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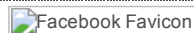
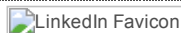
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News

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Outcry over hosting a sex offender

Baruch Lanner appearance seen as emblematic of communal failings on abuse

Larry Yudelson • Local
Published: 12 July 2013



The head of the Yeshiva University High School for Boys is under fire for hosting a convicted child molester at his Teaneck synagogue and home as recently as February, even as the high school and the parent university was sued this week for \$380 million for damages growing out of alleged sexual abuse at the high school three decades ago.

Rabbi Baruch Lanner is the former New Jersey director of the Orthodox NCSY youth group. In 2000, a Jewish Week report documenting his long history of emotional and sexual abuse finally ended his career at the Orthodox Union; in 2002 he was convicted of molesting two girls at the Hillel Yeshiva High School in Deal. On Purim this year, Lanner was a guest at the home of Rabbi Michael Taubes, who is both the rosh yeshiva of the YU high school (or MTA, as it generally is called) and the spiritual leader of Congregation Zichron Mordechai in Teaneck.

Lanner was paroled in 2008 and has been seen at Zichron Mordechai since then.

David Cheifetz of Teaneck raised the issue publicly on June 30 in an address to the annual conference of the Rabbinical Council of America.

What did he know? When did he know it? State Senate majority leader Loretta Weinberg discusses GWB scandal interim report

Joanne Palmer • 12 December 2014
Local

On Monday, the New Jersey state legislative committee investigating Bridgegate submitted an interim report.

Anyone expecting a final answer to the question of what did he know and when did he know it — or to be more specific, how much did Governor Chris Christie know about the closure of the three local lanes leading to the George Washington Bridge, creating potentially lethal havoc in Fort Lee, and when did he learn that his aides had been responsible for it — would be disappointed.

Still, there are nuggets there about the scandal, lying ready for gleaning.

This is very much an interim report, Loretta Weinberg stressed. Ms. Weinberg, a Democrat, is the state Senate's majority leader. She lives in Teaneck, and Fort Lee is in her district.

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Not just blah-blah-blah and pizza Mahwah shul develops programming for pre- and post-b'nai mitzvah kids

Larry Yudelson • 9 January 2015
Local

So now there's a how-to-write-a-blessing class. "The parents are really appreciative," Rabbi Mosbacher said.

"I used to meet with b'nai mitzvah kids and their families twice," he added. "Now we meet seven times in the course of a year. The last one is right before the bar mitzvah. Now I'm thinking the last one should be after the bar mitzvah. It's a lot of time on my part, but it's time well spent in developing a relationship with the kids and with the families."

While these efforts are designed to connect children and their families to the congregation before the bar or bat mitzvah, the synagogue also has changed its post-b'nai mitzvah connections to the children.

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Reworded interdating rules sow confusion, controversy United Synagogue Youth convention may have eased standard ... or not

Lois Goldrich • 2 January 2015
Local | World

What's in a name — or a word?

As it turns out, quite a lot. Take the word "refrain," for example.

At its annual international convention in Atlanta this week, some 750 members of United Synagogue Youth voted to change some of the wording in the organization's standards for international and regional leaders.

Most of the changes are clear, easily understood, and warmly welcomed. For example, the group added provisions relating to bullying and lashon hara — gossiping. Leaders should have "zero tolerance" for such behavior, the standards say.

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RECENTLY ADDED

“How is it possible?” he asked the 50 rabbis who attended the session, the first of the convention.

“It staggers the mind, really, that the principal of MTA would be hosting the most notorious pedophile in the history of modern Orthodoxy,” Cheifetz told the Jewish Standard. This was even more true, he said, in wake of the revelations, first published in the Forward last December, of alleged abuse by the school’s former principal, Rabbi George Finkelstein.

Reached at his MTA office, Taubes said, “I’m not going to comment at this time.”

The public affairs office of Yeshiva University declined to comment on the propriety of Taubes hosting Lanner.

The Standard has spoken to three Teaneck residents who saw Lanner at Taubes’ Purim meal, which was open to the public, seated in a position of respect, or at Zichron Mordechai.

Two of those witnesses, who prefer not to be identified, are Orthodox rabbis who work at YU’s Washington Heights campus. The third, Jordan Hirsch, is a member of a nearby Orthodox congregation that met in Zichron Mordechai while its own building was under renovation.

Cheifetz said that after he posted a copy of his RCA talk on Facebook, and then later on a blog, the Jewish Community Watch, Taubes called him. Although Taubes downplayed the significance of Lanner’s visits, Cheifetz said, “He did not deny that Baruch Lanner was at his shul.

‘Couldn’t send him away’

“He said it was only two times in three years,” Cheifetz said. “He mentioned that those Shabbosim when Lanner was there, he was a guest at Rabbi Taubes’ home. He did not deny that Baruch Lanner was in his house on Purim. He said that Baruch Lanner, he claimed, came to deliver shaloch manos and he couldn’t ask him to leave so he stayed for a little bit.”

Cheifetz said he told Taubes, “You as the head of a synagogue and as a principal of MTA are not just yourself. You are a symbol. You are a role model. What about all the victims of Baruch Lanner? What do you think this is doing for them?”

“It was quite an animated conversation,” Cheifetz said.

In his address to the rabbis, Cheifetz said that Orthodox culture long has placed the concerns of abusers ahead of their victims. Welcoming Lanner is just one example he gave of that culture.

It is a culture he hopes to change.

Cheifetz experienced this culture as a 13 year old at Camp Dora Golding in East Stroudsburg, Penn., more than 30 years ago, when he was befriended by a rabbi on staff, who then molested him.

“At the end of the week I shared what was happening with a bunkmate, swearing him to secrecy,” Cheifetz told the RCA in his speech. “He did the responsible thing and may have saved my life: He reported the incident to the counselor, who reported the incident to the camp director.”

Cheifetz was “forced to confront the person who violated me, and encouraged to go home.

“My story was never doubted,” he continued. “I was sent home because it is

‘Build me a sanctuary’ ranklin Lakes shul to examine the Tabernacle’s specs from many directions

Joanne Palmer • 30 January 2015
Local

Planks of acacia, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high, formed into an ark.

Gold overlay on the planks, on both sides.

Gold molding around them.

Gold rings, one for each side.

Acacia poles.

Instructions for inserting the poles into the rings, and the rings into the ark.

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Where no rabbi has gone before Interfaith activist to speak at brotherhood breakfast

Larry Yudelson • 30 January 2015
Local | World

Rabbi David Rosen brings a unique perspective when it comes to evaluating Saudi Arabia’s late King Abdullah.

Abdullah’s supporters note that in the 20 years that he led his kingdom, he sided with America against Al Qaeda, proposed a peace plan that would recognize Israel, and let women serve as supermarket cashiers.

Detractors note that women in Saudi Arabia still can’t drive, Christianity is banned, and the kingdom flogs wayward bloggers.

Count Rabbi David Rosen among those praising the Saudi glass as half full.

As the international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, he was among the Jews — and the sole Israeli — invited to the unprecedented interfaith meeting Abdullah convened in Madrid in 2008.

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Fighting for the rights of survivors — and their heirs Cresskill couple gets SSA to clarify statute on exemptions

Lois Goldrich • 30 January 2015
Local

Barbara and Michael Lissner have a mission.

“It’s who we are — what we do,” said Mr. Lissner, who has spent practically his entire life witnessing — and furthering — efforts to help Holocaust survivors get the benefits to which they are entitled.

The couple, partners in the New York law firm Lissner & Lissner LLP, are both children of survivors.

Michael Lissner’s father, Jerry, started the firm, which soon came to win the trust of the “tightknit community of German Jews living in Manhattan and Queens,” the son said. “He was an incredible man, able to help people in a very knowledgeable and calming way. He became a tall pillar in the community.”

Mr. Lissner, who formally started working with the firm in 1983 but “had been around the firm my whole life,” was able to maintain the trust of that community.

Ms. Lissner was no stranger to survivors’ unique needs. Her parents were from Poland — her father was on Schindler’s list, while her mother survived in Eastern Russia. Both lost many relatives.

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February 2015						
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easier to punish the victim than it is to punish the perpetrator.

“I believe that no one ever called the police. I believe that no one ever reported the incident to the Jewish Federation, a major funder of the camp. I believe that he was quietly let go at the end of the summer, because the camp had rachmunas [mercy] on him and his poor pregnant wife. And I know that he went on to teach for 30 years at an all boys yeshiva. God only knows how many children he molested,” Cheifetz told the rabbis.

In March, Cheifetz went public with his experience as a victim, and he began to work as an advocate for victims.

Among the triggers of that decision: A blog post by Rabbi Steven Pruzansky of Congregation Bnai Yeshurun in Teaneck “that said, more or less, that if a person is violated, they should go to the police. But if it is past the statute of limitations, it is their moral responsibility not to go to the police.”

‘What of my rights?’

“And here I was, less than a mile away, dealing with the psychological trauma of something horrendous that had been done to me over 30 years ago. Of course George Finkelstein and the like have the right to defend themselves in court. But do I, a victim, not have the right to tell my story? Do I not have the right to seek justice? Do I not have the right to try to protect others?” he asked the rabbis.

In recent years, efforts to extend the statute of limitations for sex abuse in New York State have been successfully opposed by the Catholic Church and Agudath Israel, the charedi advocacy organization.

The lawsuit filed Monday in White Plains against Yeshiva University attempts to circumvent the statute of limitations by arguing that the school had committed ongoing fraud by claiming to follow Torah values while ignoring credible allegations against Finkelstein and another rabbi, Macy Gordon, Pruzansky’s predecessor at Bnai Yeshurun, who taught at the school; permitting them to continue as educators after belatedly being forced out of YU, and continuing to honor them even after their departure.

Finkelstein and Gordon both denied any inappropriate behavior.

Because the abuse and coverup were secret, the suit argues, it was not until the reports of multiple victims were reported in the Forward, along with YU’s Chancellor Rabbi Norman Lamm’s admission to the paper that he had handled reports of the abuse improperly, that the victims knew that their abuse was part of a larger pattern. That, it is alleged, created misrepresentation on YU’s part.

YU issued a statement saying that it would not comment on matters in litigation.

Whether or not the courts ultimately will accept the legal argument, the 148-page complaint provides new details about how YU is alleged to have ignored repeated efforts by victims and their families to stop abusive behavior.

The suit details 19 victims — two of them named, the rest John Does — and describes in detail their experience at the YU high school, their unsuccessful efforts to get intervention from Finkelstein’s superiors, and, most painfully, subsequent decades in which the victims describe religious alienation, failed relationships, drug abuse, psychological and psychiatric treatment, and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The suit comes just days after Lamm's surprise departure as YU's chancellor, the largely ceremonial post he held since Richard Joel succeeded him as president in 2003.

The suit details many occasions when Lamm was informed about the abuse but failed to act.

In the letter announcing his stepping down, Lamm apologized for his inaction.

'I was wrong'

"At the time that inappropriate actions by individuals at Yeshiva were brought to my attention, I acted in a way that I thought was correct, but which now seems ill conceived," he wrote. "I understand better today than I did then that sometimes, when you think you are doing good, your actions do not measure up. You think you are helping, but you are not. You submit to momentary compassion in according individuals the benefit of the doubt by not fully recognizing what is before you, and in the process you lose the Promised Land....

"[D]espite my best intentions then, I now recognize that I was wrong," Lamm wrote.

For Cheifetz, the problem is not in any particular Orthodox institution, but in the nature of an institution itself.

"Organizations are completely incapable of reforming themselves," he told the RCA rabbis.

"It is not that these organizations necessarily support abuse. But they are naturally protective of their organizational reputations. And their positions of prestige. And they are protective of their friends of many years. So they enter a 'circle the wagons' mode. And the people that get forgotten along the way or are shunned or ostracized are the victims," he said.

"How is it possible that there are still rabbis, including in the Modern Orthodox world, that are suggesting that victims not go straight to the police? That believe that allegations should be reviewed by rabbinic panels before being sent to the police?"

He told the rabbis that while they are qualified to answer questions about the repetition of prayers or the slaughter of chickens, they are no more qualified to answer questions of molestation than they are to diagnose chest pains or build a rocket ship to the moon.

It is a view endorsed by the Rabbinical Council of America and the Orthodox Union, which issued a joint statement this year saying that allegations of child abuse should be taken to the police for investigation.

This represents a shift from 1989, when the Rabbinical Council of Bergen County sent allegations of abuse by Lanner to be judged by a beit din, or rabbinic court, made up of three Yeshiva University faculty members. The beit din acquitted Lanner and ruled that the accuser must issue an apology.

But this year one senior OU official took a line against calling the police, adhering to the Agudah position rather than that of the RCA.

Rabbi Chaim Yisroel Belsky of Brooklyn, one of the OU's two halachic authorities on matters of kashrut, wrote in defense of Rabbi Yosef Kolko of Lakewood, who had been charged with sexually abusing an 11-year-old boy, that "after conducting a thorough investigation" he was absolutely sure of

Kolko's innocence.

'The Jewish law is clear'

Writing to the Lakewood Jewish community, Belsky wrote in Hebrew that "My ears should have been spared hearing the horrific news that one of your fellow residents in town informed upon a fellow Jew to the hands of the secular authorities, may God spare us, for which the Jewish law is clear that one who commits such an act has no share in the world to come."

His remarks came as nine leading Lakewood rabbis condemned the victim's father for going to the police, rather than to the rabbis, with the accusation. The victim's family was forced to leave town.

In May, after three days of trial, Kolko pleaded guilty, after learning that two more alleged victims were prepared to testify against him.

Belsky continues to maintain Kolko's innocence, notwithstanding the guilty plea and the emergence of more alleged victims.

"Rabbi Beslksy is a consultant for the Orthodox Union on matters of kashrus, an area where he is brilliant and accomplished, but at the end of the day he does not speak for the OU on matters of child abuse or on anything other than kashrus," Mayer Fertig, the OU's chief communications officer, said. "I recognize that for some this is an unsatisfactory answer, but it happens to be a fact."

For its part, the RCA issued a statement praising "the process that led to the guilty plea of Yosef Kolko, an Orthodox Jew who pleaded guilty for the sexual molestation of a young boy. For many years the RCA has condemned the efforts of many parts of the Jewish community to cover up or ignore allegations of abuse, viewing these efforts as against Jewish law, illegal, and irresponsible to the welfare of victims and the greater community. The RCA strongly advocates, as a matter of Jewish law, the reporting of reasonable suspicions of all forms of child abuse to the civil authorities and full cooperation with the criminal justice system. The RCA decries any invocation of Jewish law or communal interests as tools in silencing victims or witnesses from reporting abuse or from receiving therapeutic and communal support."

RCA leaders met with Belsky to discuss the matter. Belsky restated his belief in Kolko's innocence, but he signed a letter affirming the RCA and OU position that child abuse must be reported to the authorities.

"We were pleased that his overall position is compatible with that of the RCA," said Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, who completed a two-year term as president of the RCA last week.

Goldin said Belsky "has a right" to maintain Kolko's innocence though he disagrees with him.

That doesn't satisfy Chaifetz.

A choice for the OU

"The Orthodox Union has to make a decision," he said. "Do they stand by abusers and those who chase the families of accusers? Either they're going to tolerate it or they're going to say this is unacceptable."

(The OU's other halachic authority on kashrut, Rabbi Herschel Schachter, also has diverged from the RCA's position. In a speech in London in February, he said the Orthodox community should set up boards of

psychologically trained rabbis who would determine whether allegations of abuse are legitimate before they are sent to the police. He said he was worried that American prisons are dangerous because someone could be locked up “with a shvartze, in a cell with a Muslim, a black Muslim who wants to kill all the Jews.”)

Goldin said that he was among the Bergen County rabbis who sent the allegations against Lanner to the 1989 beit din.

“In retrospect, if it happened today, we would handle it differently,” he said.

He is proud that under his leadership the RCA took the position “that anyone with credible suspicion of abuse should go directly to the authorities. You do not have to receive rabbinic permission to do so. It’s not a two-step procedure.

“The community at large — not just the Jewish community — has become much more aware of this problem, much more sensitive to it. We’re responding differently based on that sensitivity.

“The Jewish community has matured in its willingness to confront its own blemishes and flaws. That maturation is very welcome and important. For a long period of time there was a sense of wanting to deal with things in house, to not make a public chillul Hashem” — not to desecrate God’s name by airing dirty Jewish laundry. “Now we are very aware that that approach has created great pain for people who has had situations swept under the carpet. That is why the RCA has taken a strong position, in contradistinction to the position of Agudah,” Goldin said.

More on: Outcry over hosting a sex offender

Giving voice to victims

Larry Yudelson

Teaneck’s David Cheifetz works to establish new watchdog organization

David Cheifetz is not the first victim of childhood sexual abuse in the Orthodox community to come forward.

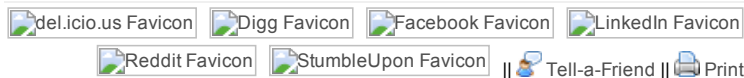
But he may be the first who also is an executive at McKinsey & Company, the New York-based high-profile management consulting company.

He sees the problem of sexual abuse as reflecting the failure of the institutions that allowed it to happen.

And he is working to build his own institution, with the tentative name of “Mi Li — Who Is For Me?”

“This is not intended as a one-man shop,” he said. “There are many activists who have done fantastic work on a limited budget. This is meant to address it on some degree of scale.

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