooled victims of a man who took advantage of them. The emails were recovered from Gafni's computer hard-drive. Reading them, it appears clear that those relationships actually had been the product of mutual consent and honest, loving disclosure. "Gee, I had a sexual relationship with Marc, but things didn't turn out how I had hoped, so I'll blame him for my part in it and hurt him however I can," is the subtext of the complaint. Any feminist should be appalled at the pretension of such utter powerlessness and lack of responsibility.

That isn't the end of it, however. The story became known to a woman who claims to have recovered the most bizarre memories of baby-sacrificing satanic rituals, and to a man who is a gossip columnist in the pornography industry, who smeared the claims all over the Internet. And they did it in the most salacious, outrageous manner. They're not required to prove their attacks. They just destroy a man's reputation and much of his life, then move on to the next person.

—Rocky Anderson

that in some extreme sense the Shekhinah was testing my love, and she had hurt me because in some sense I hadn't seen something about her. These relationships had hurt women I loved. Even while she was hurting me, she was embracing me. And I was here on the back roads of Utah to discover something about the divine feminine so that I might speak of her in new ways. I danced in real ecstasy for hours on end."

Gafni later shared the incident with his friend, Brother David Stendl-Rast, who was reminded of an anecdote about Saint Francis: A disciple once asked, "What would be for you the most perfect joy?" Francis replied that for him, perfect joy would be to seek shelter in

a house, be rejected and thrown out, and left to lie in the mud with the dogs.

Gafni says this teaching, which might have seemed wildly extreme and weird to him previously, actually described the profound spiritual opportunity that he had begun to see in this moment of his life. So along with examining his part in what he called the "contribution system" that had created this situation, and the qualities in himself that needed to change, Gafni also began a powerful inner journey into the subtleties of the masculine-feminine relationship.

"Sexuality creates wounds—sometimes mortal ones," he writes in an unpublished essay called "The Wounds of Love." "But if we learn to

live wide open even as we are hurt by love, then the divine wakes up to its own true nature. To be firm in your knowing of love, even when you are desperate, and to be strong in your heart of forgiveness even when you are betrayed, this is what it means to be holy."

Along with his inner work, Gafni began collecting documentary evidence to prove the falsity of the claims against him. He took polygraph tests with internationally recognized polygraph expert Gordon Barland which fully supported his assertion that the relationships with these women had been mutual, and had not resulted from any deception or inappropriate deployment of power on Gafni's part.

He underwent an extensive psychological evaluation with three independent evaluators. Their conclusions and his own were summarized by Paul J. Goodberg, M.A.: "I am convinced that Rabbi Gafni never abusively hurt or exploited anyone. He is completely reputable."

Ray, Quinney Nebeker turned his computer over to PeakSpan, LLC, a Salt Lake data recovery firm, which recovered valuable information and proved data had been intentionally removed.

"Of course, I regret with all my heart that anyone experienced hurt through their relationship with me. And, remember what Bono sings? 'We hurt each other and we do it again.' The key is what we do with our hurt," Gafni says. "But what I most deeply regret is that I allowed myself to jeopardize the work we were doing by engaging in these relationships. I believed that what we were doing was sharing love, and that therefore there was nothing ethically, and certainly not legally, wrong. I still believe that. But I also recognize that a spiritual teacher has to hold strong boundaries around his personal life. Even mutual relationships with powerful and autonomous women are a problem for a public teacher. Moreover, in retrospect, our relationship did not serve the highest growth of these women; it endangered our movement and let down my supporters, friends and partners. In that sense—although I was unconscious of it at the time—they were unethical relationships and I regret that deeply."

But even by Israel's strict standard, in no way did he break the law.

Gafni has contracts for several new books and is beginning to teach again. He has been invited to

create and host a documentary movie that uses the frame of his story to look into contemporary sexual and spiritual politics, and how rumor, innuendo and hysteria can destroy a life. And to show how a life can be rebuilt in love without bitterness. Most of all, he seems committed to helping foster a social justice movement that works to end genocide, human trafficking and sexual slavery in the world. Gafni seems determined not to attack his accusers, unless they leave him with no choice, but rather to facilitate healing.

"It is the challenge of the spiritual practitioner," says Diane Musho Hamilton, "and especially that of a teacher, to become intimate with the processes of life and death, of destruction and of transformation. In this way, everything that arises, whether it appears as good or bad, right or wrong, fair or unjust, is regarded as the path. To walk it requires great fearlessness, an abundance of compassion, a willingness to accept blame, and the offering of forgiveness."

Sally Kempton, a former journalist, leading spiritual teacher and second wave feminist was asked what good might come from this story. She responded, "Marc has gone through a deep evolution. He will be an even deeper, better teacher in the second half of his life than he was in the first. The question is, can the people involved move from victimhood to power and responsibility? If they can, then Marc, the women, and all the shadowy players behind the scenes, will offer us great hope for healing in our world."

The third act of this drama has yet to be written. Can this spiritual teacher come back from the dead? The answer is most likely "yes," due to Gafni's unflagging persistence. Did the obloquy and ignominy of the last two years break his spirit? No, though it has left some scars. Yet, throughout the whole of this nightmare, in circumstances that could easily, and forgivably, break the spirit of nearly any other person, Gafni has managed to hold onto his chronic optimism and genuine love for humanity. ♦

Jeff Bell is a writer, part-time indie filmmaker, musician, wonk and political consultant. He is the former Democratic National Committee communications director for Utah and former president of the Children's Justice Corps. Greta deJong is editor and publisher of CATALYST. For more about Marc Gafni, visit WWW.MARCGAFNI.COM