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## Elite Chabad Yeshiva Says School Is Free of Abuse Despite Newsweek Expose

By [Sam Kestenbaum](#) March 13, 2016



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he Chabad-Lubavitch movement's premier yeshiva is seeking to assure parents that no sexual or physical abuse is taking place within its walls following a detailed report on allegations of such abuse in the past.

"I categorically assure you that there is absolutely no abuse taking place in Oholei Torah that we know of," Rabbi Sholom Rosenfeld, the school's administrator, wrote parents in a March 8 letter on school letterhead, "neither sexual abuse, nor physical abuse, nor verbal abuse."

The abuse allegations, which appeared in a [March 3 Newsweek article](#), detailed past instances of alleged misconduct at Oholei Torah, a religious school of about 2,000 male students, kindergarten through high school, in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights. In one such case, a student was said to have been thrown into a glass door or window. In other cases, reports of sexual abuse were allegedly ignored.

The school's letter to the parents, dated March 8 and posted on community websites, neither addressed or denied any specific allegations or complaints, but described "many actions and precautions" that the school has instituted in recent years to prevent abuse. Among other things, the letter stated, Oholei Torah has, in recent years installed "windows on every classroom door"

and has invited “numerous speakers” to address “child abuse and bullying.” The school has also held regular training programs for students on how to react to “improper behavior toward them,” according to the letter.

The alleged abuses detailed in the Newsweek article fall into two broad categories — sexual and physical. Both, past students told the news magazine, have taken place repeatedly at Oholei Torah over the last decades. Two former students echoed these charges in interviews with the Forward.

A number of allegations of physical abuse trace back to an Oholei Torah veteran named Rabbi Velvel Karp. In one case a 7-year-old boy was allegedly beaten so badly he suffered a concussion, a family member told Newsweek. “Karp lifted him in the air and tossed him into a glass door or window—we’re not sure,” the family member said.

The mother begged administrators to move Karp to another school, the family member said. An investigation by the police found no wrongdoing, but the family may also have been uncooperative out of fear that their son would be expelled, Newsweek reported. The child’s mother, the family member told the news magazine, was “afraid they’ll get kicked out of the school.”

Allegations of sexual misconduct were also reported to school administrators over the years.

Rabbi Joseph Reizes, a religious instructor who had been dogged by prior allegations of sexual abuse, was hired by Oholei Torah in the '80s, Newsweek reported. After a parent complained that he had inappropriately touched their son during a private lesson, Reizes was dismissed.

There are other cases, activists allege, where school administrators were alerted to abuses happening to students but sought to cover up the improprieties.

In 2003, when he was 14, Chaim Levin told the Forward, he confided in the elementary school's dean, Rabbi Hershel Lustig, that he had been molested years earlier by his older cousin. There is no public record that Lustig made any report to the police or the Child Protective Services. Lustig offered to tell Levin's parents, but also said, "We shouldn't tell your parents who did it," Levin recalled to Newsweek.

"He has failed to do his duties," said Levin, who is now a community activist. Levin later sued his cousin independently and won a \$3.5 million civil lawsuit.

Amidst these years-old allegations bubbling to the surface, a petition was posted, calling for Lustig's resignation. The petition, organized by the activist group Jewish Community Watch, claims Lustig, a widely beloved community figure, helped cover-up "many instances" of abuse over the years. On Friday there were over 600 signatures.

“Rabbi Lustig has overseen and allegedly participated in the cover-up of so many instances of abuse of children that it’s time for him to step down,” the petition read.

In an email response to the Forward, Lustig wrote, “We follow the guidelines of Merkos L’inyonei Chinuch, the Chabad education arm... Those guidelines are in line with the law.”

Traditional law in Judaism prohibits Jews from informing on other Jews to secular authorities, a principle known as mesirah, or “handing over.” The law dates back to Medieval Europe—seemingly a world away from the streets of Brooklyn—but debates on how to apply this prohibition in modern day America are still active. Numerous reports indicate that this injunction continues to prevent victims, rabbis and members of the community from reporting cases of abuse to outside authorities.

But in 2011, the Crown Heights Beis Din, or rabbinical court, ruled that the prohibition does “not apply to cases where there is evidence of abuse.” What’s more, “one is forbidden to remain silent in such situations,” the court’s ruling read.

Many of the alleged abuses at Oholei Torah took place prior to the rabbinical court’s ruling. No one from the rabbinical court would speak to the Forward. But Rabbi Eli Cohen, executive director of the Crown Heights Jewish Community Council, believes that the last years have seen a groundswell in awareness about abuse of children.

“I do not have any statistics, but [the court’s ruling] certainly has contributed to a greater awareness of the issue in the community, and a better appreciation of one’s obligations,” Cohen wrote in an email to the Forward.

In general, people are more open to talking about abuse, Cohen said. “Also, we are seeing more discussions of the topic between teachers and children, and parents and children, to encourage reporting. That awareness is itself the greatest deterrence.”

Last March, another rabbi, and Oholei Torah tutor, was arrested and charged with child molestation, the website Crownheights.info reported.

When asked if the rabbinical court was aware of any alleged sexual abusers working at Oholei Torah or other yeshivas in the area, Cohen wrote: “If they were, I am sure that the authorities would have that information.”

Some community members say much has changed in Crown Heights.

“Much to my shame, I was one of those people who thought, ‘No, this doesn’t happen in the Jewish community,’” said Bronya Shaffer, who works for the website Chabad.org and holds educational workshops about sexual abuse. “Only after having met people who were victims did I begin to realize that the reason I thought it didn’t happen was because people didn’t speak about it.”

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