

FORWARD

Rabbi Fired Over Sex Claims, Defenders Offer Mea Culpa

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An Israeli-based spiritual institute has fired its main rabbi over sexual abuse claims, less than two years after several prominent American religious figures rallied to defend him against earlier allegations.

At least five female students and staff members have come forward to accuse Rabbi Mordechai Gafni of luring them into sexual relationships through intimidation, psychological manipulation and deception. Late last week, Gafni, an Orthodox-trained rabbi who has become a star of the New Age-style Jewish Renewal movement, was dismissed from his position as the head of Bayit Chadash, a center on the Sea of Galilee that he co-founded six years ago.

Gafni subsequently issued a public apology for having "hurt people I love," and said that he would seek in-patient treatment for what he called "a sickness."

A number of prominent American rabbis who publicly backed Gafni when allegations surfaced in the fall of 2004 have said that they now regret their previous support. Among those voicing regret are Rabbi Saul Berman, the leader of the liberal Orthodox organization Edah; Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, an Orthodox author best known for his accessible books on Judaism; Rabbi Arthur Green, dean of the rabbinical school of Hebrew College in Newton, Mass., and former president of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, leader of Congregation Nevei Kodah, a Jewish Renewal community in Boulder, Colo., and Rabbi Arthur Waskow, director of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia and a leader of the Jewish Renewal movement.

In recent years, the Orthodox Jewish community has suffered several high-profile sexual abuse cases. It also has been accused by some critics of being insufficiently alert to the nature of abuse and overly protective of leaders at the expense of alleged victims. The dismissal of Gafni — who had been dogged by a welter of rumors and allegations over the past two decades — has shone a similar spotlight on the responses of a number of individuals on the liberal end of the Jewish spectrum and in liberal Orthodox circles generally untainted by previous scandals.

"The saddest part of the story is that there were these women from the past who had the courage to speak up despite their isolation and their own pain, despite being threatened by him repeatedly, and nobody came forth to give them support," said one of the current accusers at Bayit Chadash, who did not want to

be identified by name. "People in this culture [chose] to support the male predator rather than...the women's voices that were alone."

Earlier this week, Jacob Ner-David and Avraham Leader, the two other founders of Bayit Chadash, sent out an open letter announcing that Gafni would be seeking intensive therapy for his "sickness" and that they would be contacting all organizations to which he has been connected.

Gafni, who is in his mid-40s and been married three times, was born Marc Winiarz and moved from the Midwest to New York for high school and college. He was originally ordained as an Orthodox rabbi and moved to Israel more than a decade ago, after leaving posts in New York and in Boca Raton, Fla., amid rumors of sexual misconduct. He assumed an Israeli name and transitioned into the world of Jewish Renewal.

In September 2004, as Gafni's profile was rising again back in the United States — where he had become a frequent guest lecturer and visitor at several spiritual centers and synagogues — the editor and the publisher of *The Jewish Week*, Gary Rosenblatt, wrote a column reviewing some of the long-standing allegations against him.

Rosenblatt said he had interviewed about 50 supporters and critics, including two prominent Orthodox leaders — Rabbi Yosef Blau, spiritual mentor at Yeshiva University, and Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of the West Bank settlement of Efrat — who had known Gafni since the 1980s. Blau and Riskin, who both criticized Gafni, told Rosenblatt that over the years they had spoken with a number of women who had complaints about the rabbi.

Rosenblatt interviewed several alleged victims. One was a woman named Judy, who first accused Gafni of molesting her in 1986, when she was a 16-year-old member of a youth group he directed. Shortly thereafter, Gafni left New York for a pulpit job in Florida. Another woman, Susan, who was an adviser for the group at the time, said that Gafni had threatened her when she tried to intervene on the girl's behalf.

When asked about the allegations, Gafni told Rosenblatt that Judy was a troubled, unstable teenager who fabricated the story after he rebuffed her advances.

But he admitted to having had a sexual relationship with another girl, when she was 13 and 14 and he was 19 and 20, studying to become a rabbi.

"I was a stupid kid and we were in love," Gafni was quoted as saying in *The Jewish Week*. "She was 14 going on 35, and I never forced her."

The woman told Rosenblatt that Gafni had "repeatedly sexually assaulted her" when he stayed at her house for the Sabbath. The rabbi also told her that she would be "shamed in the community" if she told anyone.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who is widely credited as the founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, went on the record in Gafni's defense.

"If you want to find fly specks in the pepper, you can always find them," Schachter-Shalomi told Rosenblatt. "But I've watched him teach. He is learned, exciting and charismatic."

In the weeks after Rosenblatt's column appeared, several Jewish communal leaders vigorously defended Gafni in letters sent to The Jewish Week and attacked the newspaper for running the story. Berman, Telushkin and Firestone wrote a joint letter stating that together they had conducted a thorough investigation and found all the accusations against Gafni "totally unconvincing." This week, in a statement to the Forward, the three rabbis said that they are "deeply regretful of our prior support of Rabbi Gafni."

In a subsequent e-mail to the Forward, they argued that "it is vital to distinguish between past accusations against Rabbi Gafni and the current situation."

Green, who in 2004 penned one of the most vociferous letters in defense of Gafni, agreed that the new batch of allegations were different from the ones that plagued the rabbi two years ago.

"The stories were from long ago, and he had rejected and outgrown that side of himself," Green said in an interview with the Forward. "These are now new cases and new investigations."

In a 2004 letter to The Jewish Week defending Gafni, Green said that he had not investigated the allegations and had "no interest in doing so." This week, Green told the Forward that he felt "victimized" by Gafni's lies and actions, while acknowledging that the accusers have suffered more.

Less than a month after the four rabbis wrote their letters to The Jewish Week in October 2004, the Israeli newspaper Ma'ariv reported allegations, dating from 1994, that mirror the current accusations against Gafni. According to an Orthodox couple interviewed for the lengthy Ma'ariv profile on the rabbi, he sexually preyed on their 23-year-old daughter while serving as a visiting rabbi in Kfar Saba. He went so far as to tell her that he wanted to leave his wife and marry her.

"We taped him saying to our daughter, 'I love you very much. I dream of the day we will be together,'" the couple told Ma'ariv. "When the story became known, Gafni left Kfar Saba." The couple's daughter told Ma'ariv that she subsequently found out that Gafni was having similar relationships with other young women.

The Bayit Chadash accuser contacted by the Forward said that the five women who recently came forth had all been told by Gafni that he wanted to marry them — and the accuser said that all the women had been dumped shortly after being told he was committing himself to celibacy.

In response to an e-mail from the Forward asking if he ever contacted anyone connected to the Ma'ariv story as part of his investigation, Berman wrote that the "article was no more than a repetition of earlier allegations which had been part of our original inquiry."

Rabbi Mark Dratch, who last year founded JSafe, a new organization to help counter sexual abuse in the Jewish community, said that the lesson of the Gafni case is that rabbis do not have impartiality or the expertise to conduct professional investigations involving friends or colleagues.

Dratch said that, in his view, the rabbis who investigated Gafni were handicapped by their own lack of understanding regarding the nature of sex crimes.

One misconception among rabbis, Dratch said, is that their knowledge of someone as a friend or colleague gives them insight into whether he or she is a sex offender. Another mistake, Dratch said, is discounting incidents based on when they occurred, since "what studies show us is that recidivism is very high."

The Bayit Chadash accuser who spoke with the Forward said she hopes that by sharing her experience, she has helped spare other women pain. So far, four of the original five accusers have made sworn statements and three have filed complaints with the police. And since then, three more women have come forward in the Bayit Chadash community, along with three women from Jerusalem.

The line between teacher and perpetrator, the woman said, is far too easy to cross, and any violation of boundaries must be taken seriously as a red flag for abuse.

"Seduction and education, they come from the same root as educe, which means to draw forth," she said. "So with education, you're drawing someone forth and helping them see themselves. With seduction, you're drawing someone forth and leading them astray."