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Critics: Jewish Court Stymies Reports

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.c The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) - The case of a rabbi accused of molesting more than 20 girls sparked a review of sex abuse policies in Orthodox Judaism's most prominent group, but critics say a rabbinical court unique to the Orthodox branch still hinders abuse claims from getting a full airing.

As the sex abuse scandal among Roman Catholic clergy widens, church authorities across the country are revisiting the way they handle abuse claims and looking again at sometimes decades-old abuse claims.

But for Orthodox Jews, the wake-up call came a couple of years ago with the case of Rabbi Baruch Lanner, who is accused of molesting teen-agers over a long career as an educator and youth group leader.

He resigned in June 2000 from his job as a leader of the Orthodox Union's National Conference of Synagogue Youth and is facing trial in Monmouth County, N.J. He could be sentenced to up to 40 years in prison and \$250,000 in fines if convicted.

Lanner has denied criminal wrongdoing, but admitted to having had romantic relationships with former students.

"Because of the Lanner case the Orthodox Union has undergone almost two years now of deep introspection and examination of our policies and procedures," said Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb, executive vice president of the union, which represents 1,000 mainstream Orthodox synagogues in the United States and Canada.

He said the Orthodox Union has implemented standards for all staff members who work with youth and has set up extensive training sessions.

"We also have a clear way for parents or youth to complain," Weinreb said. "We're trying to develop a culture of vigilance and continuous improvement."

While no one is alleging that sexual abuse is especially common among Orthodox Jews, critics say the rabbinic court or Beit Din, can discourage civil authorities from investigating a complaint.

"As we look at the general issue of the cover-ups of abusers in the clergy, what we find in the Orthodox Jewish community is unfortunately that an institution already exists which allows clergymen to wield extraordinary influence," said Michael Leshner, a lawyer and journalist who has written about the issue.

Leshner said that "deeply held tradition" impels Orthodox Jews to bring a complaint against a rabbi to a Beit Din, where the accuser is often pressured not to alert the police or prosecutors.

In a case that received some local publicity, Leshner and sociologist Amy Neustein have charged that Brooklyn District Attorney Charles Hynes dropped charges against a Hasidic rabbi in 2000 after a Beit Din said he was innocent.

The case involved Rabbi Solomon Hafner, a member of the ultra-Orthodox Bobov sect in Brooklyn's heavily Jewish Borough Park section. Hafner was accused of molesting a young boy during private tutoring sessions.

A Beit Din consisting of five Orthodox rabbis from around New York cleared Hafner, and the district attorney declined to prosecute.

Hafner would not speak about the case, but his lawyer, Jack Litman, said that Hynes "determined that the complaining witness and his family made up the charges."

A spokeswoman for Hynes, Sharon Toomer, said the evidence "didn't substantiate the claim" against Hafner.

But Dr. Katherine Grimm, a pediatrician who is the medical director of the Children's Advocacy Center of Manhattan, said that she interviewed the boy and "there were details that were very hard for a child to be coached to make up," Grimm said. "Nobody had anything to gain from this disclosure."

Neustein and Leshner suggested that Hynes' office was pressured to drop the case by the religious court, a charge denied by Rabbi Chaim Rottenberg, one of the tribunal's members.

"Who is powerful enough to pressure the D.A. and the police to drop the charges?" Rottenberg said. He added that Hafner served as a camp counselor and pool monitor for 13 years and no one ever complained about him.

In the Lanner case, a Beit Din met in 1989 - more than a decade before he was eventually charged in court with abusing two teen-age girls while he was principal of a Jewish day school - and found that allegations against him had not been proven.

Weinreb said anyone who suspects abuse should go to the police and not to a Beit Din.

"If there's a fire, you call the fire department, you don't go to the rabbinical court," he said. "We're obligated to go to the authorities."

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