

Orthodox rabbis laud conviction of Hasidic man on sexual abuse charges

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The world's largest group of Orthodox rabbis is lauding the process that led to the conviction of a Hasidic Jewish man on Monday (Dec. 10) on sexual abuse charges, and called on all segments of the Jewish community to cooperate with police in such cases.

"The RCA strongly advocates, as a matter of Jewish law, the reporting of reasonable suspicions of child abuse to the civil authorities and full cooperation with the criminal justice system," reads a statement from the Rabbinical Council of America, which represents more than 1,000 rabbis in 14 countries.

The RCA is generally dissociated from Hasidic Jewish communities – fervently religious groups that follow the teachings of particular rabbis in almost all aspects of daily life. Hasidic Jews distinguish themselves by their Old World clothes, and they typically have little interaction with outsiders.

Concentrated in Israel and Brooklyn, Hasidic communities such as the Satmars, to which the convicted man belongs, have frustrated police with their unwillingness to work with civil authorities on sexual abuse cases. They have invoked Jewish law to justify their insistence that the community alone handle such matters.

In its statement, released the day after the conviction of Nechemya Weberman, the RCA said it "decries any invocation of Jewish law or communal interests as tools in silencing victims or witnesses from reporting abuse or from receiving therapeutic and communal support, and strongly condemns those members of the Jewish community who use such tactics."

Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes, in announcing the conviction of Weberman, 54, praised the female victim, now 18, for coming forward after years of sexual abuse.

"The victim showed great courage to come forward in a very difficult time. Hopefully, this verdict will lead to the understanding for other women that they can come forward as well," said Hynes, who in past years has been accused of failing to aggressively pursue cases within Brooklyn's politically powerful Hasidic communities.

The victim was referred to Weberman, an unlicensed youth counselor, to deal with her doubts about her faith and, by Satmar standards, her immodest dress. Many in the community shunned her family after her accusations.

Rabbi Mark Dratch, executive vice president of the RCA and founder of a group that fights sexual abuse, said Judaism, like other religious communities, has come a long way in confronting sexual abuse within itself.

"We increasingly understand that our religious texts, traditions, and values must serve as resources of strength and support for members of our faith communities, not as roadblocks to their safety and security," he said. —RNS