

Police investigate former principal over molestation claims

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A FORMER principal of a Jewish girls' school in Elsternwick is being investigated over claims she molested students, as the Victoria Police probe into alleged sexual abuse widens to take in a second school.



Adass Israel Girls' School.

Malka Leifer, a former principal of the Adass Israel Girls' School, fled to Israel in 2008 after the school board sacked her following complaints of inappropriate conduct with students. At the time, parents told *The Age* that Ms Leifer, a mother of eight, had molested students at school, at her home and probably at school camps. They said one victim had attempted suicide.

Parents were critical of the Adass Israel School, claiming it allowed Ms Leifer to flee before notifying police. The school has denied this.

Ms Leifer, who is still living in Israel, is now being investigated by police after people came forward with information when police began investigating a separate sex scandal at Yeshivah College in St Kilda East.

Former teacher David Kramer allegedly sexually assaulted boys at Yeshivah College between 1989 and 1993.

Kramer, who is serving a seven-year jail sentence in the US after molesting a boy, 12, in St Louis in 2007, fled Australia in the early 1990s after the Yeshivah College accusations.

At the time, Yeshivah College did not report the complaints to the police.

The Age believes Ms Leifer's alleged victims are more reluctant to speak out than those who claim they were assaulted by Kramer, because Ms Leifer has not been convicted of a crime.

It is believed some alleged victims feel constrained by the prohibitions of mesirah, which discourage Jews from referring other Jews to civil authorities.

The Rabbinical Council of Victoria last year issued a statement condemning child abuse and affirming that the prohibitions of mesirah did not apply in cases of abuse.

The statement said the council had become increasingly aware of incidents of the sexual and physical abuse of children in "our community" and many abuse victims still did not come forward to accuse perpetrators or seek help for fear of stigma, personal and familial consequences, or "perceived halachic concerns".

The principal of Adass Israel School, Israel Herszberg, said neither the school nor any of its staff had been informed by Victoria Police that it was investigating Ms Leifer.

"As a matter of general principle, the school would obviously encourage and support any victim co-operating fully with the police," he said.

Professor Herszberg denied claims made by parents at the time that the school allowed Ms Leifer to flee to Israel before notifying police or that it paid for her to return to Israel.

He said counselling was made available to students following Ms Leifer's departure in 2008 and the school had not been in contact with her since.

The Adass community is a small, ultra-orthodox group of families based in Elsternwick and Ripponlea, who have little contact with the wider Jewish community and non-Jewish community.

If the police decide Ms Leifer has a case to answer, they are expected to seek her extradition to Australia.

Anyone with information should contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

Do you know more? Email Jewel Topsfield at scoop@theage.com.au

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