

Stolen Innocence

Rabbi Baruch Lanner, the charismatic magnet of NCSY, was revered in the Orthodox Union youth group, despite longtime reports of abuse of teens.

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By Gary Rosenblatt

Baruch Lanner is widely regarded as one of the most brilliant, dynamic and charismatic educators in Jewish life today. As director of regions of the National Conference of Synagogue Youth, an arm of the Orthodox Union, the 50-year-old rabbi has been working with and supervising teenagers for more than three decades. He has also been a principal and teacher in yeshiva high schools in New Jersey, and for many years has led a highly successful six-week NCSY summer kollel program in Israel offering Torah study to up to 300 American boys.

But even while he is credited with bringing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of youngsters closer to Judaism, reports have continued to circulate that he has harassed, if not abused, many scores of teens sexually, physically and/or emotionally, from the early 1970s to the present. Though Rabbi Lanner's erratic behavior has long been an open secret in some Orthodox circles, for the first time more than a dozen former NCSYers and others have come forward publicly over a three-month period, telling their stories to The Jewish Week. They described in detail firsthand experiences, including Rabbi Lanner's alleged kissing and fondling scores of teenage girls in the 1970s and '80s, repeatedly kicking boys in the groin, and reports of taking a knife to a young man in 1987, and propositioning girls in 1997 at the yeshiva high school where he was principal for 15 years.

Those who have elected to tell their stories say they are motivated by anger and frustration over the refusal of the OU, the national central body of Orthodox synagogues, to act decisively on repeated complaints about Rabbi Lanner's behavior. These critics are particularly upset that he has continued to work with young people, having led a group of students on the Birthright Israel trip last winter and participating regularly in NCSY Shabbat retreats, or Shabbatons, across the country.

They are speaking out now, they say, because Rabbi Lanner's divorce from his wife of 23 years recently was finalized. There had been concern that any negative publicity before the divorce proceedings were complete may have jeopardized its resolution.

"It's long overdue that this whole story be told," said Judy Klitsner, 42, of Jerusalem, who asserted that when she was a 16-year-old active in NCSY in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., Rabbi Lanner, who was director of the Etz Chaim (N.J.) region, tried to caress and kiss her one evening during a Shabbaton in New Jersey. When she rebuffed him, she recalled recently, "he began to strangle me with all his strength, and it was only when he saw that I was losing consciousness that he threw me down and walked away."

Klitsner said she was afraid to tell anyone of the incident because the rabbi had a volatile temper and she feared reprisals. When she later told Rabbi Lanner that she would inform his supervisor, she said the rabbi laughed and told her his supervisor already knew of his behavior.

"It's immoral," she said, "that this cover-up has gone on for decades and that Baruch Lanner is still working with kids."

Klitsner and several other critics of the rabbi were adamant about going on the record publicly, insisting they did not believe the OU would take action unless forced to do so by communal pressure. They also asserted that relieving Rabbi Lanner of his current duties quietly would leave his public record unblemished and allow him to take another job in the future working closely with and supervising young people.

Pressed Not To Publish

At stake, critics and defenders of Rabbi Lanner agree, is not only his own future but the credibility of the Orthodox Union and its youth arm, NCSY, which with its hundreds of chapters and 12 regions throughout the U.S. and Canada is considered the jewel of the OU. The parent organization has described NCSY in its literature as "the most effective and respected educational youth movement in the world."

But several weeks ago, at least two influential lay leaders of the OU met personally with Rabbi Raphael Butler, its executive vice president, and urged the organization to remove Rabbi Lanner from working with youngsters. The lay leaders are torn between their belief that Rabbi Lanner is a negative role model for young people and their loyalty to NCSY. These leaders say they want Rabbi Lanner removed from his present work, but do not want to cause any negative publicity for the organization. They chose not to speak on the record for this article.

By contrast, some of the alleged victims interviewed, particularly those who say their complaints about Rabbi Lanner's treatment of them were rebuffed by OU and NCSY leaders, want the facts to come out so that the organization's response, or lack of response, over more than three decades will be widely known.

"Sometimes you have to use fire to clean out impurities," said Marcie Lenk, a Judaics teacher at the Pardes and Hartman Institutes in Jerusalem and an alleged victim of Rabbi Lanner. "That's how we kasher things in Judaism."

Some point out that according to Jewish law, one is not only permitted but obligated to publicize what would otherwise be considered lashon hara, or malicious gossip, for the protection of those who would be in danger. And they believe that Rabbi Lanner working with young people poses such a danger.

Rabbi Lanner has not responded to several requests for an interview, but in recent days, a number of OU leaders and friends and colleagues of Rabbi Lanner, having learned of the preparation of this article, called on his behalf. They urged that the article be withdrawn,

claiming it would be harmful to Rabbi Lanner and his family, NCSY, the OU and the Jewish community.

One rabbi, saying he was calling at Rabbi Lanner's suggestion, proposed a deal that would call for the article to be withheld in return for Rabbi Lanner's agreeing to cease working with youngsters and move into adult education work for the OU.

Others said the determination had already been made in recent days for Rabbi Lanner to end his three-decade association with NCSY, but there were conflicting reports as to whether the decision was Rabbi Lanner's or the OU's.

When pressed, Rabbi Butler said there was some truth to each of the reports regarding Rabbi Lanner's status (though the reports were inconsistent). He added that Rabbi Lanner would not take part in the NCSY kollel this summer, calling it "a devastating loss" for the program. Rabbi Butler said that after the summer, Rabbi Lanner would move into adult education, noting that his duties would include working with college students.

Rabbi Butler said he has never heard any specific allegations against Rabbi Lanner, though he has heard the rumors for many years. "It's like chasing shadows," he said with frustration.

Rabbi Butler, who has supervised Rabbi Lanner for 19 years, said "our method of dealing with the rumors has been to have a bet din, as an independent entity, evaluate the charges, and we abide by all its decisions."

When asked if he would care to examine the research gathered for this article, including allegations from more than a dozen former NCSYers, Rabbi Butler declined, saying a bet din, or religious tribunal, was the proper venue. He asserted that a specific bet din of three Yeshiva University-affiliated rabbis, which was first convened in 1989 over a dispute centering on Rabbi Lanner, subsequently has been consulted periodically and has permitted his youth work to continue.

The three highly respected members of the bet din in question are Rabbi Yosef Blau, mashgiach ruchani (or spiritual guidance counselor) at the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary at Yeshiva; Rabbi Mordechai Willig, a rosh yeshiva at the school; and Rabbi Aaron Levine, a professor of economics.

Rabbi Levine, who is the least involved in this matter, declined to speak on the record, though he indicated that Rabbi Blau was most knowledgeable on the subject and said the bet din had met only once regarding Rabbi Lanner since 1989. That was in 1997, when the bet din gave its approval for Rabbi Lanner to work full-time for NCSY after leaving his position as principal at Hillel yeshiva in Deal, N.J.

Rabbi Willig, a staunch defender of Rabbi Lanner over the years, is believed to agree with Rabbi Butler's assertion that the OU has followed the guidance of the bet din regarding Rabbi Lanner.

Rabbi Blau believes that while that may be technically correct, it does not address many missteps along the way. Bottom line, he says bluntly, Rabbi Lanner is "unfit to work in Jewish education," and Rabbi Blau has taken a leading role in seeking his dismissal.

"The pattern of protecting Baruch rather than his victims" goes back at least 25 years, Rabbi Blau says, and reflects "a broader inability within the Orthodox community to acknowledge improper behavior by rabbis."

He notes that "an unanticipated consequence of covering [Rabbi Lanner's] improprieties was to make into accomplices all those who knew" of his actions, making it more difficult to act against him.

"The number of men and women who have been hurt is incalculable," said Rabbi Blau. "The lack of action by the OU until now is a statement to the many victims that the Orthodox community condoned Baruch's actions, and that they were the problem."

Loyalty Was Everything

Some see the re-emergence of the bet din as a last-minute ploy by the OU to shift the blame for lack of action over Rabbi Lanner. Certainly none of the more than three dozen former NCSYers and others interviewed for this article seemed to know that the place for complaints was the bet din. Many said they lodged complaints with various rabbis and OU officials over the years but were rebuffed or dismissed, and they were never told to speak to a bet din.

Marcie Lenk, the Judaics teacher in Israel, said she has told her story to a number of influential rabbis, including Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, founding director of NCSY, but they either ignored her or made excuses for Rabbi Lanner as a brilliantly effective, if erratic man whose good works outweigh his problematic behavior.

Lenk and other women who complained to rabbis about Rabbi Lanner over the years said the implicit message was clear: leave it alone. In time, youngsters stopped reporting his actions.

Rabbis Butler and Stolper say they never heard specific allegations, but Rabbi Stolper acknowledges there were several complaints from young women many years ago about improper behavior by Rabbi Lanner. Rabbi Stolper says he sought to deal with the allegations but found no real substance to the charges.

At the time, he says he warned Rabbi Lanner in no uncertain terms that if he ever heard such accusations again, even if they could not be proved, he would have to dismiss him because "NCSY lives on the reputation of the community, the parents and the synagogues."

But decades after Rabbi Stolper says he heard reports of Rabbi Lanner's improper behavior with girls or, in at least one case, kicking a boy in the groin, Rabbi Lanner has remained in a leadership role and in regular contact with young people through NCSY.

"He has had such a magnificent impact" on so many young people, Rabbi Stolper says in defense of Rabbi Lanner, "despite some obvious sickness that is not sexual but has to do with needing to be in control."

Powerful Role Model

Rabbi Lanner's need for control was a dominant theme in numerous interviews and conversations. What emerges is a pattern of an extremely bright, talented and troubled man who created his own universe of adoring teens - a universe in which loyalty to him was paramount.

"Do you love me?" Rabbi Lanner would repeatedly ask teen officers of NCSY during required daily phone calls to him, either early in the morning or late at night. "Tell me you love me," he would demand. "Tell me you love me." And they did.

Dealing with boys, Rabbi Lanner reportedly would use four-letter words and tell crude jokes freely in his private conversations with them, disparage those not in his inner circle, and often greet them with a swift, hard kick in the groin. When they sometimes would crumple to the ground in pain, he would laugh, insisting he was just showing he was one of the guys.

With girls, he allegedly tended to focus his attentions on attractive, well-developed teens from nonobservant and often troubled families, showering them with praise but demanding complete devotion and secrecy. He would constantly tease them about their bodies, make lewd and suggestive comments, and sometimes try to kiss and fondle them when they were alone with him, warning them never to tell anyone.

The emotional power Rabbi Lanner had over these impressionable youngsters was formidable. "He was like a god to us," several men and women said. They basked in his praise, but if he turned on them, and he could easily, they were bereft. The price he demanded was loyalty.

"I was not allowed to criticize or question him," recalled one former NCSYer, now a rabbi. "I had to trade in my dignity and honesty for the feeling of power he gave me. And I had to give up control of my life to him."

Some of the teens called Rabbi Lanner "Charlie" among themselves, referring to convicted cultist killer Charles Manson, and spoke of the female teens the rabbi favored as "Baruch's girls."

Even today, a number of these former proteges, men and women with children of their own and successful careers - many in Orthodox Jewish education - say they still fear Rabbi Lanner, however irrational that fear may be. "When I hear his name my stomach clutches in tension," one woman wrote. "I feel flushed and cold at the same time."

Controversial Figure

One thing Rabbi Lanner's critics and defenders agree on: he is a controversial figure.

One of his self-described defenders, Dr. John Krug, a psychologist who was hired by Rabbi Lanner when he was principal of the Hillel yeshiva high school in Deal, N.J., and worked with him there for more than a dozen years, says the rabbi 'generates extremely strong feelings - you either hate his guts or love him to bits.'

'He's a combination genius and Talmud chochem [scholar]. He's very charismatic, flamboyant, given to histrionics. He's the master of the double entendre and he marches to a different drummer,' Krug said.

Krug said the rabbi was known to 'take an active interest in some kids - he always had his favorites' - and could be heavy-handed in seeking to persuade students to follow his advice, including convincing some to go on NCSY summer programs.

Krug says he heard allegations over the years of Rabbi Lanner committing acts of violence against students but noted that he was not 'personally aware of any improprieties' and 'never saw him' commit such acts. He did note, though, that Rabbi Lanner was disciplined by school authorities in the 1980s at least one time after a complaint that he had kicked a male student in the groin.

'That's the one incident I am aware of where the board sat him [Rabbi Lanner] down and intervened,' he said.

Krug also heard rumors that the rabbi had made sexual advances to two female students, whom he questioned directly and who denied to him any wrongdoing on the part of the rabbi.

'The perception was that he was cruising close to the boundary' of acceptable behavior, the psychologist said, but there was no proof that he stepped over.

Still, Krug offers: 'I believe a person in a leadership position in the Jewish community, and especially Jewish education, should be squeaky clean. Is Baruch? The answer is no.'

He adds that if asked 'to intervene' for Rabbi Lanner on a moral or ethical matter, he would decline, citing conflict of interest since he had been an employee of the rabbi's.

Others are less circumspect in describing Rabbi Lanner's behavior.

Etan Tokayer, a 31-year-old rabbi and former Judaics teacher at the Torah Academy of Bergen County, an Orthodox boys high school, says Rabbi Lanner was psychologically abusive to him from the time he was a seventh-grader in NCSY through high school.

'He was a very important role model to me during my formative years,' Rabbi Tokayer said. 'But while Baruch was so deep and spiritual in his public performances, he was cruel and crude in his private encounters. There seemed to be two Lanners, the destructive and the good, and that caused great tension in me. I wanted and needed his friendship and approval, yet he inspired great fear as well.'

He tells of times when as a youngster, he was berated by Rabbi Lanner, accused by him of lying, and hit in the groin. 'He preyed on the insecurities of young people and fostered a cult of personality,' Rabbi Tokayer said, 'using his power to manipulate and control us when we were vulnerable.'

Erica Schoonmaker Brown, 33, a Jewish educator in Boston, boarded at Rabbi Lanner's home in Paramus, N.J., when she attended the Frisch yeshiva high school, where he was her teacher. She recalled that she once drew a portrait of Rabbi Lanner's rebbe, the late Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and presented it to Rabbi Lanner for his birthday. 'He ripped it up in front of me, threw it in the garbage and slammed the door,' she recalls.

'A few minutes later I was in my room, talking to a friend on the phone, when Baruch came in, slammed the phone down, threw me on the bed and screamed at me for telling someone else.'

She said Rabbi Lanner created a 'constant sense of fear and terror, and to this day I've never met anyone with the kind of hostile, volatile temper he has.'

Yet she and others expressed more anger with NCSY and OU officials for allowing young people to fall prey to abuse than with Rabbi Lanner himself, who they feel is unable to control his behavior. And not all NCSY leaders are supportive of the rabbi. Several adult leaders of regions in the New York area said Rabbi Lanner is not permitted to appear at any of their events or programs because of his track record.

Taking Advantage

Some of those interviewed noted with irony that despite the emotional trauma they have endured, Rabbi Lanner remains a major positive figure in their lives in terms of Jewish inspiration and education. But some of these same people assert that their loss of self-esteem was profound, and they said there is no way of knowing how many young people in NCSY, on the cusp of religious observance, gave it all up after witnessing or experiencing Rabbi Lanner's allegedly abusive behavior.

Lisa Rabinowitz Dunn, 32, of Hastings, N.Y., said when she was 13 and active in NCSY, Rabbi Lanner insisted on driving her home from a Shabbaton on a Saturday night. She alleges that he pulled over in a deserted parking lot, asked her to take off her shirt and roughly sought to kiss her.

'I didn't tell anyone at the time,' she said. 'I loved NCSY and I had become more religious because of Rabbi Lanner. I understand the love people have for him. At the time he gave me attention I didn't get at home. But his behavior was so hypocritical, singing about the wonders of Hashem and then chasing young girls. For me it closed the door for religion, and while I have no sense of revenge, I feel that he took advantage of an innocent soul, and you can never get that innocence back.'

Now the mother of two small children, Dunn has a renewed interest in Judaism and may send her 5-year-old daughter and 2-year-old son to a Conservative day school. But she looks back on her experience with Rabbi Lanner as 'only negative.'

Allegations Spill Out

Many of those interviewed said they felt a need for validation, after having their stories dismissed over the years. Invariably, by conversation's end, they would offer the names of at least three or four contemporaries with similar experiences and encourage a reporter to speak with them.

'I feel that speaking out is the right thing to do now,' said Dena Greenspan Lehrman, 34, an occupational therapist in Efrat, Israel. 'There is a sense of closure at this stage of my life, and I want to keep others from having to go through' the experiences she had with Rabbi Lanner as a teenager in the mid-'80s. His need for control was amazing. He destroys your sense of self.'

She recalls, as a high-schooler, mentioning to Rabbi Lanner a scheduling conflict between an NCSY activity and family obligation. 'He said, 'listen to me before you listen to your father,' and when I think back on that, it blows me away.'

Rosie Shyker, now a dental assistant in Rishon LeZion, Israel, says that when she was in high school and active in NCSY, she was subjected to 'verbal and physical abuse' from Rabbi Lanner, who would call her names and embarrass her in front of her friends. 'And I would come home with bruises. He would hit me or pinch me on my arms, legs and thighs,' she said.

One night, while driving her home from a Shabbaton at about 3 a.m., Rabbi Lanner allegedly became enraged with something she said. 'He stopped at a corner, and pushed me out of the car,' she recalled. 'There I was alone, in the middle of the night. I just stood there for about 20 minutes, until finally he came back for me, but he screamed and yelled at me the whole car ride.'

Still, Shyker says she has only positive memories of her NCSY experience. 'It was only good for me - the subject of Baruch is separate.'

Leah Silber, who lives in Israel, says that in the summer of 1973, when she was 19 and on an NCSY tour of Israel, Rabbi Lanner, four years her senior, told her he wanted to marry her. 'I was very drawn to religion and the Torah, and he would use his learning, citing rabbinic sources as a technique to work on me,' she said.

When Silber rebuffed him, she said, 'he smacked me in the face' and nearly broke her jaw. 'It was swollen and out of place, and I was really in pain.' She says she went to one of the rabbis affiliated with the tour to tell him what happened, but nothing came of it.

'Baruch is repulsive, and yet he has so much charisma, so much brilliance,' she said. 'I can't even explain it to myself.'

Perhaps Dr. Samuel Klagsbrun can. Although he does not know Rabbi Lanner, and was not given his name when told of some of the episodes, the well-known New York psychiatrist said the behavior described - manipulation and abuse of teens - was classic among people with severe character disorders. Klagsbrun said there was little or no chance of correcting such behavior through therapy.

He also said it was typical for victims, especially young women, to come forward and discuss their experiences only many years later, if at all, 'when they are healed from major trauma and have created their own lives.'

The larger, communal problem, Klagsbrun says, is that 'our community's concept of concern over a shanda [embarrassment] operates in such a destructive way. Regardless of how uncomfortable we are with confronting these situations, or how damaging it may be to an individual organization, if we don't uproot these problems we are damning young people to lifelong damage.'

A Disputed Letter

The only time Rabbi Lanner's disturbing behavior surfaced on a public level until now was in the summer of 1989, shortly after he was hired to become the rabbi of a fledgling Orthodox congregation in Teaneck, N.J.

That was too much for Elie Hiller, who was 24 at the time and attended the synagogue, then known as the Roemer (Avenue) shul. He had worked for seven years for NCSY as an assistant regional director, and says that at various times Rabbi Lanner had hit him in the groin and in the head, called him names and threatened to withhold pay.

But what upset Hiller most was an incident that had taken place two summers earlier, Aug. 7, 1987, after Rabbi Lanner sought to dissuade Adina Baum, a young woman who had boarded at the rabbi's house while in high school from marrying Hiller's younger brother, Jonah, because he had Hodgkin's disease.

Jonah, who was 22 at the time, drove up to Rabbi Lanner's summer bungalow to ask him not to interfere in his relationship with his fiancée. According to Elie Hiller, Jonah and Rabbi Lanner exchanged words and then the rabbi, in a rage, grabbed a kitchen knife, lunged at Jonah, and cut him in the neck and arm, and tried to choke him.

Hiller, who worked for Rabbi Lanner at the time, says that after the incident, the rabbi called to tell him that he and Jonah had just had an argument and that he had tried to calm Jonah down. 'Then he laughed and talked to me about getting me a raise,' Elie said.

Elie wasn't amused. He quit his NCSY job, and he and his family, after contacting an attorney, sought to have the OU remove Rabbi Lanner from his job, threatening to go to the police otherwise.

Eventually they reached a compromise with the organization that would have Rabbi Lanner save face by easing him from his job as director of the New Jersey region, have no contact with staff or members of the region, and have no active participation in Shabbatonim.

But the Hillers say that though Rabbi Lanner was given a new title (seemingly a promotion, director of regions), the OU soon reneged on the agreement, denying the knifing incident had taken place and allowing the rabbi to take part in several Shabbatonim.

The last straw for the Hillers was the appointment of Rabbi Lanner at the new Teaneck congregation, despite their personal appeals to local rabbis and leaders of the congregation.

Frustrated, Elie Hiller wrote a letter graphically detailing Rabbi Lanner's alleged abusive behavior to him, his brother and others, and sent it to the entire Orthodox community of Teaneck, urging that Rabbi Lanner not be allowed to lead the new congregation.

Rabbi Lanner responded by calling for a bet din, asserting that Hiller had unfairly maligned him. The three-man tribunal consisted of Rabbis Blau, Willig and Levine.

In August 1989, the bet din met in marathon session for 18 hours, with witnesses for both sides testifying as to the specific charges made in the letter and the character of Rabbi Lanner, who sought to undermine the qualities and veracity of those who spoke against him, according to witnesses.

Several witnesses say Krug, the psychologist, characterized young witnesses against the rabbi as troubled. Though he is now more cautious in defending Rabbi Lanner, Krug says he has no regrets about his testimony at the time.

The result of the hearing was never made public, but the bet din concluded that most of the charges were not proven, though some of the rabbi's actions were deemed inappropriate. Elie Hiller was told to make a public apology to Rabbi Lanner, which he did.

Rabbi Lanner did not become the rabbi of the synagogue.

Jonah Hiller and Baum were married a few months later, early in 1988. Jonah died of cancer three years later.

Self-Appointed Monitor

Though the case was closed, Rabbi Blau was troubled. After the formal proceedings ended, he received a number of letters and phone calls from individuals unwilling to testify publicly or detailing events outside the purview of the particular case.

'They described a pattern of totally unacceptable behavior that reflected a troubled individual who should not be allowed to deal with teenagers,' he says now.

In time Rabbi Blau came to regret the bet din's decision, and took it upon himself to monitor Rabbi Lanner's behavior. For more than a decade, and particularly in the last year in working toward a divorce settlement for the Lanners, he has been the point person for those with complaints about Rabbi Lanner, often counseling those with feelings of bitterness or remorse.

One of the more disturbing calls Rabbi Blau says he received came a few years after the bet din from a woman who was one of Rabbi Lanner's character witnesses. 'She admitted that she had not told the truth when testifying, and wondered how one repents for this act.

'Most shocking,' Rabbi Blau says, 'was the orchestrated campaign' used by Rabbi Lanner and his defenders 'to convince this young woman not to describe what had really transpired between Baruch and herself. She was reminded of her debt to him for his role in her becoming observant, and it became apparent that she was not the only one pressured either not to testify or to testify falsely. Those who did testify against him were ostracized in NCSY.'

One woman who testified against Rabbi Lanner at the bet din was Marcie Lenk. She said that as a teenager active in NCSY, she endured constant remarks from Rabbi Lanner about her figure, often in front of her friends.

'He would invite kids to his house for Shabbos, and say to me, 'so, are you going to sleep with me this Shabbos?' I'd say, 'I'm sleeping at your house this Shabbos.' It was a game of manipulation to him, a test to see how far he could go. He'd look at me innocently and say, 'right.' That kind of behavior was constant.'

Rabbi Lanner was also her teacher at Frisch, and sometimes, she says, he would squeeze through a classroom doorway at the moment she was walking through, rubbing against her. 'He'd say, 'ooh, that felt good,'' she said.

But she didn't tell any adults of this behavior. 'Baruch created this situation where we needed him,' she says now. 'We were kids looking for friendship and community. But to be 'in,' this was the price we had to pay. I guess I felt it was worth it at the time.'

At the bet din, Rabbi Lanner 'made up reasons why those of us who testified against him were supposedly out to get him,' Lenk said. 'He said I wasn't religious, and that I resented that he wasn't close to me.'

Deaf Ears

The night before the bet din, Lenk, who was 23 at the time, says she received a call from Rabbi Lanner's wife, clearly at his request, tearfully urging Lenk not to testify. 'When she said, 'how could you do this to me?' I said, 'I'm not doing this to you, he did this to you.''

The most disappointing part of the experience, she says, were rabbis who knew her since childhood testifying on Rabbi Lanner's behalf, asserting that he could never have done the things she alleged were done to her.

'The kids who had no one else to protect them were not being protected,' she says. 'I'm still very angry at the rabbis. They turned away from us. We thought of going to the authorities but trusted the system to take care of it. The system failed us, and it still is.'

Naomi Freistat, 41, of New York, says when she was a 15-year-old NCSYer on a summer program in Israel, Rabbi Lanner would kiss and fondle her until one evening when she insisted he stop. 'He punched me in the stomach,' she says, 'and I told him, 'you just punched the wrong girl.' But when I complained to several rabbis, no one wanted to hear of it and nothing happened.'

Shelly, 41, who now lives in Israel, and asked that her last name not be published, says that when she was a 14-year-old NCSYer, Rabbi Lanner made sexual advances to her, and she told several rabbis at the time. One, who was Rabbi Lanner's superior, told her that he had 'inherited the monster, not created him,' she recalls, and said there was nothing he could do. Others ignored her complaints. 'We've learned that it's a given that he always gets away with it,' she says.

'It bothers me that the OU has protected him all these years. What if it was one of their daughters who was treated this way? People don't realize how much damage he's done to kids,' Shelley says.

This complaint was heard from virtually every critic interviewed. Several said they believed that as a result of the 1989 bet din, the OU had agreed to remove Rabbi Lanner from direct contact with young people. While the OU did change the rabbi's title from regional director of NCSY to director of regions, its officials now dispute whether or not Rabbi Lanner was indeed banned from contact with young people.

In any event, he has continued to take an active part in Shabbatons around the country at least a few times a year, delivering divrei Torah, or sermons, as well as mingling with individual teens, according to numerous observers.

Jordan Hirsch, 37, a professional musician and teacher in Teaneck, N.J., who has known Rabbi Lanner since he was an NCSYer 25 years ago, and considers him a friend, says the rabbi has been attending NCSY Shabbatons 'all through the years,' where he is 'lauded and lionized.'

Hirsch, whose band often performs at these functions on Saturday nights, says the rabbi 'was never monitored. He had contact with the kids all along.'

At one of these events three or four years ago, he says he was sitting with Rabbi Lanner when the rabbi, in speaking to a girl who was a senior in high school, began making sexual references to her in a lighthearted way, or as Hirsch puts it, 'getting into that sexual stuff.'

Hirsch says he interrupted, warning the rabbi about his behavior, and Rabbi Lanner responded, 'I know, Hirsch, I've got to be careful.'

Quiet Deal

But Rabbi Lanner's alleged inappropriate behavior apparently has not been confined to his NCSY experiences. He has been accused of harassing or abusing youngsters, physically and emotionally, in schools where he has served as teacher and/or principal.

The situation at Hillel high school in Deal came to a head in 1997. The official version is that Rabbi Lanner, who had been principal for 15 years, chose to leave at the end of the academic year, but several sources say he was forced out quietly after an internal investigation regarding his behavior with students, which reportedly included harassment, kicking boys and propositioning several female students. At least two girls are said to have confided in a faculty member, which led to the school inquiry.

Still, a number of faculty members he hired have remained loyal, crediting Rabbi Lanner with raising the pay scale for teachers at Hillel, a wealthy school, and indirectly in other area yeshivas as well. In addition, they say he was extremely supportive of his teachers and went out of his way to praise them and accommodate their schedules, and set high academic standards for the school.

Last year, Rabbi Lanner taught a Judaic class on Friday mornings at Bas Torah, a girls' yeshiva high school in Monsey, N.Y. Several students complained that he humiliated them in class and called them names disparaging their intellect, and a few refused to attend his class, saying he made inappropriate sexual comments, according to one teacher. They were excused from attendance.

The teacher, who asked not to be identified because 'I love my job,' says she feels strongly that Rabbi Lanner 'should not be in contact with kids.'

Critics of Rabbi Lanner cite these and other relatively recent examples to rebut those who say that any improper behavior on his part, if it existed at all, was a product of the distant past.

Communal Lessons

How could Rabbi Lanner remain in influential positions dealing with impressionable teens as a rabbi, educator and role model after all the allegations against him?

And if, as some OU and NCSY officials insist, they never heard complaints, was it because they didn't want to hear them, or did alleged victims get the message it did little good to speak out?

Some rabbinical leaders seem so dazzled by Rabbi Lanner's intellect and charisma that they are willing to ignore or overlook his faults, attributing them to youthful indiscretions rather than any continuing pattern of troubled behavior. They suggest that if these disturbing incidents did indeed happen - and teens are known for exaggeration, they note - then it was a long time ago, and besides, the rabbi's good works outweigh the bad.

Marcie Lenk, the Israeli educator, cites Orthodoxy's emphasis on scholarship, suggesting that the community puts less weight on other values. She says Rabbi Lanner's colleagues are so taken with his Talmudic abilities that they resist any criticism of him.

'But I was always taught Torah knowledge was a means to an end, of good behavior,' she says, 'not an end in itself.'

Others may have little training in the seriousness and long-term effect of emotional abuse. As one yeshiva principal told a critic in defending Rabbi Lanner, 'It's not as if he raped anyone.'

There is also the fact that a number of his rabbinical defenders were beholden to him in some way. Rabbi Lanner hired many of them in his capacity as yeshiva principal or through NCSY, and there was a combination of fear of retribution and an old-boys network of protecting one's own.

Clearly a number of rabbis, OU professionals and lay leaders sought to downplay Rabbi Lanner's behavior over the years because they believed he was indispensable to the organization and out of concern for its reputation, and their own. The longer this went on, the more difficult it was to act against him, no doubt.

Most disturbing to some of the men and women interviewed was that while his colleagues and others have gone to great lengths to apologize or make excuses for Rabbi Lanner's actions over the years, he himself has shown no sense of remorse or willingness to take responsibility, at least publicly.

Rabbi Stolper says he cannot think of anyone 'who has suffered as much' as Rabbi Lanner, but the alleged victims may well be asking, what about us?