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NEWS

Victims Press Brooklyn D.A. To Seek Abuse Suspect's Extradition From Israel

By [Nathaniel Popper](#)

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In the wake of new revelations about sexual abuse in the Orthodox community, pressure is mounting on the Brooklyn district attorney to seek the extradition of a man who fled to Israel after being indicted for sex offenses.

Avrohom Mondrowitz was indicted in 1984 on four counts of sodomy and eight counts of sexual abuse in the first degree after years as a school counselor in the Brooklyn Orthodox community. Three of Mondrowitz's alleged victims, who had not been aware of the original investigation, recently approached an Orthodox lawyer who has passionately taken up the case. One of those men has since given his testimony to the Brooklyn district attorney's office, which would be responsible for requesting extradition. Another of the victims plans to go to the district attorney, Charles Hynes, in the next week.

The district attorney preceding Hynes had pushed for Mondrowitz's extradition from Israel in the 1980s, but Hynes dropped the effort after he was elected in 1989, according to recently released government documents. The new set of victims to come forward say they are pained by Mondrowitz's continuing freedom, and the lack of effort by Hynes and the Orthodox community in pursuing the suspected abuser.

"Every time somebody gets let down as a victim, it's a further continuation of the abuse," said Mark Weiss, who says he was abused by Mondrowitz during a summer week with the counselor when he was 13. "He's just sitting there, taunting us, saying 'Hah, you're never going to catch me, I know the system too well.'"

Weiss, who is now 39, said that just a few weeks ago a friend in Israel says he saw Mondrowitz on the streets of Jerusalem, speaking with a group of children. Mondrowitz has been a teacher at the Jerusalem College of Engineering, posting his lectures and syllabi online.

A spokesman for Hynes, Jerry Schmetterer, said the Brooklyn district attorney's office is ready to arrest Mondrowitz if he ever returns to the United States. But Schmetterer says the D.A.'s office is hamstrung by Israeli law, which in the 1980s did not classify Mondrowitz's alleged crime — sodomy — as rape. For extradition to go forward, the crime generally must be punishable in both countries. In fact, the Israeli rape law was changed in 1988 to include sodomy, but Schmetterer said the extradition treaty cannot be used retroactively.

"Our position is that he cannot be extradited; he could not be extradited then, and he cannot be now," Schmetterer said.

That line of legal reasoning was explicitly rejected by the American embassy in Tel Aviv, soon after the Israeli law was changed. In a cable to the State Department, the embassy said that they had talked with officials in the Israeli Justice Ministry and determined that because Mondrowitz could eventually be charged under American rather than Israeli law, the retroactivity should not be an issue. The new law "presents us, we believe, with an opportunity to reopen the extradition case of Avrohom Mondrowitz," the embassy said.

The government documents were uncovered by Michael Leshner, the attorney who has gathered together the three new alleged victims to press the case. Other legal experts told the Forward that while there could be legal complications, the district attorney's office could pursue the extradition.

"I don't think the D.A. is being aggressive enough," said Douglas McNabb, who specializes in international extradition at a Washington, D.C., law firm. "If I were a victim I would be very upset that the D.A.'s office is not pursuing this matter."

The extradition was a clear priority for Hynes's predecessor, Elizabeth Holtzman. Her office pushed the State Department on the matter. At one point the Israeli government signed a deportation order, but the situation ended in a "stand off," according to a State Department memo. When Hynes took office, and his assistants were asked if they wanted to pursue the case, one of those assistants informed the State Department that "they would not be pursuing the case any further at this time," according to another memo.

Schmetterer said that the Brooklyn D.A.'s office dropped the issue after knowing for years that it could not pursue Mondrowitz.

Anti-abuse activists in the Orthodox community say Hynes's silence may have been due to pressure from the Orthodox community, which they claim has historically been reluctant to see alleged sex offenders prosecuted. The activists, including Leshner, point to a 14-person Jewish advisory council that Hynes assembled soon after he was elected, comprising members of the Orthodox leadership in Brooklyn. One woman who has been at odds with the leadership for years, Amy Neustein, said she was told by two members of Hynes's council that the community did not want to see Mondrowitz prosecuted.

"The rabbis have no comprehension of the injury of sexual abuse," said Neustein, an anti-abuse activist. "They have no comprehension of why the victims want justice."

One member of Hynes's Jewish council, Rabbi Herbert Bomzer, said he does not remember Mondrowitz's extradition being discussed by the council. Bomzer did say that he knew Mondrowitz when the younger man was a counselor at Yeshiva University's high school, and that Mondrowitz had been "loved" by the students.

When asked if he would now support extradition proceedings, Bomzer, president of the rabbinical board of Flatbush, said: "If he has managed to get to Israel and is protected by the law there — then leave it alone."

Weiss, the 39-year-old alleged victim of Mondrowitz, said that from the beginning it had been clear that many members of the Orthodox community wanted him to let the case go. He said he had been molested when his father sent him to spend a week with Mondrowitz at a difficult moment in Weiss's adolescence. During that week, Mondrowitz's family was in the Catskills and, Weiss claimed, each night he was coaxed into bed by Mondrowitz.

"What's difficult to think about is that he was so smooth — so manipulative," Weiss said. "It was as if it was all my choice."

Weiss said that he blocked the experience out for years, but a run-in with Mondrowitz during high school conjured up the memories and led to a breakdown. He first told his parents, but they told him he must be mistaken. "He's a *frum* man," Weiss remembers his parents saying, using a Yiddish word meaning religiously observant.

A few years later, a principal at the yeshiva that Mondrowitz had attended summoned Weiss — but after giving over the details, Weiss said, nothing happened.

The incident faded into the background for many years, but in 2001, Weiss was drawn out by what was billed as a "night for healing" at a New York school for Orthodox boys. Weiss showed up with high hopes, but he says that the event turned into a series of speeches by rabbis who spoke in allegorical terms, rather than dealing with the victims in the room.

Weiss decided to go outside the Orthodox community when he read an article in New York Magazine last month, detailing the case of Rabbi Yehuda Kolko, a teacher at an Orthodox boys school in Flatbush who was sued by alleged former victims. Kolko has not yet filed opposition papers.

The second alleged Mondrowitz victim, who has already gone to Hynes — and who wishes to remain anonymous — also said it was the Kolko article that prompted him to step forward. For both, the hope is that Mondrowitz will be "brought to justice and made an example of," in the words of the second accuser.

"I want to show that abusers can't get away with it, that we as a community will no longer stand for the routine cover-ups of abuse, and to try to put some finality to that chapter of my life," he said.

It is likely that the new complaints would not be included in the counts, if Mondrowitz is arrested, due to the statute of limitations. But the men both say they hope their voices will increase the pressure on Hynes.