

# Panel to discuss abuse by clergy

By **ABIGAIL KLEIN LEICHMAN**

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In reaction to recent allegations of sexual molestation of children in Jewish settings, the Teaneck-based Union for Traditional Judaism is hosting a March 15 public symposium on the topic, featuring religious authorities and activists.

The forum will also serve as a book-launching for “Tempest in the Temple: Jewish Communities and Child Sex Scandals,” edited by Amy Neustein.

“There isn’t any other major religious organization taking on the issue in a forceful way,” said UTJ Executive Vice President Rabbi Ronald D. Price. “Everybody has read about individuals or institutions that have, out of fear, stepped away from discussing the problem publicly. We feel our position as a halachic but transdenominational body allows us to view the whole Jewish people as our constituency and deal with an issue that crosses all borders.”



Speakers at the upcoming forum on clergy abuse include, clockwise from left, Michael Lesher, Rabbi Mark Dratch, Dr. Rachel Yehuda, and Rabbi Fred Hyman. Dr. Michael Kaplowitz, not pictured, will also take part.

In the past three years, four rabbis in Brooklyn have been sued or arrested on charges of abusing boys in yeshiva or camp settings. In August, following the latest charge, New York State assemblyman and radio talk-show host Dov Hikind interviewed the mother of a past victim and began hearing many further stories of molestation.

Hikind has said that he has testimony and information detailing at least 1,000 cases of childhood sexual abuse in Brooklyn yeshivas dating back as far as a generation. Some of the accusers claim school administrators knew about the abuse but did nothing to stop it. Others told of threats when they attempted to speak out or press charges.

Even though none of the reported cases happened in North Jersey, Price said early publicity for the symposium encouraged local past victims to come forward.

“One of our committee members who helped arrange the program was approached by five people between the ages of 30 and 40 who said they’d been abused by teachers or rebbeim and they want us to deal with this so it doesn’t happen to others,” said Price. “That’s validation for doing something that’s not pleasant.”

Price emphasized that sexual abuse is not pervasive in the Jewish community. “But it exists. And if it exists, it is antithetical to what we believe in as Jews and we must do what we can to eliminate sexual abuse in home or school.”

Two of the scheduled speakers are Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive director of JSafe, a non-profit organization committed to combating child abuse and violence in homes, day schools, and yeshivot; and attorney Michael Lesher, who represents several victims of alleged sex offender Rabbi Avrohom Mondrowitz. Both men contributed essays to Neustein’s book.

The other speakers are Rabbi Fred Hyman, an Orthodox rabbi in Springfield, Mass., and an advocate on behalf of victims of child molestation; psychiatrist Dr. Michael Kaplowitz, director of the pastoral counseling course at UTJ’s rabbinical seminary; and Dr. Rachel Yehuda, an expert on traumatic stress who has published widely on sexual abuse in the Jewish community.

“Our conference committee chose speakers with reputations as thoughtful professionals in many aspects of this arena,” said Price. “We don’t want this to be inflammatory, but rather helpful in figuring out how to deal with sexual abuse. This needs to be only the first of many discussions on the subject.”

Price said all 85 ordained UTJ rabbis will receive JSafe training.

“We don’t say we can solve the problem,” he added, “but if we can make a first step in making sure another generation isn’t affected by this, we will have accomplished our mission.”

The program will be held from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. at UTJ headquarters, 811 Palisade Ave., Teaneck. There is a suggested donation of \$10 for attendees. Price said UTJ has requested continuing education credit for social workers through the National Association of Social Workers. For information and advance registration, call (201) 801-0707, ext. 201.