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## Day school teacher suspected of sexual abuse in Pittsburgh

by Toby Tabachnick, Senior Staff Writer

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*The quick response by the Yeshiva Boys School to allegations of sexual abuse by one of its teachers has been described as "exemplary."  
Photo by Jim Busis*

After a lengthy investigation, a former teacher at Yeshiva Boys School of Pittsburgh, an important institution in the Chabad-Lubavitch educational system, is a suspect in several alleged incidents of child sexual abuse.

According to police, Rabbi Nisson Friedman, 26, who is well connected in the local Jewish community and is the son of an influential Minnesota-based rabbi, is suspected of sexually assaulting at least three boys while employed by the school. Det. Bryan Sellers of the city's Bureau of Police Sex Assault Team, who is investigating the case, said he is "absolutely certain" there are additional victims.

The suspected assaults occurred both privately and publicly, including at least once in the Yeshiva building on Wightman Street. According to Rabbi Yisroel Rosenfeld, dean of Yeshiva Schools, that incident was discovered last year on Saturday, Sept. 24 during Shabbat services in the building. Rosenfeld said that a member of the community observed Friedman "touching a child inappropriately" in the facility's library and alerted the school's administration.

The administration promptly reported the disclosure of the suspected assault to the police and to the state's mandated ChildLine and Abuse Registry as well as to other authorities, said Rosenfeld, and immediately suspended Friedman from his teaching duties. Friedman has left his position with Yeshiva Schools permanently.

Attempts to contact Friedman were unsuccessful. A member of his family who did not want to be identified noted that Friedman himself is a victim of child sexual abuse.

The school's swift response to the suspected assault was praised as "exemplary" by Sellers, as well as by others who are experienced in matters of child sexual abuse.

"Yeshiva followed the correct procedures right out of the gate," said Sellers. "They got Rabbi Friedman out immediately, they have been accommodating law enforcement, and they have been providing spots at the school to conduct interviews [relative to the case]."

Additional claims of assault against Friedman are coming from parents in Pittsburgh as well as from other communities, said Rabbi Yossi Rosenblum, principal of Yeshiva Boys School.

"For a long period of time, there was one allegation we were aware of, but now there are multiple stories," Rosenblum said.

Friedman began working at Yeshiva as a full-time teacher in September 2014; he worked as a teacher's aide for one year prior to that and also was on staff for five years at Yeshiva's Camp Gan Israel summer day camp in the boys' primary division. Campers at Gan Israel include families beyond those affiliated with Pittsburgh's Chabad community.

Friedman also worked at other camps in the Pittsburgh Jewish community during that time, Sellers said, although he did not identify the other camps.

Yeshiva informed many of its parents about the accusations against Friedman shortly after the suspected abuse was discovered last fall, and, after the police determined that doing so would not impede their investigation, had a meeting with the wider school community on Tuesday, Jan. 31 "to keep all apprised of the status of the investigation and to make available the mental health and law enforcement professionals we are consulting with to answer any questions that can be answered at this time," according to a prepared statement from Yeshiva.

An arrest warrant has not yet been issued, but it is "inevitable" that one will be forthcoming, said Sellers. Friedman is no longer in Pittsburgh and may be living in New York, according to multiple sources.

Deborah Fox, founder of Magen Yeladim, a national organization based in California that works to prevent child abuse through education and intervenes with resources when abuse does occur, commended the Yeshiva administration for its handling of the case. Fox came to Pittsburgh two years ago to help train Yeshiva staff on child abuse prevention and to speak to children about staying safe and was also present at the Jan. 31 meeting.

"When this current situation came up, [Yeshiva] called me immediately," Fox said. "I recommended they call Child Protective Services, and I advised the school to get an attorney. And they did. They really followed through in every way. They were exemplary and a model for how a school should handle a very dramatic situation. Nobody wants this to happen, but if it does, you have to know how to deal with it."

The administration of the school "knew we had to report it," Rosenblum said. "We have training every year on mandated reporting from a secular group that tells us our legal responsibilities."

Fox noted the particular "sensitivity" in this case, praising the school for acting in accordance with proper protocol despite outside pressures. Friedman is connected to several Jewish institutions throughout Pittsburgh. Moreover, Friedman hails from a renowned Lubavitch family and is the son of an influential Minneapolis-based rabbi.

Despite Nissan Friedman's connections, Yeshiva Schools employed the same vetting procedure before hiring him as it does for all its other potential employees, according to Rosenblum. That vetting includes procuring FBI clearances, checks with the Department of Homeland Security and personal interviews.

"It just shows you, with everything, you never know," Rosenfeld said. "Unfortunately, this is a sickness like so many others. It is unfortunately sad, but it is what it is, and we have to protect our children. The safety of our children is paramount."

The school has done a "phenomenal job in acting within what the law requires us to do," said Shlomo Jacob, a parent of children enrolled in Yeshiva and president of Yeshiva Schools of Pittsburgh, the umbrella organization of the boys school. "They acted safely in making sure it all happened, including dismissing the teacher."

Such is not always the case. Sellers has been assigned to four separate cases in the Pittsburgh Jewish community — including in the non-Orthodox community — in the last six years involving suspected child molestation. In each of the other cases, he said, the institutions involved declined to cooperate with police, and he was unable to make a case against the suspected abuser.

"I'm pleasantly surprised by the support I am getting from Yeshiva," Sellers said. "They have set the standard of how to handle children who are victims of sexual assault. I've been very impressed."

The actions of Yeshiva in immediately reporting abuse may be further contrasted to those of other schools in both secular and religious communities that chose instead to cover it up. The examples are many and include the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Penn State and Yeshiva University High School in New York City, where 34 former students claimed in a \$680 million lawsuit that administrators had covered up abuse for decades.

Sellers is hoping that additional victims step forward to disclose any inappropriate behavior on the part of Friedman, which will strengthen his case.

"It's a lot easier when you have a group of victims gathered together speaking as one rather than one standing alone," he said, noting that there is no time limit to coming forward. The statute of limitations for prosecuting such abuse does not expire until the victim reaches the age of 50.

If parents notice changes in a child's behavior or an unusual reaction when the child hears Friedman mentioned, they are advised to contact Sellers. The detective cautioned

against parents speaking to their children about any suspected abuse but advised them to instead arrange for a forensic interview. If a child comes forward on his own, parents are advised to hear what the child says, then report it to the police.

Fox, of Magen Yeladim, said that parents should refrain from interviewing their children themselves about possible abuse. She suspects there are additional victims in Pittsburgh.

After the Jan. 31 meeting, "there was a line of people waiting to speak to the detective, and a line of people waiting to speak to me," she said.

Fox's advice to the community when it comes to child abuse is: "If you see something, say something."

"The more that the community is aware, the more the community can make it unsafe for a predator," she said.

Former Pittsburgher Ruth Gordon knows firsthand the pain of being a parent of a child who is sexually abused in the Orthodox community. Her son, David Menachem Gordon, was a student at Hillel Academy of Pittsburgh from 2008 to 2010, and his parents were members of the Orthodox Gemilas Chesed Synagogue.

But it was in the Orthodox community of Detroit where Gordon was sexually abused when he was between the ages of 9 and 11. Years later, Gordon was a lone soldier in the Israel Defense Forces during 2014's Operation Protective Edge when he went missing one day in mid-August. Two days later, he was found dead with his rifle beside him.

As a child, his parents knew something was wrong, but they didn't find out about the abuse until he revealed it when he was 16.

Looking back, Gordon recalled that at the age of 9, her son's "behavior changed drastically overnight. He became the opposite of what we were used to."

The Gordons sought medical advice and psychological help for their son, but they did not suspect sexual abuse. They didn't want to.

"Someone had said to me at the time, 'What you are describing to me is indicative of a child who has been molested,'" Gordon recalled. "I shut them down."

Once they accepted the fact that he had been abused, and the Gordons came forth with their son's claims, they were "shunned" in the Orthodox community in Detroit, she said.

"People didn't want to have anything to do with us because they didn't think we should be talking about it. We reached out for help, and we were rejected, and that hurt."

Gordon now lives in Columbus, Ohio, but nonetheless heard about the suspicions against Friedman and of Yeshiva's response to those accusations, last fall. Gordon was pleased with the school's reaction, particularly in light of Friedman's connections.

"When someone is well connected ... that is where things sometimes get hazy," she said.

"But if I could, I would go and hug those administrators [at Yeshiva]. They did everything right. They did what had to be done. They said, 'First, let's get rid of him and then we'll sort it out.' That's not easy to do."

Anyone wishing to arrange for a forensic examination of a child who had contact with Friedman should contact Sellers at 412-323-7141.

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