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Cover Story

Ner Israel Rabbi Alleged Abuser

Phil Jacobs 08/31/07

The whispering got louder in the summer of 2006. Rabbi Moshe Eisemann, 71, a beloved longtime Ner Israel Rabbinical College scholar, teacher and author, was associated with the words "alleged molester."



Rabbi Moshe Eisemann: Former students allege sexual abuse and a respected Baltimore rabbi is believed to have investigated the case. (Photo Provided)

A Baltimore-area pulpit rabbi and Ner Israel colleague left Rabbi Eisemann off the invitation list to his daughter's wedding, because of the uncertainty of it all.

The blogs, the Internet sites, were teeming with allegations of molestations by many rabbis, including Rabbi Eisemann. There have never been any complaints or charges filed with the police against the rabbi.

When students identified themselves as victims to Ner Israel, the school allegedly chose Rabbi Yaakov Hopfer, president of the Baltimore Vaad HaRabonim, to look into the accusations.

Rabbi Hopfer, spiritual leader of Shearith Israel Congregation in Upper Park Heights, is not on the faculty or staff of Ner Israel. He did not return two telephone calls to the Baltimore Jewish Times made in early August of this year. His response could have cleared up much of the speculation. He also chose not to respond to a personal letter mailed to him by the Jewish Times on Aug. 5, 2007, pertaining to the status of Rabbi Eisemann. The letter was referred to by Rabbi Eisemann in a recent conversation he had with the Jewish Times.

Ner Israel's response to a request for answers on the subject was an e-mail from its president, Rabbi Sheftel Neuberger, which read: "Ner Israel takes claims and complaints of abuse

made by an individual very seriously. It has implemented an independent process to investigate and deal with such claims and complaints as necessary. Given the sensitivity and nature of the subject, and the Yeshiva's concern for all involved, both claimant and accused, it is the policy of the Yeshiva to refrain from discussing or commenting on these matters."

The Jewish Times had asked: "Is Rabbi Eisemann still teaching at Ner Israel? Is he still living on campus in faculty housing?"

In the summer of 2006, this reporter telephoned Rabbi Sheftel Neuberger and asked these two questions. Rabbi Neuberger replied that "Rabbi Eisemann would most likely retire from the Ner Israel faculty" and "most likely move off of campus."

There was, according to a source close to the Vaad HaRabonim, no actual *din Torah* (rabbinic court ruling) in Baltimore concerning Rabbi Eisemann. Instead, the source confirmed that Rabbi Hopfer was asked to act as sort of a one-man decision maker.

The source said he thinks Rabbi Eisemann admitted some of the abuses to Rabbi Hopfer.

The abuses, according to another source, "weren't extreme, but were on the cusp of abuse," such as back-rubbing or kissing.

The source added that Rabbi Eisemann was allegedly also told to work through some of his issues with a therapist not connected to Ner Israel. That therapist, according to the source, did not consider Rabbi Eisemann's actions "terrible abuse."

Also, Rabbi Hopfer, according to the source, said that Rabbi Eisemann was "contrite."

Still, he was — based allegedly on Rabbi Hopfer's recommendations — retired from teaching students.

But in an interview last week with the Jewish Times, Rabbi Eisemann said that he denied any of the allegations of molestation. He also said that he was still "seeing students" and "still living on Yeshiva Lane," and was never directed by any rabbinic authority to leave campus or stop teaching.

"The whole story [concerning the molestations] is really removed from me," Rabbi Eisemann said. "I can't get involved in it. I feel totally removed from it. I haven't looked at any blogs or Internet sites, though people have told me about them.

"It is not I," he continued. "I have a life to live, and I don't have the strength to deal with these rumors. I have done no harm to anyone. It's all wrong, and I can't even dignify it."

But on Friday, Aug. 24, 2007, an e-mail arrived at the Jewish Times from Rabbi Eisemann. It simply stated: "After reflecting on our brief telephone conversation, I wish to make it clear that I voluntarily retired from Ner Israel in August 2006."

One source said: "You have Eisemann denying all of this. You have Ner Israel's legal statement. You have Rabbi Hopfer's judgment call. Also, Rabbi Hopfer found Eisemann's accuser credible. Put it all together, this is what you have."

Earlier in the summer, Rabbi Eisemann was in the Upper Park Heights neighborhood for Shabbat. Rabbi Moshe Heinemann gave him a VIP seat at the Agudath Israel Synagogue to daven. Rabbi Heinemann was one of 22 rabbis who signed a community letter last April of condemnation against child molestation.

Also, in Rabbi Eisemann's book, "Music Made in Heaven," copyright 2007, Rabbi Aharon Feldman, rosh yeshiva of Ner Israel, writes in a forward: "Rabbi Eisemann has deeply influenced the students at Ner Israel with his classes for over 30 years."

Perhaps the first public comments concerning Rabbi Eisemann came from the blog Unorthodox Jew and from a blog called Chaptzem.

One anonymous blogger wrote, "When I was ___ years old, I was a *talmid* [student] of Ner Israel. At that time, the Mashgiach Ruchni [spiritual adviser] was Rabbi Moshe Eisemann. I became close to him and trusted him totally like a father figure. He is a very sick man. He would tell me he loved me and would hug and kiss me inappropriately."

Another anonymous blogger wrote that he met with New York Jewish Week publisher and editor Gary Rosenblatt, who wrote the expose on the molestations by former NCSY executive Rabbi Baruch Lanner. The blogger wanted advice on where he should go with his story of molestation.

Mr. Rosenblatt said he did receive a phone call from an alleged victim who wanted to discuss the issue of molestation specifically at Ner Israel. But, according to Mr. Rosenblatt, Rabbi Eisemann's name was never discussed.

Then there was another contact made. This time, it was with Rabbi Yosef Blau, a faculty member of Yeshiva University of New York. According to the YU website, "Rabbi Yosef Blau has been the masgiach ruchani (spiritual guidance counselor) at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary since 1977. He also is spiritual guidance counselor for students at the university's undergraduate schools and colleges for men." He is also the current president of the RZA (Religious Zionists of America). The Jewish Times traveled to Manhattan to meet with him.

The rabbi, who has counseled many sexually molested Jewish men and women, explained that he had ongoing contact with an individual who reported that Rabbi Eisemann had behaved inappropriately with him and others. He was loyal to the yeshiva, but was troubled by the lack of response to the allegations.

"Through him, I became aware of the process where Ner Israel graduates who had complained to the administration were asked to tell their stories to Rabbi Hopfer," said Rabbi Blau. "After he spoke with Rabbi Hopfer, he informed me that it was clear that Rabbi Hopfer believed the allegations. There would be an agreement that Rabbi Eisemann would be retired. There was a decision to leave him on the grounds so he wouldn't go somewhere else where they couldn't take responsibility. Rabbi Eisemann was allegedly retired without any explanation given. He stayed on campus. The fellow I am counseling is still somewhat disappointed with these results. But on the other hand, he didn't want to hurt the yeshiva and is filled with mixed feelings."

Former Student Speaks Up

Mike Simms sits for a crowded but comfortable late lunch at the Hometown Buffet, a favorite restaurant location of his in Phoenix, Ariz. It's 115 degrees this afternoon, a day when a cold drink and a piece of fruit would do.

Instead, he's got the steamship round au jus on his plate, along with a salad and some hot potatoes and brown gravy.

Mike, who has graying long hair and a gregarious personality, brings up words like Rashi and drasha during informal conversation. He jokes that this is probably the first time those words have ever been spoken at the Hometown Buffet.

He's almost certainly correct.

A Hispanic woman comes over and takes away his empty plate. He gets up and goes for more.

Mike Simms, originally Zev Simanowitz, has come a long way since he was a student of Rabbi Moshe Eisemann, a teacher, author and scholar at Baltimore's Ner Israel Rabbinical College.

Mr. Simms, a Phoenix-area locksmith, former community newspaper publisher and writer, was Rabbi Eisemann's student in the 1960s at the Philadelphia Talmudical Academy.

He said he doesn't remember much from his classes with Rabbi Eisemann. But he does recall his former teacher had a "habit of staring at people's crotches. I knew that being around him there was an ongoing assault on my privates. He'd stare at my privates to the point where it made me uncomfortable."

So uncomfortable that as a young teen, Mr. Simms went to a local store and purchased an athletic supporter that would flatten out any hint of his genitals.

"I remembered that soon after I put on the jockstrap, he looked at me with this face of, 'What happened?'" Mr. Simms said. It worsened, according to Mr. Simms. One day after school, he found himself alone in the classroom with the rabbi.

"I remember distinctly him trying to calm me down. He was talking to me about masturbation. He told me it was sh'cha'tat zera [destruction of the seed]," he said. "That was all very nice, but I didn't ask him for the lecture. I remember him saying that if you are not multiplying with your sperm, you are not multiplying. When he came out with this, I got like 40 shades of red."

Then Mr. Simms left the room, but not before he believes Rabbi Eisemann touched him on his rear end twice.

There were other troubling signs, recounted Mr. Simms.

"When he was teaching, he'd have sitting on his desk a boy who happened to be the smartest kid in the class," he continued. "He was slight of build, short and cute with glasses and curly light brown hair. Eisemann would sit there and this kid would sit at his right hand in front of the class. Eisemann would be patting his tush forever, almost caressing it at times.

"I was overwhelmed," he continued. "What do you say about the rebbe with the beard doing something like this?"

"If Rabbi Eisemann was here in front of me now, I guess I'd say to him that I wish I had the courage to say something along the way even though I know I would have been ignored. I wish I had been more knowledgeable about the subject so that I could not have been so naive," he added.

Mr. Simms would go on to graduate from a different *yeshiva*. But when it came to continuing his Jewish education, he decided to go away from it to the extreme, joining the U.S. Marines. He stayed single all of his life.

In the Phoenix restaurant, he said the Rabbi Eisemann incident wasn't the exclusive reason he wasn't interested in Judaism any longer. It was just part of the process that turned him off.

"People like me could have been directed better," he said. "But everyone did the same thing, 'Shut up and do this.' They would tear the covers off of Agatha Christie books because there was a woman on them. They lost us to unorthodoxy and to wandering in the land. They didn't teach us spirituality. They taught us religion. It was sit-down-and-shut-up stuff."

Mr. Simms takes some gulps of coffee from a brown cup.

"This was all a huge chilul HaShem," he said. "For me, it was an encounter with evil. But it was also the whole Tevya, 'Fiddler on the Roof' thing. There was no room for question; You did things because you were told to do them. Even if it meant getting molested. Who knows what this guy did? Who knows?"

Mike Simms answered his cell phone on this day in August. It was time to go.

Someone was locked out.

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