

## Facing Up To Abuse

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Two very different cases of alleged sexual misbehavior by rabbis were in the news this week, pointing to the ongoing need for the community to find a respected mechanism for investigating and dealing with these problems.

A major piece in New York magazine ("On The Rabbi's Knee," by Robert Kolker) focuses on Rabbi Yehuda Kolko, a longtime rebbe at Yeshiva Torah Temimah of Brooklyn, who faces a \$20 million federal lawsuit, alleging his sexual abuse of young boys in his charge in school and in summer camps going back more than 35 years.

One of the rabbi's former students, David Framowitz, now 48 and living in Israel, brought the suit, which blames the yeshiva and its rosh yeshiva for "a campaign of intimidation, concealment and misrepresentation designed to prevent victims from filing lawsuits."

It is a deeply disturbing story, particularly because of the alleged cover-up and the indication that it could be, according to the article, "just the tip of the iceberg" of "rabbi-on-child molestation" in the haredi community, which continues to deny the problem.

While some in that community would call the magazine piece a chillul Hashem, or desecration of God's name, for publicizing the issue, many readers are certain to conclude that the real embarrassment is over the refusal of community leaders to address the situation.

In the meantime, the spiritual renewal communities in Israel and the United States are reeling from the news that Bayit Chadash, a New Age prayer and study group in Tel Aviv, has removed Rabbi Mordechai Gafni as its rabbinic leader after four women — his students and a staff member — filed complaints of sexual misconduct against him with the police. (See story, page 16.)

Rabbi Gafni is no stranger to such allegations, which have followed him, here and in Israel, for more than two decades. But in the past he managed to convince a number of leading Jewish educators that he was the innocent victim of a runaway rumor mill.

Several organizations and rabbis took it upon themselves to investigate the

allegations and concluded that they were false and unfair, and that Rabbi Gafni deserved to have his name cleared. Now that he has admitted the pain he has caused, it is worth reflecting on the lack of professionally conducted and communally accepted inquiries to deal with charges made against religious leaders. What is required is the formation of a respected body of rabbis, community leaders and professionals versed in the legal and psychological matters at hand. Ad-hoc investigations simply are ineffective. And as spiritual renewal organizers acknowledged this week, efforts must be made to prevent rabbinic teachers from being looked upon as gurus, able to use their charisma to manipulate followers emotionally and otherwise.

Sadly, cases of rabbinic abuse and calls for a coherent communal response are not new. As noted by Rabbi Mark Dratch, founder of JSafe, an organization to deal with abuse in the community, the disconnect is that rabbinic authorities feel critics are out to embarrass them, when in fact the critics are disillusioned to find that some rabbis seem more concerned about protecting their colleagues than the children and others who are vulnerable. Until the situation is confronted more openly and directly, embarrassing cases of abuse are certain to continue, and to become public.