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'Shame,' not threats, led to resignation

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Dov Hikind will name new leader to task force on abuse

By Michael Orbach

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New York State Assemblyman Dov Hikind pledges to press on with an effort to end child sexual abuse in the Orthodox community despite the sudden resignation of the leader of his newly formed task force.

“If you have a conscience, how can you not address this?” Hikind told The Jewish Star after Rabbi Benzion Twerski, a clinical psychologist, announced his resignation on Sept. 10, less than a week after Hikind tapped him to lead the task force. “I am committed to those in pain. I will not stop.”

In an hour-long interview, Rabbi Twerski stated that he resigned because he felt that his adult children were being pressured from within their Chasidic community over his public dealings with the issue of sexual abuse. He said his children asked him to resign.

“You have to be moser nefesh, not someone else’s nefesh,” Rabbi Twerski said. “I don’t have it at my discretion to force my children to live in shame.”

Rabbi Twerski clarified that he had not been threatened, as reported in The Jewish Week.

“If anyone made any threats that involved my safety, I didn’t hear a word of them,” he said. “I felt threatened and my feeling of threat is based solely on my family living what they feel is a life of shame.”

He said that he spoke to The Jewish Week via a series of brief e-mails and stressed he used the word prosecuted, not persecuted.

“I was judged,” he said. “I always felt safe to walk the streets.”

An email from Rabbi Twerski quoted in The Jewish Week reads, “to protect myself, my family, and my reputation, I decided to withdraw from the project.”

Rabbi Twerski voiced concern to a reporter about the public nature that Assemblyman Hikind’s crusade has taken, which may have been a factor in his resignation.

“Maybe we’ve misjudged what the community is ready to listen to. There may have been some expectations that the community is ready and it’s just not ready yet. It’s not because we’re trying to protect molesters. I think it has a lot more to do with the fact that we’re dealing with a sensitive issue and you need to discuss it in a way that’s sensitive,” Rabbi Twerski said.

Another therapist, who requested anonymity, said that he had received threats because of his activities concerning child abuse in the Orthodox community. He is Orthodox, lives and works in the Five Towns and treats patients across the spectrum from Charedi to Modern Orthodox. His children were threatened, he said, with not being accepted into yeshivot or for shidduchim, and he was threatened with financial ruin.

“There is this situation where there is this virtue police trying to dampen down reality and say it doesn’t exist,” the man told The Jewish Star.

Reformers in the Orthodox community so far have faced an uphill battle.

“There is a problem in our community in which people who try to address issues that the community has swept under the carpet are intimidated by a sensibility ... that anyone who tries to change the status quo is a threat,” said Dr. Asher Lipner, a psychologist who works in the frum community.

The mission of the new taskforce is to collect information concerning suspected child molesters and to make that information available to schools. The taskforce also intended to develop a protocol to deal with sexual abuse in the Orthodox community. In Rabbi Twerski's words, the mission was to develop a policy "sensitive to secular law [and] to Shulchan Aruch," that could be presented to the rabbinical leadership. Hikind said that Rabbi Twerski would be replaced.

According to Hikind, a sexual abuse hotline he set up has been inundated with callers telling stories of abuse inside the Orthodox community — perpetrated, the callers say, by rabbis, teachers and community members. His office has also met with accused pedophiles, since most victims in the Brooklyn community are afraid to press charges for fear of social stigma.

"If you're a child molester, the best community to come to is Borough Park, Flatbush, Lakewood or Monroe. Your chances of being arrested are much smaller because people don't press charges," Hikind said. "Even if a rabbi gets kicked out of a yeshiva for doing things, he goes to another yeshiva. No one does anything about it."

While he would not name names or reveal other details, Hikind says some of the cases his office is dealing with have come from the Five Towns and Far Rockaway. He also said he met with a number of Long Island-based therapists to discuss the issue.

Some therapists told The Jewish Star that there are some distinctions between the cases occurring in the Five Towns and ones in Brooklyn.

"In terms of my own practice, a lot of the cases in Brooklyn center around teacher/rebbe student abuse," said Gavriel Fagin. He is a forensic social worker and adjunct professor at Yeshiva University's Wurzweiler School of Social Work, who lives in Woodmere but maintains a practice in Brooklyn.

"The situations that I've been involved in the Five Towns, by and large, have been with older community members with younger community members. That could be a 17-year-old with a 9-year-old; a 25-year-old with an 1-year-old. But it has not been a teacher-student interaction," Fagin said.

Norman Blumenthal, a psychologist affiliated with Chai Lifeline and North Shore-Long Island Jewish Medical Center, declined to comment on specific cases, but said: "I think we have to sit down with rabbis and educators and work this issue into the curriculum. We have to teach children to protect themselves. The corollary to that is that we also need to teach our children how to deal with their sexual urges and how to address them because we're not really addressing that. We need to start talking to them about a Torah perspective on sexual urges and expressions."

Hikind is confident that once the taskforce's work is presented to rabbinical leaders, they will act.

"I'm not saying we're going to solve the problem, we're going to make a difference," Hikind said. "When you get one pedophile off the street, do you know how many children you save?"

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