

NEWS

A Haredi Town Confronts Abuse From The Inside

Passaic, N.J., is waging a lonely fight against molestation in the Orthodox community. Will its example spread?

By [Steve Lipman](#) | November 11, 2009 | 12:00 am

On the night before Yom Kippur in September, Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman stood before his Orthodox congregation, in a room crowded with men wearing black hats and women wearing sheitels, and moderated a panel discussion among five Orthodox Jews who said they had been the victims of sexual abuse at the hands of other Orthodox Jews. The rabbi regularly uses his pulpit to preach against the evils of sexual molestation.

On another recent day Michael Leshner, an Orthodox lawyer and author, welcomed four young Orthodox Jews into his home, two men and two women, who told him their stories of sexual molestations committed by Orthodox Jews. For more than a decade he has served as the legal “advocate” for sexual abuse victims and as “their voice,” since first handling a custody case that involved a sexually abused child.

Also not long ago, Brochie Neugarten, an Orthodox mother who works as a purchasing manager, described to a friend her plan to establish an organization that will offer financial support to victims of sexual abuse in the community. Neugarten became an activist a few years ago, after someone she knows became the target of a molester.

The efforts by Rabbi Eisenman, Leshner and Neugarten, rare steps against sexual abuse in a religious community, took place within a few blocks of each other in Passaic, a middle-class suburb with a growing haredi community 10 miles west of Manhattan in northern New Jersey.

Following more than a decade of sensational accusations of rapes and molestations committed by members — often leaders — of Orthodox Jewry, and increasing criticism of the Orthodox community’s leadership for ignoring or attempting to cover up the accusations, Passaic is slowly and quietly building a reputation as an exception.

The work of several members of Passaic’s Jewish community, which has taken on a haredi, “yeshivishe” and “chasidische” character in recent years, has established Passaic as a place that is taking a stand against sexual predators and the people who protect them. And it’s a place where abuse victims are urged to take their allegations to the police and not simply rely on rabbis to handle the cases inside the community.

In addition to Rabbi Eisenman, who coordinated the event at his shul, as well as Leshner and Neugarten, Passaic is also the home of Mitch Morrison, a magazine editor who has lobbied rabbis in his area to openly discuss the topic, and Marc Stern, an attorney who has served as a pro bono advisor to local rabbis about the legal ramifications of sexual abuse accusations.

The grass-roots advocates sometimes work independently, sometimes together.

Twice within the past few years, several pulpit rabbis in Passaic, Rabbi Eisenman among them, announced in shul when men accused of being sexual molesters had moved into the community. One, Stefan Colmer, left Passaic soon thereafter, likely because of the public exposure, Passaic residents say, and is now in jail having been convicted of eight counts of criminal sexual act in the second degree; the other, Mitchell Levinton, pleaded guilty to child endangerment last month and faces a five-year prison term.

The pair of disgraced molesters who had lived there played a role in energizing Passaic’s Jewish community, residents say.

To an outsider, Passaic’s Orthodox community — which features a wide variety of synagogues and Shabbat-only shtiebels [minyan sites], a strip of kosher restaurants along Main Avenue and notices posted around town about upcoming Torah lectures and chesed projects — seems like any other.

But, Morrison wrote last month on the FailedMessiah.com blog, Passaic “is unlike many Orthodox communities in New York and New Jersey. It is neither Modern Orthodox nor Chassidish.” It has, Morrison wrote, a demographic distinction that may explain why its Orthodox community is responding to the sexual abuse issue more aggressively than others. “It is, per capita, home to one of the largest populations of baalei teshuva and is among the fastest growing religious Jewish communities in the country.”

“The people who came out” to the Ahavas Israel program “were largely from the [baal teshuvah] community,” says Lesley Schofield, a member of the congregation who attended the panel discussion. Baalei teshuvah, people from non-religious backgrounds who turned as adults to lives of traditional Judaism, have “a lesser fear of dealing with controversial things” than many “from birth” (the so-called FFBs) Orthodox Jews do, Schofield says. Because their family members are outside the community, they are less fearful of harming relatives’ marriage prospects, a motivation that keeps many Orthodox people from drawing attention to themselves or speaking out on controversial matters.

Rabbi Eisenman says he put the program together on short notice — he intentionally scheduled it during the High Holy Days, for the greatest spiritual impact — and proceeded when other local rabbis dropped out. The other rabbis reportedly expressed concern about what the panelists might say, including giving names of molesters who have not been formally accused, indicted or convicted.

“It’s just easier to do it alone,” Rabbi Eisenman says.

He did not tell the panelists what to say or what not to say; such limitations, he explains, would limit the emotional impact of their words.

“It opened him up to criticism ... some felt it was irresponsible for him to allow people to have an open mic,” Morrison says.

In his FailedMessiah post on the Ahavas Israel program, Morrison called Rabbi Eisenman “a maverick rabbi.”

“He’s very much an independent person,” Morrison says. “Rabbi Eisenman is an emotional person. Passaic is a passionate community. In a lot of [other Orthodox communities] there’s an intellectual response that’s devoid of passion.”

“Do I want to shake things up? For sure,” Rabbi Eisenman says. “Is there a side of me that is anti-establishment? Yes. I don’t have any stage fright. I love the stage.”

For two and a half hours, Schofield and the other members of the audience heard the abuse victims describe their experiences and the often-unsupportive reaction they got from family and friends. The program, she says, “was an eye opener. There was hardly a dry eye in the room.”

Activists caution, however, that the Orthodox community’s forthright stance against sexual abuse, epitomized by Rabbi Eisenman’s panel discussion and by calls for alleged victims to go to the police with their allegations, is not embraced by all of Passaic’s Orthodox Jews, rabbis or laity, or everyone in the wider haredi community.

“I think parents are talking to their kids a little more” about prudent safety measures, Neugarten says. But she adds, “I don’t think [the children] are safer here, because there are still 5,000 people who didn’t come” to the Ahavas Israel program. “It’s just a beginning.”

“At this point,” Morrison says, “[the movement to confront such abuse] has not necessarily spread outside of Passaic.”

In fact, Agudath Israel, the umbrella organization for the haredi community in the United States, has given mixed signals when it comes to combating abuse in the Orthodox community. The group’s executive vice president, David Zwiebel, told The New York Times recently, “A broad consensus has emerged in the last few years that many of these issues are beyond the ability of the community to handle internally.”

But, he added, that prosecutors should recognize “religious sensitivities” in pressing their cases and should seek alternatives to prison. “The district attorney should be careful not to be seen as making a power grab from rabbinic authority,” Zwiebel told The Times.

Rabbi Eisenman, who ranks as “one of the most prominent rabbis in Passaic,” has a following “of probably 20 to 25 percent” of the community, Morrison says. In Orthodox circles that don’t read newspapers, don’t watch TV, don’t surf the Internet, many simply haven’t heard about the Ahavas Israel program, Morrison continues. And many of those who do know, “feel that the issue should be handled privately.”

Neither of Passaic’s major day schools, Yeshiva Ketana or the Hillel School, offers a formal sexual abuse prevention curriculum for students or faculty, Morrison says.

Requests by The Jewish Week for comments on this issue from several pulpit rabbis in Passaic and from the heads of the two day schools were not returned.

Rabbi Eisenman’s Ahavas Israel has grown from about 40 Shabbat-observant families to about 250 since he became spiritual leader 14 years ago, after it changed from Conservative to Orthodox. He has drawn veiled criticism, but no outright attacks, for unilaterally sponsoring the program, members of Passaic’s Orthodox community say.

“No one [openly] condemns him for what he did,” says psychologist Mordechai Rindenow, who attended the panel discussion. “I don’t see anyone speaking against him. I just don’t see [other rabbis] siding with him.”

Without the vocal support of other Passaic rabbis, Rabbi Eisenman is “somewhat doing this in a vacuum,” Rindenow says.

“Absolutely, it’s not a revolution,” says Asher Lipner, a psychologist and abuse victim who took part in the Ahavas Israel program. “It’s a matter of time” before other communities, other rabbis follow the Passaic example, he says.

Lipner says he has received calls from members of two area Orthodox communities — from lay leaders, not rabbis — who want to run similar programs with abuse victims. “In other communities it will start with members of the community” asking their rabbis, “Why aren’t you doing this?”

In Passaic, “certainly, the shul is behind him,” says Howard Penner, Ahavas Israel president.

Rabbi Eisenman, 50, was ordained at the Modern Orthodox flagship institution, Yeshiva University. But since then he has taken on the outward trappings (a full, reddish-gray beard and long black coat) and the practices (his children attend right-wing schools) of the haredi faction. Which make his actions on combating sexual abuse all the more rare.

“What he did is significant,” says Rabbi Yosef Blau, masgiach ruchani, or spiritual guidance counselor, at Yeshiva University’s rabbinical school, who has become an outspoken advocate for abuse victims. “It demonstrates that the community now understands the problem.”

Marc Stern, acting co-executive director of the American Jewish Congress, says a ruling some 20 years ago by Rabbi Meir Stern (no relation), rosh yeshiva of the town’s Yeshiva Gedola (a post-high school institution of Talmudic learning), that an autopsy was performed after a child in the community died and a contagious disease was suspected, set a tone for the primacy of children’s physical and emotional safety.

“The community has grown up with that assumption ... that within the bounds of halacha, we will do everything that is possible to protect the interests of children,” Stern says. “Other communities don’t have that.”

Community-wide outrage at the possibility of children being molested was evident in the size of the crowd at the Ahavas Israel program, an estimated 300 to 400 men and women, sitting separately, Neugarten says. “We expected 40 people to show up. We were in shock.”

“It wasn’t just from our shul,” says Daniel Pollack, a professor of social work who belongs to Ahavas Israel.

Lipner, a therapist who counsels other abuse victims, calls the event “historic.”

It was, he says, the first time Orthodox victims of sexual abuse were invited to describe their experiences in a haredi congregation; the first time a haredi rabbi himself was the impetus behind such a program; the first time parents in a right-wing Orthodox community were publicly advised to go to the police or district attorneys, instead of just consulting with rabbis, when a child is abused.

Most of the panelists went public with their stories for the first time that night.

“For the first time, survivors of abuse were asked, ‘Please come. We want to hear your experience,’” Lipner says. “This was a huge step forward.” Past programs in the New York area or out of town, sponsored by synagogues or politicians, drew smaller crowds, featuring mental health professionals instead of victims themselves, and avoided mention of being in police or district attorneys, he says.

“It was an amazing experience,” says Sarah, a 16-year-old girl from the New York area who spoke at the program, under a pseudonym, about being raped by a friend of her family from the time she was 7 until three years ago. After the program, she says, many members of the audience stayed to talk with the panelists past 2 a.m., offering hugs and Shabbat invitations. “They acknowledged our pain.”

“I’m used to hearing, ‘It can’t happen in the [Orthodox] Jewish community,’” Sarah says.

According to most mental health experts, the incidence of sexual abuse in Orthodox circles is comparable to the rate in wider society, but most leaders of the community have denied the problem and discouraged victims from taking their complaints to secular authorities. Lipner says he has heard of abuse victims and relatives being threatened with physical abuse, public embarrassment, loss of business, summons to a beit din and exclusion from the community if they go to the police.

The reasons for Orthodox reticence to publicly confront abusers vary: publicizing molestations committed by persons identified as Orthodox Jews, some rabbinic leaders have ruled, would blacken the image of Orthodox Judaism and lessen respect for rabbis; it is against Jewish law to go outside the structure of a beit din, or rabbinic court; it is immodest to discuss sexual matters in public.

“The current trend in Judaism toward hagiography has made matters worse, where it is considered unconvictional to even mention a Jew in a bad way, or turning in a Jew to non-Jewish authorities, ‘doesn’t apply if there is no comparable [law enforcement] system in the beit din system,’” he says; a beit din can’t arrest or imprison an offender. Therefore, the rabbi says, “there is no prohibition against going to the police.”

During the panel discussion, a recording of which is available on the FailedMessiah.com site, Rabbi Eisenman acknowledged that he, like other Passaic rabbis who have taken a less-public position on the sexual abuse issue, was “brought into this kicking and screaming.” Alerted to the problem by members of the Orthodox community who came to him for counseling, he conducted further research, he says, and realized the extent of abuse committed against and by Orthodox Jews.

He declared at the program that other, unnamed pulpit rabbis in the community, declined to co-sponsor the panel discussion, and he urged the audience to eschew giving charitable donations to the Ger chasidic sect, which has fought extradition from Israel of a molester who is a member of the group.

The program, Passaic activists say, gave their work the imprimatur of a major rabbi who has the status of a rav, a communal leader. Morrison calls himself part of “bunch of yechidim,” individuals working on behalf of abuse victims. “Now we have a springboard.”

So are children in Passaic’s Orthodox community safer because of the activists’ work?

“Yes, 100 percent,” Lipner says. In Passaic, he says, a child making an accusation of abuse will be believed, and the perpetrator will be confronted. Because of attention focused on the subject, parents there say they are more protective of their children.

“If you’re a child abuser,” says Marc Stern “you don’t want to live in Passaic. There’s no refuge here.”

As a therapist, Lipner says he frequently deals with Orthodox Jews who were sexually abused and state they do not feel understood or accepted in Orthodox communities. “Now I can say, ‘Move to Passaic.’”