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## NATIONAL



# An Apparent Abuser Remains Free

A U.S. beit din ruled against a rabbi and four Israeli seminaries, but an Israeli religious court took little action.

12/02/14 | Rachel Delia Benaim | Special To The Jewish Week

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The U.S. beit din dealing with sexual abuse warned students not to attend Israeli seminaries headed by Rabbi Elimelech Meisels.

This summer Rabbi Elimelech Meisels, 45, a former Chicagoan who has owned and has taught at four Bais Yaakov seminaries for American girls studying in Israel, was found guilty of sexual misconduct by the only American beit din (religious court) specifically dealing with charges of sexual abuse.

In an unusually strong statement dated July 14, the court, based in Chicago, wrote that “based on the testimony and documents” it received, “including testimony by the claimants [several former students, over the age of 18] and by Elimelech Meisels, the Beis Din believes that students in these seminaries are at risk of harm and it does not recommend that prospective students attend these seminaries at this time.”

What’s more, since the four seminaries – Peninim, Binas Bais Yaakov, Chedvas Bais



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Yaakov and Keser Chaya – are in Israel, the court noted that a “distinguished beis din” made up of three Israeli rabbis, have “assumed responsibility for this matter.”

Why, then, is Rabbi Meisels a free man after reportedly admitting to the Chicago religious court that he is guilty of sexual misconduct? And why are the seminaries in question functioning as usual (though he is no longer on the premises) and American parents continuing to send their daughters to these schools?

The answers are not simple. The case underscores the difficulty of puncturing the protection afforded some figures in the charedi world. And beyond legal matters of jurisdiction, there are the intra-Orthodox disputes between U.S. and Israeli rabbinic leaders. In this case, for example, the members of the Israeli beit din ignored or disagreed with the findings of its American counterparts.

Meanwhile, in the U.S., two former students of Rabbi Meisels who are residents of New York and New Jersey brought charges against him to a federal court here in October. He is accused of rape, attempted rape and other forms of sexual assault.

The young women, neither of whom is named in the suit, were students at Rabbi Meisels’ main school, Peninim, where he has been head of school for the past five years. Peninim, based in Jerusalem but with administrative offices in New Jersey, is also named in the suit.

Their case is being brought under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, legislation that prohibits gender discrimination in the classroom. In 2011, the Department of Education issued a letter explicitly tacking sexual harassment and sexual violence onto Title IX.

The schools are being sued for intentional and negligent infliction of emotional distress, breach of contract and negligence. And Rabbi Meisels is being sued for sexual assault.

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In addition, according to a report in Haaretz this week, a class-action suit filed in Chicago in August by parents seeking their money back for tuition this year has been resolved. The seminaries agreed to return the funds, the newspaper said. The parents took their daughters out of the schools on hearing of allegations about Rabbi Meisels.

### Crossing Boundaries?

Born to a prominent rabbinic family, Elimelech Meisels was educated at the Telz Yeshiva in Chicago before moving to Israel and becoming an educator in young women's schools. He founded Peninim, the crown jewel of his four seminaries, in 2004. Geared to post-high school young women, the schools offer the traditional Bais Yaakov curriculum, which follows charedi ideology.

Until this summer when the Title IX violations were exposed, Rabbi Meisels taught at all four schools, but spent the majority of his time at Peninim.

Based on our interviews with a dozen of his former students, all of whom insisted on anonymity due to the delicate nature of the story, Rabbi Meisels was seen as both a strict rabbinic figure and someone who crossed the boundaries of tzniut, or religious modesty, in his associations with his students.

“He tried to connect with us by flirting,” a 2008 alumna said. “It was weird, but I didn’t say anything,” said the young woman, who is now married. This characterization of flirtatious behavior was heard most often among those interviewed, like always telling them they were pretty. A 2010 student said “he would use curse words in front of us,” and another former student said the rabbi told her about a student “who was addicted to calling sex lines – that’s just inappropriate to talk to me about.”

A former Peninim student said the rabbi asked her, and other young women, about

their sexual history. But “he was trying to help us,” she maintained.

Beyond allegedly crossing verbal boundaries, former students said the rabbi drove alone with girls late in the evening, drank with them on occasion and smoked a hookah, or water pipe, with them in his office. At the same time, the women described Rabbi Meisels as a mentor who encouraged them to dress modestly in long skirts and tights.

One former student, who became a whistleblower and brought her case to the Chicago beit din, clearly was tense and spoke quickly when she recounted the rabbi’s alleged sexual advances toward her at the end of the school year.

“He said he wanted to give me a hug goodbye,” she said. “He was crying. He said he was going to miss me.” She asked him about shomer negiah, the Jewish prohibition against touching members of the opposite sex other than one’s spouse. Didn’t that matter?

He responded that he was her “Tatte,” using the Yiddish word for father, and it was OK. No, she told him, it wasn’t OK. He continued to advance. The whistleblower was frozen in her seat. What was happening? There he was, inches away. She curled into a ball in the chair in his office. Suddenly, Rabbi Meisels collapsed onto her body, sobbing uncontrollably, she said. He hugged her from behind, caressing her and kissing her head. “Why wasn’t she hugging him back,” she recalled him asking her. When he finally moved away, she bolted for the door. He let her go.

Some time later, after this student had already left seminary and had settled in New York, Rabbi Meisels, who was in the U.S. for official seminary work, asked her to get together. She said she accepted, never considering the possibility of another episode. But as he was driving her to where she was staying in Brooklyn, he brought up their last encounter. “He told me it was my fault, that I was a bad girl, that I made him attracted to me,” she said. Facing her, “he said it was allowed for men to have more

than one wife,” she remembered. (He is married and has many children.) According to her account, the rabbi pinned her to her seat in the car, she told him to get off of her, and when he didn’t, she screamed and pulled away. He kept on grabbing her back, she said, and then “I scratched him, and ran out of the car.”

### Another Lawsuit

The Illinois case against Rabbi Meisels over tuition fees was resolved last month, according to the Haaretz report this week. It alleged that the rabbi “threatened his victims that if they shared their story he would draw upon his vast contacts within the shidduch system to ruin their reputations and ensure that no viable candidate would want to take their hand in marriage.” It was difficult for the beit din to acquire testimonies, for this reason and for others, including stringent interpretations of lashon hara, the Jewish prohibition of guarding one’s speech, that are commonplace in the charedi community.

After the whistleblower approached the Chicago Beit Din, its four members, Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, Rabbi Shmuel Fuerst, Rabbi Avrohom Chaim Levin and Rabbi Zeev Cohen, spent months investigating her claims. Thirty alumnae of Rabbi Meisels’ four schools from over the past decade came forward to testify to the beit din against his behavior, which included at least eight allegations of actual assault, sources confirmed.

Once the rabbis heard the testimonies, they called Rabbi Meisels himself to testify in front of the Chicago Beit Din in May.

In a letter issued by the Chicago Beit Din on Sept. 4, Rabbi Meisels is said to have confessed to serious misconduct. As the letter noted, “some of the misconduct to which he confessed constitutes, to our understanding, ‘sexual violence’ as that term is understood in the context of Title IX.”

Although the confession occurred in late spring, this information was not publicized until Sept. 4, when a letter from the Chicago beit din, which has handled more than a dozen sexual assault cases since its founding in 2000, made its way to the charedi blogosphere, which has been covering the Rabbi Meisels story closely. The letter was sent to Aaron Twersky, the schools' lawyer; Touro College, which was a university partner to the schools but is no longer affiliated with them; and Hebrew Theological College, which also suspended its accreditation of Rabbi Meisel's seminaries.

According to the letter, Rabbi Meisels provided the beit din with a "hand-written list of multiple additional victims."

Rabbi Meisels could not be reached for comment and his attorney, Elliot Blumenthal, declined to comment.

#### 'It's Our Job To Protect Girls'

In response to Rabbi Meisel's statement, the Chicago beit din's unofficial emissary, Rabbi Aharon Feldman, head of the Ner Israel Yeshiva in Baltimore, established an ad hoc beit din in Israel, headed by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shafran in conjunction with Rabbi Chaim Malinowitz and Rabbi Tzvi Gartner, to ensure that Rabbi Meisels was removing himself from the schools and, effectively, selling them. The approach was in keeping with the charedi community's attempts to use its rabbinic authorities as arbiters of such conflicts rather than go to the police.

But the result "was an embarrassment to the charedi world," according to Rabbi Yosef Blau, longtime spiritual adviser at Yeshiva University and advocate for Jewish abuse victims. He noted that the women followed the charedi protocol and went to a rabbinic court. But since that resulted in no substantive action being taken against Rabbi Meisels, like informing the criminal justice system of the allegations against him, the two alleged victims took their case to a civil court.

“It’s our job as a Jewish community to protect girls who were hurt,” explained a plaintiff in the lawsuit known as Jane Doe. “He used Torah for his own corruption.” She was particularly upset with the staff of Peninim, which is why, she said, the suit is being brought against both Rabbi Meisels and Peninim of America Incorporated, which is listed as both an educational institution and a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

Jane Doe said she told two staff members at the seminary, and an educator at a Modern Orthodox seminary, about her case of sexual assault but was told not to pursue it and that no one would believe her.

When the Chicago beit din established that members of the staff and administration were aware of Rabbi Meisels’ alleged indiscretions and did not act or report it, it issued a letter saying that the beit din “believes that the students in these seminaries are at risk of harm.” The staff, in effect, was implicated.

The beit din in Israel, however, disagreed. It issued its own statement, blessing the “strong staff that is doing important, noble work.” It put its stamp of approval on the schools, declaring that they are under the guidance of the current staff and are safe.

Members of the staff couldn’t be reached for comment. But Aaron Twersky, a lawyer representing the schools, and Yanke Yarmush, the schools’ reported new owner as of early August, as well as Rabbi Tzvi Gartner of the Israeli beit din, said via email that the seminaries are working “to establish and craft policies and procedures to ensure allegations like these don’t happen again.”

“The seminaries look forward to putting this matter behind them, educating the next generation of young women according to the ideals and principles of the Torah,” they wrote.



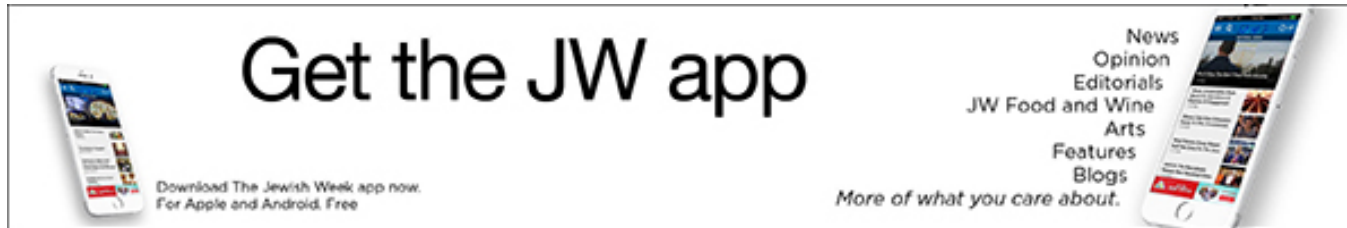
Observers say the schools are operating as before with no significant staff changes other than the removal of Rabbi Meisels.

*Rachel Delia Benaim is a freelance religion reporter based in New York City.*

Last Update: 01/30/2015 - 08:49

Beit Din

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Submitted by [Bais Yaakov Alum \(not verified\)](#) on Thu, 12/11/2014 - 10:37.

Yerachmiel Lopin was at the forefront of this story and should be credited. If not for Frum Follies, this horrific crime would have remained in the shadows.

reply

Submitted by [Anonymous \(not verified\)](#) on Tue, 12/09/2014 - 10:15.

“The seminaries look forward to putting this matter behind them, educating the next generation of young women according to the ideals and principles

of the Torah,” they wrote.

Observers say the schools are operating as before with no significant staff changes other than the removal of Rabbi Meisels.

How nice. I wish the victims of Rabbi Meisels and his enablers much hatzlacha in Federal court. I hope that he receives a lengthy prison sentence and that all the people who were involved in attempting to sweep this matter under the rug, receive hefty financial penalties as punitive damages to be awarded to the young victims. Maybe this will prevent similar incidents in the future. One can hope.

reply

Submitted by [Anonymous \(not verified\)](#) on Tue, 12/09/2014 - 01:47.

This article is a joke!!  
One untruth after another!!

reply

Submitted by [Anonymous \(not verified\)](#) on Tue, 12/09/2014 - 01:45.

I'm afraid you will find yourselves with one big lawsuit for slander and defamation.

Your story as published is false in its facts and details.

The Jewish Week should know better than to print these untruths!!!

reply

Submitted by [Anonymous \(not verified\)](#) on Mon, 12/08/2014 - 14:14.

The funniest quote here is from the school's lawyer and owners, that the schools are working: "to establish and craft policies and procedures to ensure

allegations like these don't happen again." So they want to make sure that crimes like these don't happen again? or just that allegations of these crimes aren't made? This is a bit bizarre. Even from the perspective of these people, why not shut the places down and reopen under different names? What do they gain by associating with this appalling history? I don't get it even from their perspective.

reply

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Fri, 12/05/2014 - 12:17.

This article is stunning in its ignorance of the details from this case. Also not mentioned is the recent proclamation by the aforementioned Rabbis that the schools are deemed safe to attend and requesting that they get reaccredited. To get a accurate description of the events <http://daattorah.blogspot.com/2014/12/it-is-offiicial-chicago-beis-din-and.html?m=1>

reply

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Fri, 12/05/2014 - 10:08.

the author of this article has so many facts completely wrong, it makes me wonder if any details are actually true. I was involved first hand in certain aspects of the story and can guarantee that there is misinformation in this article. Most notably, the complete lack of exposure of the corruption of the Chicago beis din and their attempts to close down the seminaries long after meisels was removed when it became apparent they would not receive financial control as they had intended and expected.

reply

Submitted by Yerachmiel Lopin (not verified) on Fri, 12/05/2014 - 09:41.

This is a valuable article. The reporter, Ms. Benaim and the Jewish Week served the community well by exposing a rapist who remains free. This story is unusual because the secret workings of Jewish religious courts (battei din) were exposed through a set of leaks on my blog, Frum Follies and Rabbi Daniel Eidensohn's blog, Daas Torah. Both of our blogs are heavily focused on sex abuse in the orthodox community and have been around for over five years. But for the postings on our blogs, many critical documents would not have been available to be quoted in this story. Yet the story never acknowledges these sources either by name or link.

Instances of unattributed use of material from Frum Follies include:

"In an unusually strong statement dated July 14, the court, based in Chicago, wrote that "based on the testimony and documents" it received, "including testimony by the claimants [several former students, over the age of 18] and by Elimelech Meisels, the Beis Din believes that students in these seminaries are at risk of harm and it does not recommend that prospective students attend these seminaries at this time."

"In a letter issued by the Chicago Beit Din on Sept. 4, Rabbi Meisels is said to have confessed to serious misconduct. As the letter noted, "some of the misconduct to which he confessed constitutes, to our understanding, 'sexual violence' as that term is understood in the context of Title IX." Although the confession occurred in late spring, this information was not publicized until Sept. 4, when a letter from the Chicago beit din, which has handled more than a dozen sexual assault cases since its founding in 2000, made its way to the charedi blogosphere, which has been covering the Rabbi Meisels story closely. The letter was sent to Aaron Twersky, the schools' lawyer; Touro College, which was a university partner to the schools but is no longer affiliated with them; and Hebrew Theological College, which also suspended its accreditation of Rabbi Meisel's seminaries."

Other details in this story also came from my reporting on this case.

Readers seeking the full source documents on which the above was based should visit my blog, [FrumfolliesDOTWordpressDOTcom](http://FrumfolliesDOTWordpressDOTcom).

In the past the Jewish Week complained to the New York Times when it published articles about sex abuse which drew heavily on the work of their award-winning reporter, Hella Winston, without crediting her. The Times investigated and their public editor apologized. I hope the Jewish Week will do the same, apologizing to me, correcting the story by identifying the sources and including links as appropriate.

Sincerely,

Yerachmiel Lopin

[reply](#)

**Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Fri, 12/05/2014 - 05:03.**

why was he not arrested after admitting to criminal acts? He should not benefit from selling his seminaries! For every girl that did come forward I'm sure there are dozens that did not. Everyone that allowed this to continue should be ashamed ! This is a perversion of the torahs truth!

[reply](#)

**Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Thu, 12/04/2014 - 23:39.**

The Chicago Beit din and the Israel Beit din came together to address the situation at the schools and they issued a joint statement this week stating that they are now confident that the schools are safe and one need not worry sending to them.

[reply](#)

Submitted by Anonymous (not verified) on Wed, 12/03/2014 - 21:09.

The lawyer for the charedi school noted that the goal is that "allegations like this don't happen again"? Does that mean the school will prevent further allegations? Sounds like a Freudian slip. What he should have said is that the school would seek to prevent such alleged activities from occurring.

reply

Submitted by sarah (not verified) on Wed, 12/03/2014 - 14:49.

They need to fire anyone who was complicit!

reply



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