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Wednesday, September 17, 2008 / 17 Elul 5768

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Hikind Reports Second Reichman Allegation

New development comes on heels of Joel Engelman's charges; assemblyman stymied by family's fear of going to police.



Assemblyman Dov Hikind is aggressively pursuing his crusade against child molestation in Brooklyn, despite community protests.

by Hella Winston
Special To The Jewish Week

A second former student of Rabbi Avrohom Reichman alleged Tuesday that the Satmar yeshiva teacher sexually molested him as a child, State Assemblyman Dov Hikind reported this week. But, reflecting an endemic problem known well by law enforcement authorities, Hikind said that despite his entreaties, the alleged victim and his family refuse to report the case to the police.

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“Just an hour ago, I had a man here I know, who shocked me and told me that this same person molested his son,” Hikind said, referring to Rabbi Reichman. “I told him, come on, let’s go [to the authorities].” But, Hikind added, “He absolutely will not do anything.”

The father, “a chasidish guy from Williamsburg,” told Hikind that his son, is now “looking to get engaged” — a goal certain “to be imperiled due to the stigma of being a victim and the communal apathy toward “informing” to the secular authorities, were he to go public with his charges.

Hikind reported that the former student is now “18 or 19,” which means Rabbi Reichman’s alleged acts remain within the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution. The father told Hikind that when his son was in elementary school, Rabbi Reichman had regularly touched him in “inappropriate places.”

“The guy was giving me all the encouragement in the world,” Hikind reported, referring to the politician’s recent push against what he believes is a serious pedophilia problem in Orthodox Brooklyn. “He was cursing [Rabbi Reichman] furiously. He’s telling me, you gotta do, you’ve gotta do. But I couldn’t get him to move to first base. This is an example of why we’re having such difficulties.”

The development was but the latest in a recent rash of rabbinic sexual molestation allegations in Brooklyn’s Orthodox neighborhoods. Last month, Joel Engelman, now 23, filed suit against Rabbi Reichman, the Satmar bungalow colony where he worked and the school that employs him, United Talmudical Academy, in connection with sexual molestation he says he suffered at Rabbi Reichman’s hands at age 8. But because Engelman’s age puts the alleged acts beyond the statute of limitations for criminal prosecution or civil suit, Engelman’s lawyer is seeking entrée to the court with a novel legal theory, the success of which is uncertain.

A secretary for an administrator at United Talmudical Academy said Wednesday the school’s “administration has said we will not give any information on this case.”

Last April, Rabbi Yehuda Kolko of Yeshiva Torah Temimah in Flatbush was convicted on two counts of child endangerment. Several of his former students have filed suit against him, the school and its administrator, Rabbi Lipa Margulies, who, they alleged, continued to employ Rabbi Kolko despite numerous warnings about his conduct.

Another alleged abuser, Rabbi Avrohom Mondrowitz, now awaits extradition from Israel to Brooklyn, where he has been charged with sexual abuse of children while working as a child counselor out of his home.

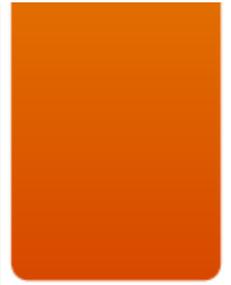
Many say that the few cases in which people have come forward — often as adults — constitute just the tip of an iceberg, and that the communal leadership in Brooklyn Orthodox communities are in denial about their situation.

Hikind, who has made the issue a personal crusade over the last couple of months, says he has assembled a dossier of “hundreds” of cases. With the help of a community task force he is now seeking to form, he plans to assemble a registry of alleged abusers based on alleged victims whose charges the panel finds credible. He has threatened to broadcast the alleged abusers’ names if rabbinic leaders do not then act to keep them out of community schools.

Michael Dowd, an attorney prominent in this area of law, said Hikind’s plan would increase the legal liability of school administrators and community rabbinic leaders by robbing them of the excuse of ignorance if the alleged abusers molest again.

But Hikind’s own legal position once he has assembled his information could be problematic, he said.

“As an assemblyman, if [Hikind] learns of crimes that are presently



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prosecutable, what would compel him not to disclose this to the DA?," he asked.

Dowd, who is representing the plaintiffs suing Torah Temimah and Rabbi Margulies, said Orthodox communities may believe they have the right to resolve such issues internally. But "in a pluralistic state — and by that I mean both New York and the United States — we don't get to excuse illegal conduct because of our religion."

Hikind affirmed the legitimacy of this question. He said he has scheduled a meeting for next week to determine just how his task force will deal with this issue.

"It's an unbelievable responsibility that rests on us," Hikind said, referring to the information he has now amassed.

Meanwhile, Dr. Benzion Twerski, who had been tapped to head Hikind's Task Force but abruptly resigned from it last week, now denies he left due to threats to his safety.

"The intimidation is primarily based on the shame that my family would endure," he told The Jewish Week.

In a letter posted last week on the Orthodox news blog Voz Is Neias, Twerski elaborated, "For several days, I was approached by individuals, some stating that they would cross the street if they were to meet me while walking with their children. Others told me they would not accept my child into their class if assigned. Others used euphemisms that I refuse to repeat. Family members were likewise confronted by all sorts of comments and phone calls. My married children had been told to fear ever getting shidduchim [marriage partners] for their children."

Last week, Rabbi Twerski told The Jewish Week he was being "prosecuted in the street for daring to join such a venture" and had resolved to quit "to protect myself, my family and reputation."

"He was basically forced to resign," Hikind said then. "He was literally put up against the wall. ... The point is they got to him, they threatened him."

But Twerski stressed this week that he was not in any physical danger.

"The implication is that I need bodyguards to move around the community. That is simply not true. I walk the streets in Borough Park with as much safety as anyone else."

Pressed on whether he seriously feared for the marriage prospects of his young grandchildren, Twerski said, "It's not that I'm fearing that my grandchildren won't have who to marry. That would be silly. The idea over here is — and this is the way my children said it to me — we don't to have to live in shame. The reality is that shame about all of this is not going to change quickly. And basically I would have chosen to force my children to live with that. The cause is a noble one. The question is, the process. ... This is really, really delicate."

Indeed, despite declarations by both men of a shared vision for the community task force, Twerski appeared to significantly differ from Hikind in some respects on this point.

Hikind, for example, appears determined to broadcast the names of alleged child molesters if communal leaders do not act. And he consistently urges individuals who have been molested to go immediately to secular law enforcement authorities with their accounts.

Twerski told The Jewish Week, "There's got to be something that takes the appropriate level of caution. The ones that should get reported should, and very few people say differently. But the question is how to go about doing that so you don't put the wrong guy there."

He believes allegations need to first be verified within the community, though by who is unclear. He conceded that the police have the best expertise to investigate such allegations but seemed to favor a system in which "an independent panel, with poskim [experts on religious law] and

professionals on it, completely external to the school” would look into matters first.

Twerski said it might also be possible for the school in question to carry out the investigation but noted, “You can’t leave it completely internal because that creates an easy opportunity to cover it all up.”

Whatever the ultimate makeup of the initial inquiry panel, it appeared implicit in Twerski’s vision that the initiative on how to handle such an allegation would be communal — and lay specifically with communal leaders— rather than with the individual alleged victim.

“We do have to have a system that allows the right thing to be done,” he said. “The people who have to get reported will. There’s going to be people that the community accepts widely as the ones that say, we authorize going to court.”

The system has “been misused in the past,” Twerski acknowledged. “[But] I believe it’s been misused because of a tremendous lack of knowledge. I think people simply don’t know, there are rabbis who don’t know. There’s a lot of education that needs to go on.”

“The lack of knowledge is staggering and very bothersome,” he said. “It’s evolution not a revolution. It’s not going to happen that fast. The tendency is that the community responds with fear to drastic moves.”

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