

## Sex-Abuse Case against Rabbi Raises Larger Issues

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Boston Globe  
July 20, 2010

[http://www.boston.com/yourtown/brookline/articles/2010/07/20/molestation\\_charges\\_against\\_rabbi\\_raise\\_unsettling\\_questions\\_for\\_orthodox\\_community/](http://www.boston.com/yourtown/brookline/articles/2010/07/20/molestation_charges_against_rabbi_raise_unsettling_questions_for_orthodox_community/)

Two years ago, Michael Brecher came to prosecutors in Boston with a disturbing allegation: In the 1970s, he said, he had been molested by a rabbi who was teaching sixth grade at one of the region's most prestigious Jewish day schools, the Maimonides School.

One of Brecher's classmates came forward at the same time. And last year, after reading news accounts of indecent sexual assault and battery charges filed against Stanley Z. Levitt, a third person said that he, too, was abused by Levitt.

Now, court records show that Levitt might have tried to entice two more students into having intimate contact with him while they took showers in his Brighton home.

One of those former students has told Boston police that Levitt took him and other students on a field trip to Montreal where Levitt directed the students in a ritual purification bath, or mikvah, while all of them were naked, an inappropriate practice, according to an official at a prominent Jewish theological seminary.

Levitt has also faced allegations in Philadelphia, where he lived after leaving Maimonides.

The case, with echoes of clergy sexual abuse incidents in the Catholic Church, is a reflection, scholars say, of similar abuse cases that have taken place in the orthodox Jewish community, where rabbis are held in high regard and the social penalties for criticizing clergy can be high.

A number of prominent orthodox rabbis have faced charges, including Baruch Lanner, the subject of a 2000 expose in The Jewish Week, and Yehuda Kolko, who was featured in a 2006 New York magazine article.

"There is a growing acknowledgment that we have a problem, which has taken a long time," said Yosef Blau, an Orthodox rabbi who is the spiritual adviser at the theological seminary at New York's Yeshiva University. "Denial has been very powerful in the community."

Suffolk District Attorney Daniel F. Conley has charged Levitt, 64, with molesting three of the students, and the rabbi, now a Philadelphia resident free on \$5,000 bail, has pleaded not guilty.

Neither Levitt nor his Boston attorney, Scott Curtis, returned messages from the Globe seeking comment on the allegations made by Maimonides School alumni. But court records show that Curtis is seeking to have the charges against Levitt dismissed based in part on "the age of the allegations."

Rabbi David Shapiro, the religious leader at Maimonides, who was an assistant principal in the mid-1970s, and Nathan Katz, the school's executive director, declined to comment on the allegations by the former students.

Katz, however, issued a statement, saying, "Our hearts go out to the victims of child abuse and we are deeply saddened at the circumstances surrounding this matter, which took place in the mid-1970s." He added that school officials take a variety of measures to ensure the safety of students, including criminal background checks of school employees.

Six years ago, Levitt pleaded no contest to molesting a boy living in an Orthodox Jewish community in Philadelphia and was later cited for violating probation when he refused treatment at an institute for sexual offenders.

"He basically flunked the sex offender course there because he refused to accept responsibility for what he did," said Philadelphia Assistant District Attorney James Berardinelli, who prosecuted the case.



Stanley Z. Levitt is charged with molesting students. (7 News/ WHDH-TV)

Activists seeking to raise awareness about sexual abuse by rabbis say the Levitt case is an opportunity for Jewish leaders to continue efforts to overcome the religious obstacles that have discouraged some victims from reporting abuse to police.

The obstacles include traditional Jewish rules, adhered to in some pockets of the Orthodox world, such as a prohibition against "chillul Hashem," bringing shame on God's name, and against "mesirah," informing on fellow believers to secular authorities.

Marci A. Hamilton, a professor at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law and the author of "Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect its Children," said strict adherence to those practices can create an environment where pedophiles flourish.

"If other adults are willing to keep their secrets, they can have multiple victims," she said. "It's horrifying."

Blau, who began his career as a teacher at Maimonides, in the 1960s, said the concept of mesirah is rooted in the history of the Jewish people, who were often persecuted while living in societies that officially sanctioned anti-Semitism. But he also said that the use of chillul Hashem and mesirah as reasons to avoid reporting sexual abuse by rabbis "is a misapplication of those laws," an opinion underscored by the Rabbinical Council of America in a resolution approved at its convention earlier this year.

Researchers concerned about sexual abuse by rabbis attribute a gradual change in attitudes among orthodox Jews to websites and blogs where victims have felt free to discuss their abuse anonymously. They also cite the example of clergy abuse victims in the Catholic Church, who began speaking out in large numbers after the 2002 scandal in the Boston Archdiocese.

"Victims in Jewish communities were fortified by the experience of Catholics who have blazed a trail for them," said Amy Neustein, editor of the book, "Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities & Child Sex Scandals."

The case against Levitt began unfolding when Brecher and a New York man decided to approach law enforcement authorities in Boston. Brecher, 46, now a Maryland resident, said Levitt sexually abused him while he was a patient at Children's Hospital recovering from a school accident.

The second man, a 46-year-old New Yorker who asked that his name be withheld, said Levitt molested him on three occasions in the shower area of his Brighton home during a three-night visit while his parents were on vacation. The Globe does not publish the names of alleged sexual abuse victims who wish to remain anonymous.

In a Globe interview, the New York man said that as a result of Levitt's alleged abuse he, too, became a sexual abuser and was arrested in 1999 on a related charge. "A child is nothing but a piece of clay," he said. "Anything he sees, touches or does, or is done to him, has an effect."

After Brecher and the New York man made their accusations, the third alleged victim stepped forward, and several additional Maimonides alumni have talked with investigators or testified before the Suffolk grand jury that handed up the indictments against Levitt, according to court records.

In addition, the former student who told investigators about the alleged mikvah incident in Montreal also said that his father, after learning of the incident, had a loud argument with Levitt and informed school authorities, according to court records. Yet Shapiro, the assistant principal at the time, testified to the grand jury that the school received no serious complaints about Levitt and that the rabbi left in good standing.

Neither Shapiro nor Katz returned messages from the Globe seeking to resolve the apparent inconsistency.

Whether or not Maimonides officials received complaints about Levitt in the 1970s, it is clear that he did not return to the school after the 1976-1977 academic year and that he was subsequently charged with molesting three boys living in an Orthodox Jewish community in Philadelphia. In the first case, Levitt was found not guilty. In the second case, he pleaded no contest and received a five-year sentence of probation, which expired last December. And in the third case, the alleged victim withdrew his charges.

The statute of limitations for indecent assault and battery on a child in Massachusetts, the time after a crime during which prosecutors may file charges, is 27 years. But Conley was able to cite Levitt with 35-year-old allegations because the clock on the statute stops ticking when an alleged perpetrator leaves the state. Although Levitt's whereabouts in the years right after he left Maimonides, in 1977, are unclear, prosecutors say he has been living outside Massachusetts since the early 1980s.

Still, Curtis is arguing that the decades that have elapsed since Levitt was teaching religious studies in Brookline have rendered the statements made by his accusers "inherently unreliable." He also argues that prosecutors failed to present corroborating evidence to the grand jury that handed up the indictments.

David Deakin, chief of the Suffolk Family Protection and Sexual Assault Bureau, said prosecutors believe it is important to pursue child sexual abuse accusations, even if they are decades old, in part to prevent perpetrators from offending again.

"One of the things we know about pedophilia is that it tends to be a chronic condition, especially if it's not treated and even when it is treated," he said. "We have to think about the children the alleged offender may prey on in the future."

Mitchell Garabedian, an attorney representing Brecher, agreed, saying the Levitt case is a cautionary tale for anyone working in an institution that serves children.

"Supervisors must be able to notice red flags when supervising adults working with children in institutional settings," he said. "It's naive to think that sexual abusers stop abusing children because they move from one location to another."

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