

Senior London rabbis break ranks to demand colleague in sex case step down

‘The grave allegations warrant the immediate withdrawal’ of Rabbi Chaim Halpern ‘from all rabbinic and counseling functions,’ letter says

BY MIRIAM SHAVIV | December 7, 2012, 5:31 am |

LONDON — Five senior London rabbis issued a public statement Thursday night declaring that one of their colleagues “is not fit and proper to act in any rabbinic capacity”.

Although the rabbi is not named, it is a reference to Rabbi Chaim Halpern, a leading haredi rabbi who has been accused of sexual misdemeanors with around 30 women who come to him for counseling and rabbinic guidance. Rabbi Halpern resigned as a religious judge and as a rabbinic adviser to several London institutions last month, but has remained in charge of his own synagogue.

Some 30 rabbis originally said they would sign a statement against Halpern after hearing the evidence against Halpern two weeks ago. However, rabbis belonging to the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations, with which Halpern was affiliated, were forbidden to sign it, delaying its publication and prompting widespread criticism from members of London’s haredi community who bemoaned the lack of rabbinic leadership.

The five rabbis who put their name to the letter Thursday night were the former head of the London Beth Din, Dayan Chanoch Ehrentreu; London Beth Din dayanim Menachem Gelley and Yonatan Abraham; and two rabbis from Halpern’s neighborhood of Golders Green, Shimon Weingarten and Berel Knopfler. The latter two are widely regarded as having spearheaded the efforts to call Rabbi Halpern to account.

According to the letter, the rabbis conducted “painstaking and extensive investigations, including interviews with alleged victims,” which left them “in no doubt as to the veracity of our own conclusion that the grave allegations warrant the immediate withdrawal of the [rabbi] from all rabbinic and counseling functions.” They warned the public “about the risks involved in allowing the alleged perpetrator to resume his activities.”

Earlier this week the Union announced that it was appointing religious judges to a court that would

investigate the allegations against Rabbi Halpern. Thursday's letter seemed to question whether the religious court was being established in good faith and can be objective, with the rabbis saying that they stand by their own verdict against Rabbi Halpern "whatever the motivation of the proposed beth din and whatever it may conclude."

Because three of the signatories are members of the London Beth Din, which is a rival to the Union's own beth din, they denied allegations that their actions against Rabbi Halpern stemmed from "a battle between different organizations. We would like nothing better than to see total [unity] ... we are confident that reasonable, thinking people will appreciate that we have only become involved in order to safeguard vulnerable members of the [community]."

They asked that any person who feels they have been abused take "immediate steps to be debriefed by recognized professionals" and said that they were establishing a body of Orthodox professionals for this purpose.

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