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Borough Park, NY - Exclusive to VIN News - Dr. Benzion Twerski In His Own Words Address His Departure From Askuna's

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Borough Park, NY - I am taking a few minutes to make some statements in response to the article about my departure from Dov Hikind's project and the events that triggered this.

Firstly, I have extreme respect for Dov Hikind, and I share in his mission to make a difference in this painful and destructive issue. I was eager to join with him to create a Task Force that would actually lead to reduction of this terrible problem while doing everything from within the community. It is with sadness that I left the position, and I will always to continue to consider Dov a good colleague and friend. I know he feels the same.

For quite some years, I had invested time and effort, without compensation, for various projects that were being done for the Klal. Even at times when my own financial situation was difficult, I extended myself at great cost for the hatzolas nefashos of youth at risk, addictions, etc. I am not interested in writing my own hesped, but there is much that has never been publicized and won't be. My expectations were that the mission that I was entering would be understood as something that will be done properly and sensitively. It seems that some understood this quite erroneously.

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 that 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 for their children. Basically, I was left to choose between abandoning my family for this mission, or to take the painful step that I did.

Molestation is underestimated in our community. I never proclaimed it an epidemic. I have not found any reliable statistics. But each victim is a precious neshomoh, an "olam molei" that is totally destroyed. Some victims leave the derech, others struggle with post traumatic stress disorder, some have major hurdles in establishing their own married lives, and still others become molesters themselves. There are frequent comments such as "It does not happen in my yeshiva" which constitutes denial. Perhaps there are no incidents, but one never knows. We're talking about things that occur in secrecy. I never looked at this problem as one of quantity. I am concerned with the severity. Even the minutest percentage of foreign objects in food will prompt a recall. Our children deserve a zero tolerance for violations of their safety. And for those who insinuated that I was going to go after yeshivos and mosdos hachinuch, I will add that the abuse that occurs in these holy settings is a small percentage of what occurs in various other locations. To combat the problem, we need to begin somewhere.

The intent of the Task Force was to devise systems that would be implemented by the yeshivos themselves to accept complaints, evaluate them, and move the cases onto the next level, whatever was determined by a body of individuals that would include poskim. No fox guarding the henhouse

either, as the system would comprise individuals from outside the yeshiva as well to prevent denial and bias from interfering with the process. Part of this process would help filter out complaints that are baseless, either by exaggeration, inaccuracy, or pure fabrication. To consider this project a new "abuse clinic", or a molestation police brigade is completely groundless.

So I spent several days watching these gross misperceptions feed the mouths of "holchei rochil". Not one person called me to inquire about the mission, and there was never a chance to explain any of this to anyone before the hatchet began swinging.

Most bothersome to me is that this occurred during Chodesh Elul, when we all need to be doing some self-exploration - cheshbon hanefesh and teshuvah. We will need to face the upcoming yemai hadin, where we will each stand in our individual judgments. I will face Avinu Malkeinu with the position that "I tried to help Your children but they refused to let me." What will the "holchei rochil" offer in their defense? "Hashem, we just shot down an "osek betzorchei tzibbur be'emunoh". You shot the wrong person.

I am not personally offended. I have learned to tolerate being called names. I've been around a little. I grieve for the work that could have been done, and my tefilah is that someone capable is found who can see this mission through to success. I grieve for the pain and anger that this whole situation caused for myself, my family, for Dov Hikind, and for all others who recognize the seriousness of the mission. I grieve for the pain and suffering that innocent neshamos will experience in the absence of a system that could stop it. The flak will eventually fade, but the damage has been done. If nothing else, it is a really serious lesson in hilchos lashon horah.

In reality, every frum Yid benefits from the things that askanim do. From intervening with governmental matters, legal issues, dealing with yeshivos, getting streets blocked for various events, and others too numerous to mention, we all derive much benefit from what they do. Nearly all, or perhaps absolutely all, function selflessly. Hatzoloh, Shomrim, and Chaverim are totally volunteer staffed. Since when do we carelessly and viciously attack an askan? Was there any posek asked about doing this? Was this a campaign by a group or individual, or was this just the street gossip fueling itself? I may never know. But I have been sensitized away from participating in askonus.

I already contacted others whose projects are precious and worthy, and withdrew from taking any askonus role. Without any hesitation, I will share my thoughts and opinions with any of them, including Dov. But no one will be able to hold me responsible for something I did not do.

To all the voices in the street that made this happen, my conscience is clear entering the days of selichos and yemai hadin. Are yours?

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