

The New York Times

Ultra-Orthodox Jews Shun Their Own for Reporting Child Sexual Abuse

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Mordechai Jungreis, right, walks his mentally disabled son, 16, home from school in Brooklyn. Credit James Estrin/The New York Times

The first shock came when Mordechai Jungreis learned that his mentally disabled teenage son was being molested in a Jewish ritual bathhouse in Brooklyn. The second came after Mr. Jungreis complained, and the man accused of the abuse was arrested.

Old friends started walking stonily past him and his family on the streets of Williamsburg. Their landlord kicked them out of their apartment. Anonymous messages filled their answering machine, cursing Mr. Jungreis for turning in a fellow Jew. And, he said, the mother of a child in a wheelchair confronted Mr. Jungreis's mother-in-law, saying the same man had molested her son, and she "did not report this crime, so why did your son-in-law have to?"

By cooperating with the police, and speaking out about his son's abuse, Mr. Jungreis, 38, found himself at the painful forefront of an issue roiling his insular Hasidic community. There have been glimmers of change as a small number of ultra-Orthodox Jews, taking on longstanding religious and cultural norms, have begun to report child sexual abuse accusations against members of their own communities. But those who come forward often encounter intense

intimidation from their neighbors and from rabbinical authorities, aimed at pressuring them to drop their cases.

Abuse victims and their families have been expelled from religious schools and synagogues, shunned by fellow ultra-Orthodox Jews and targeted for harassment intended to destroy their businesses. Some victims' families have been offered money, ostensibly to help pay for therapy for the victims, but also to stop pursuing charges, victims and victims' advocates said.

"Try living for one day with all the pain I am living with," Mr. Jungreis, spent and distraught, said recently outside his new apartment on Williamsburg's outskirts. "Did anybody in the Hasidic community in these two years, in Borough Park, in Flatbush, ever come up and look my son in the eye and tell him a good word? Did anybody take the courage to show him mercy in the street?"

A few blocks away, Pearl Engelman, a 64-year-old great-grandmother, said her community had failed her too. In 2008, her son, Joel, told rabbinical authorities that he had been repeatedly groped as a child by a school official at the United Talmudical Academy in Williamsburg. The school briefly removed the official but denied the accusation. And when Joel turned 23, too old to file charges under the state's statute of limitations, they returned the man to teaching.

"There is no nice way of saying it," Mrs. Engelman said. "Our community protects molesters. Other than that, we are wonderful."

Keeping to Themselves

The New York City area is home to an estimated 250,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews — the largest such community outside of Israel, and one that is growing rapidly because of its high birthrate. The community is concentrated in Brooklyn, where many of the ultra-Orthodox are Hasidim, followers of a fervent spiritual movement that began in 18th-century Europe and applies Jewish law to every aspect of life.

Their communities, headed by dynastic leaders called rebbes, strive to preserve their centuries-old customs by resisting the contaminating influences of the outside world. While some ultra-Orthodox rabbis now argue that a child molester should be reported to the police, others strictly adhere to an ancient prohibition against mesirah, the turning in of a Jew to non-Jewish authorities, and consider publicly airing allegations against fellow Jews to be chillul Hashem, a desecration of God's name.

There are more mundane factors, too. Some ultra-Orthodox Jews want to keep abuse allegations quiet to protect the reputation of the community, and the family of the accused. And rabbinical authorities, eager to maintain control,

worry that inviting outside scrutiny could erode their power, said Samuel Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College.

“They are more afraid of the outside world than the deviants within their own community,” Dr. Heilman said. “The deviants threaten individuals here or there, but the outside world threatens everyone and the entire structure of their world.”

Scholars believe that abuse rates in the ultra-Orthodox world are roughly the same as those in the general population, but for generations, most ultra-Orthodox abuse victims kept silent, fearful of being stigmatized in a culture where the genders are strictly separated and discussion of sex is taboo. When a victim did come forward, it was generally to rabbis and rabbinical courts, which would sometimes investigate the allegations, pledge to monitor the accused, or order payment to a victim, but not refer the matter to the police.

“You can destroy a person’s life with a false report,” said Rabbi Chaim Dovid Zwiebel, the executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America, a powerful ultra-Orthodox organization, which last year said that observant Jews should not report allegations to the police unless permitted to do so by a rabbi.

Rabbinic authorities “recommend you speak it over with a rabbi before coming to any definitive conclusion in your own mind,” Rabbi Zwiebel said.

When ultra-Orthodox Jews do bring abuse accusations to the police, the same cultural forces that have long kept victims silent often become an obstacle to prosecutions.

In Brooklyn, of the 51 molesting cases involving the ultra-Orthodox community that the district attorney’s office says it has closed since 2009, nine were dismissed because the victims backed out. Others ended with plea deals because the victims’ families were fearful.

“People aren’t recanting, but they don’t want to go forward,” said Rhonnie Jaus, a sex crimes prosecutor in Brooklyn. “We’ve heard some of our victims have been thrown out of schools, that the person is shunned from the synagogue. There’s a lot of pressure.”

The degree of intimidation can vary by neighborhood, by sect and by the prominence of the person accused.

In August 2009, the rows in a courtroom at State Supreme Court in Brooklyn were packed with rabbis, religious school principals and community leaders. Almost all were there in solidarity with Yona Weinberg, a bar mitzvah tutor and licensed social worker from Flatbush who had been convicted of molesting two boys under age 14.

Justice Guston L. Reichbach looked out with disapproval. He recalled testimony about how the boys had been kicked out of their schools or summer camps after bringing their cases, suggesting a “communal attitude that seeks to blame, indeed punish, victims.” And he noted that, of the 90 letters he had received praising Mr. Weinberg, not one displayed “any concern or any sympathy or even any acknowledgment for these young victims, which, frankly, I find shameful.”

“While the crimes the defendant stands convicted of are bad enough,” the judge said before sentencing Mr. Weinberg to 13 months in prison, “what is even more troubling to the court is a communal attitude that seems to impose greater opprobrium on the victims than the perpetrator.”

Silenced by Fear

Intimidation is rarely documented, but just two weeks ago, a Hasidic woman from [Kiryas Joel](#), N.Y., in Orange County, filed a startling statement in a criminal court, detailing the pressure she faced after telling the police that a Hasidic man had molested her son.

“I feel 100 percent threatened and very scared,” she said in her statement. “I feel intimidated and worried about what the consequences are going to be. But I have to protect my son and do what is right.”

Last year, her son, then 14, told the police that he had been offered \$20 by a stranger to help move some boxes, but instead, the man brought him to a motel in Woodbury, removed the boy’s pants and masturbated him.

The police, aided by the motel’s security camera, identified the man as Joseph Gelbman, then 52, of Kiamesha Lake, a cook who worked at a boys’ school run by the Vizhnitz Hasidic sect. He was arrested, and the intimidation ensued. Rabbi Israel Hager, a powerful Vizhnitz rabbi in Monsey, N.Y., began calling the mother, asking her to cease her cooperation with the criminal case and, instead, to bring the matter to a rabbinical court under his jurisdiction, according to the mother’s statement to the court. Rabbi Hager did not return repeated calls seeking comment.

“I said: ‘Why? He might do this again to other children,’” the mother said in the statement. The mother, who asked that The New York Times not use her name to avoid identifying her son, told the police that the rabbi asked, “What will you gain from this if he goes to jail?” and said that, in a later call, he offered her \$20,000 to pay for therapy for her son if the charges were dropped.

On April 24, three days before the case was set for trial, the boy was expelled from his school. When the mother protested, she said, the principal threatened to report her for child abuse.

Prosecutors, against the wishes of the boy's parents, settled the case on April 27. Mr. Gelbman was given three years' probation after pleading guilty to endangering the welfare of a child.

Mr. Jungreis, the Williamsburg father, had a similar experience. He first suspected that his son was being molested after he came home with blood in his underwear at age 12, and later was caught touching another child on the bus. But, Mr. Jungreis said, the school principal warned him to stay silent. Two years later, the boy revealed that he had been molested for years by a man he saw at a mikvah, a ritual bath that observant Jews visit for purification.

Mr. Jungreis, knowing the prohibition on calling secular authorities, asked several rabbis to help him report the abuse, but, he said, they told him they did not want to get involved. Ultimately, he found a rabbi who told him to take his son to a psychologist, who would be obligated to notify law enforcement. "That way you are not the moser," he said the rabbi told him, using the Hebrew word for informer. The police arrested Meir Dascalowitz, then 27, who is now awaiting trial.

Prosecution of intimidation is rare. Victims and their supporters say that is because rabbinical authorities are politically powerful; prosecutors say it is because there is rarely enough evidence to build a criminal case. "The intimidation often works, at least in the short run," said Laura Pierro, the head of the special victims unit at the Ocean County prosecutor's office in New Jersey.

In 2010, Ms. Pierro's agency indicted Shaul Luban for witness tampering: he had sent a threatening text message to multiple recipients, urging the Orthodox Jewish community of Lakewood, N.J., to pressure the family of an 11-year-old abuse victim not to cooperate with prosecutors. In exchange for having his record cleared, Mr. Luban agreed to spend about a year in a program for first-time offenders.

Mr. Luban and others "wanted the phone to ring off the hook to withdraw the complaint from our office," the Ocean County prosecutor, Marlene Lynch Ford, said.

Threats to Advocates

The small cadre of ultra-Orthodox Jews who have tried to call attention to the community's lack of support for sexual abuse victims have often been targeted with the same forms of intimidation as the victims themselves.

Rabbi Nuchem Rosenberg of Williamsburg, for example, has been shunned by communal authorities because he maintains [a telephone number](#) that features his impassioned lectures in Yiddish, Hebrew and English imploring victims to

call 911 and accusing rabbis of silencing cases. He also shows up at court hearings and provides victims' families with advice. His call-in line gets nearly 3,000 listeners a day.

In 2008, fliers were posted around Williamsburg denouncing him. One depicted a coiled snake, with Mr. Rosenberg's face superimposed on its head. "Nuchem Snake Rosenberg: Leave Tainted One!" it said in Hebrew. The local Satmar Hasidic authorities banned him from their synagogues, and a wider group of 32 prominent ultra-Orthodox rabbis and religious judges signed an order, published in a community newspaper, formally ostracizing him.

"The public must beware, and stay away from him, and push him out of our camp, not speak to him, and even more, not to honor him or support him, and not allow him to set foot in any synagogue until he returns from his evil ways," the order said in Hebrew.

"They had small children coming to my house and spitting on me and on my children and wife," Rabbi Rosenberg, 61, said in an interview.

Rabbi Tzvi Gluck, 31, of Queens, the son of a prominent rabbi and an informal liaison to secular law enforcement, began helping victims after he met troubled teenagers at [Our Place](#), a help center in Brooklyn, and realized that sexual abuse was often the root of their problems. It was when he began helping the teenagers report cases to the police that he also received threats.

In February, for example, he received a call asking him to urge an abuse victim to abandon a case. "A guy called me up and said: 'Listen, I want you to know that people on the street are talking about what they can do to hurt you financially. And maybe speak to your children's schools, to get your kids thrown out of school.' "

Rabbi Gluck said he had helped at least a dozen ultra-Orthodox abuse victims bring cases to the Brooklyn district attorney in recent years, and each time, he said, the victim came under heavy pressure to back down. In a case late last year that did not get to the police, a 30-year-old molested a 14-year-old boy in a Jewish ritual bath in Brooklyn, and a rabbi "made the boy apologize to the molester for seducing him," he said.

"If a guy in our community gets diagnosed with cancer, the whole community will come running to help them," he said. "But if someone comes out and says they were a victim of abuse, as a whole, the community looks at them and says, 'Go jump in a lake.' "

Traces of Change

Awareness of child sexual abuse is increasing in the ultra-Orthodox community. Since 2008, hundreds of adult abuse survivors have told their stories, mostly anonymously, on blogs and radio call-in shows, and to victims' advocates. Rabbi-vetted books like "Let's Stay Safe," aimed at teaching children what to do if they are inappropriately touched, are selling well.

The response by communal authorities, however, has been uneven.

In March, for example, Satmar Hasidic authorities in Williamsburg took what advocates said was an unprecedented step: They posted a Yiddish sign in synagogues warning adults and children to stay away from a community member who they said was molesting young men. But the sign did not urge victims to call the police: "With great pain we must, according to the request of the brilliant rabbis (may they live long and good lives), inform you that the young man," who was named, "is, unfortunately, an injurious person and he is a great danger to our community."

In Crown Heights, where the [Chabad-Lubavitch](#) Hasidic movement has its headquarters, there has been more significant change. In July 2011, a religious court declared that the traditional prohibition against mesirah did not apply in cases with evidence of abuse. "One is forbidden to remain silent in such situations," said the ruling, signed by two of the court's three judges.

Since then, five molesting cases have been brought from the neighborhood — "as many sexual abuse-related arrests and reports as there had been in the past 20 years," said Eliyahu Federman, a lawyer who helps victims in Crown Heights, citing public information.

Mordechai Feinstein, 19, helped prompt the ruling by telling the Crown Heights religious court that he had been touched inappropriately at age 15 by Rabbi Moshe F. Keller, a Lubavitcher who ran a foundation for at-risk youth and whom Mr. Feinstein had considered his spiritual mentor.

Last week, Rabbi Keller was sentenced in Criminal Court to three years' probation for endangering the welfare of a child. And Mr. Feinstein, who is no longer religious, is starting a campaign to encourage more abuse victims to come forward. He is working with two prominent civil rights attorneys, Norman Siegel and Herbert Teitelbaum, who are asking lawyers to provide free assistance to abuse victims frustrated by their dealings with prosecutors.

"The community is a garden; there are a lot of beautiful things about it," Mr. Feinstein said. "We just have to help them weed out the garden and take out the things that don't belong there."

Correction: May 11, 2012

A previous version of this article misspelled the surname of the executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America as Zweibel.

Friday: The Brooklyn district attorney is criticized for his handling of ultra-Orthodox Jewish child sex-abuse cases.

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