

NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.) introduced the **Workplace Religious Freedom Act**, which would force employers to reasonably accommodate the religious requirements of their employees. Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) introduced the measure in the Senate last week.

■ An advisory panel of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration voted to recommend that the FDA approve copolymer-1, a drug developed at the Weizmann Institute of Science that can stop the progression of multiple sclerosis. The FDA is expected to grant its approval.

■ Israeli warplanes struck Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon after four Israeli soldiers were wounded in a Hezbollah ambush. Two of the soldiers later died from their wounds. The exchange came after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with U.S. Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross to discuss ways to lessen regional tensions created by recent Syrian troop movements.

■ U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher is scheduled to meet Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa next week at the United Nations. The two are expected to discuss ways of reviving the Israeli-Syrian peace negotiations.

■ Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai met with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, but apparently achieved little progress on the redeployment of Israeli troops in Hebron. Palestinian officials said they would not renegotiate the redeployment agreement, but added that they were willing to reconsider security arrangements for the West Bank town.

■ Iran denied involvement in an attempt to assassinate Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak last June in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. Mubarak charged in a published interview that both Iran and Sudan were behind the attempt.

■ President Clinton extended Yom Kippur greetings to the Jewish community. "Let this Yom Kippur be a time for us to reaffirm our commitment to family, to community and to a world of peace and opportunity for all," Clinton said.

FOCUS ON ISSUES**Critics push for stricter codes for handling sexual misconduct**

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — How seriously does the Jewish community take rabbinic sexual misconduct?

Many officials of the major religious movements say that when a congregant complains of being sexually exploited or harassed by her rabbi, they deal with it cautiously but effectively.

"We're dealing with issues of sexual harassment and exploitation and we will take seriously rabbis' behaviors in all areas of their lives," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly.

"We want to be very careful in coming to any kind of a judgment, to first understand what the situation is before we jump to conclusions," he said.

Other movement leaders say they believe more needs to be done.

In the Reconstructionist and Reform movements, the issue has recently received more attention, as evidenced by the development of new policies to deal with the issue and more focus on the matter at professional gatherings and in rabbinic journals.

But others — including women who say they are victims of rabbinic sexual exploitation, many members of congregations where such conduct has allegedly occurred, a handful of rabbis working to change the way the issue is handled and clergy sex abuse experts — say that on the whole, the response of Jewish religious leaders continues to be ineffectual.

Those pressing for change say that the response of leaders of the congregations and the movements is ultimately what counts if the problem is to be tackled effectively.

'The message must come from our leaders'

"If this area is ever to be taken as seriously as it needs to be, the message must come from our leaders," said Arthur Gross Schaefer, an attorney and rabbi at Reform congregation Kehilat HaAlonim, in Ojai, Calif.

"In the past, that message has been less than clear," said Gross Schaefer, who has for the past few years, been pushing his movement to better handle rabbinic sexual exploitation.

Until very recently, the response of many synagogues to those few women who complained of sexual misconduct by their rabbi was to try to get the clergyman to quietly leave the congregation and hope that the real reason for his exit did not leak out, according to those involved in such cases.

For their part, rabbinic professional organizations have often helped the rabbi in question secure a job in a synagogue in a different community.

"There's a desire to reshuffle people, to keep it quiet and move them to a new community, where they succumb to the same temptations," said Rabbi Debra Orenstein, a Conservative rabbi who serves as a senior fellow at the Wilstein Institute in Los Angeles.

According to Rabbi Julie Spitzer, director of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues and the Union of American Hebrew Congregation's resident expert on rabbinic sexual misconduct, "A lot of organizations want to handle things quietly in-house."

The situation only began to change, she said, "when the women who had been victims started to come forward." But rarely do these women go beyond their congregations to their movement's ethics committee to pursue disciplinary action. Few congregants even know that the rabbinical organizations — let alone the ethics committees — exist, and the movements do little to help educate their constituents about where they can turn in cases of rabbinic misconduct, say those involved with the issue.

Awareness of clergy sexual abuse has grown in American society over the past several years. This awareness seems to be making a slow but growing impact on the way the matter is viewed by members of the Jewish community's grass roots and its leaders.

The Board of Rabbis of Greater Philadelphia, for example, recently

When rabbis go astray

Part 3 of a series

devoted a one-day symposium to the issue of rabbinic sexual misconduct.

For its part, the Reconstructionist movement, the smallest mainstream denomination in American Jewish life, has recently implemented a stringent approach to the matter.

The Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's ethics committee formulated an initial policy in 1995 and refined it this year when its members were confronted by a tough case, involving one of the movement's rabbis who had molested young boys years ago.

The RRA expelled the rabbi earlier this year, becoming the first rabbinical organization to expel a member for sexual misconduct.

As part of its new policy, the group notified all of the movement's own congregations as well as the other movements to ensure that a rabbi who has a serious problem involving sexual misconduct does not work as a religious leader again.

"It is necessary not to endanger anyone else," said Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, chairwoman of the association's ethics committee.

"This is very serious business and we don't take it at all lightly," said Berner, who serves as the spiritual leader of Bet Haverim in Atlanta and teaches religion at Emory University.

The centrist Orthodox rabbinical organization has not disciplined one of its members for sexual misconduct in years, if ever, said Rabbi Steven Dworken, executive vice president of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America.

"I really don't think it goes on in Orthodox circles the way it does in others," he said. "I don't think that in any way, shape or form it's a problem in our ranks."

'My soul had been raped'

Yet the recent experiences of several Orthodox individuals lead them to disagree with Dworken's assessment. Three years ago, two women who had studied closely with a prominent, married Orthodox rabbi in a large Northwestern city, one to convert to Judaism and the other to become observant, came forward claiming that he had courted them and had sex with them several years earlier.

"My soul had been raped," said one of the women, who asked that her name not be used.

"The community got rid of the rabbi and hushed up what it was about," said another Orthodox rabbi in the same city who is familiar with the case.

The accused rabbi, a member of the Rabbinical Council of America and the married father of four children, agreed to step down from his pulpit but wanted to remain in the community. One of his victims threatened to go public if he stayed in the city, so he relocated to a fervently Orthodox community on the East Coast.

The synagogue board paid out his contract, and the rabbi left with more than \$30,000 in hand, one of his victims and the other rabbi said in interviews.

At no point did either of the women who came forward approach the RCA about their rabbi.

But they did appeal to some leading Orthodox authorities for guidance about taking the rabbi to a Beit Din, or religious court, said the woman interviewed.

"They said that halachically they don't recognize clergy [sexual] abuse," she said, referring to Jewish law.

"Ironically, despite all of the authority that the religion heaps on the rabbi, they halachically insist that he's just another adulterer, and we were of consensual age," she said.

The rabbi in question did not return several phone messages requesting an interview.

According to a leading Orthodox halachic authority, Rabbi Gedalia Dov Schwartz, Jewish law's view of a rabbi's sexual exploitation of a congregant "would be no different than anyone else" having an adulterous affair.

In the Conservative movement, rabbinic sexual misconduct also rarely seems to be brought to the attention of its Rabbinical Assembly.

Even when it is, there is no formal procedure in place to handle the matter, and neither is there a written ethics code.

"In today's environment a report means someone is guilty. We have tried to maintain very carefully the fact that someone is innocent until proven otherwise," said Meyers of the movement's Rabbinical Assembly, who initially investigates most complaints himself to try to resolve them.

Rabbi Milton Feierstein, immediate past chairman of the R.A.'s Va'ad Hakavod, or ethics committee, said the Conservative rabbinate is working toward developing "a code of appropriate rabbinic practice that would cover things like the rabbi in relationship to his congregation and to other rabbis."

"We've been at the talking stage for almost two years," he said.

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin, a member of the R.A.'s executive council, said she once approached Meyers to tell him about a report of a rabbi's sexual exploitation of a congregant.

Meyers "said there was essentially nothing we can do. He said to tell the victim to 'get a lawyer,'" said Cardin.

Meyers said he does not remember that case, but acknowledged that "maybe I said it and really blew it, and I'm ready to admit that I can be as blind as anybody else can be."

Since taking his job at the R.A. in 1989, four cases of sexual misconduct have come to his attention, said Meyers.

Two of the four cases turned out "not to be true," he said, noting that one of them involved a false accusation.

In a fourth case, which involved a rabbi using "inappropriate behavior, but nothing physical," the R.A. required that rabbi to take defined steps toward repentance, including an acknowledgment of his wrong-doing to his victim and to his congregation as well as consulting with a rabbinic mentor, Meyers said.

System too often protects offenders

In the Reform movement, the Central Conference of American Rabbis recently has been working actively to address the issue.

CCAR leaders agree with critics that the organization needs to improve the way rabbinic sexual misconduct is handled.

"We're in the process of refining what we do," said Rabbi Jeffrey Stiffman, the past chair of the CCAR's ethics committee. "There are a lot of new findings and willingness to face the problem."

But change is coming slowly, according to some Reform congregants and rabbis who charge that the system too often protects offenders and punishes victims.

In the mid 1980s the CCAR convened a task force — jokingly called "the well-oiled zipper committee," according to several sources — to look at the matter.

After meeting for about two years, the committee participants, including the CCAR's senior leaders, decided that discussions and papers about sexual misconduct would be promoted at CCAR conventions and in the organization's journal.

A decade later, some Reform rabbis and congre-

gants are angry that the issue still hasn't moved beyond that.

"When it's time for the CCAR to take action about an ethical issue like grapes being picked by migrant workers, they come up with a policy immediately," said one Reform rabbi who has been agitating within the organization to get the issue addressed in a concrete way.

"But when it comes to monitoring and peer supervision, we can't act. There's such fear" of taking a stand against a colleague, said this rabbi. She asked that her name not be used because she has already been marginalized by her peers for being outspoken on the issue within the CCAR, she said.

The Reform movement did, however, formulate a sexual harassment policy, which was adopted in October 1995.

Intended to help congregations create their own sexual misconduct guidelines, a copy was sent to each Reform congregation's president and was written up in the movement's magazine for congregants, Reform Judaism.

But the UAHC's Spitzer said the impact of the guidelines has been limited.

"There are lots of guidelines but a lot of confusion and denial on the part of congregations," Spitzer said.

Currently, when a victim formally complains to the CCAR's ethics committee, the charge is investigated through a process that has, in some cases, taken years. The committee then makes recommendations to the CCAR's executive committee, which decides on appropriate discipline.

Resolution of recent cases varied widely

Until now, the resolution of recent cases of sexual misconduct involving Reform rabbis has varied widely — from a slap on the wrist to temporary suspension.

In the four years that Stiffman chaired the ethics committee, a position that ended this year, the CCAR temporarily suspended between five and eight rabbis for periods of one to 10 years for sexual misconduct, he said.

The CCAR established a new ethics review committee in March of this year to assess and possibly overhaul the way allegations of rabbinic sexual misconduct and abuse are handled.

"We have to develop a mode of investigation that may not yet be in place," said Rabbi Jack Stern, a highly esteemed veteran member of the Reform clergy who is serving as chair of the new committee.

He expects the task force to report back to the CCAR at its annual convention next spring.

One of the system's most serious flaws, critics charge, is that none of the movements' rabbinical organizations consistently specifies what must take place to illustrate sincere repentance in order for a suspension to be lifted or an expulsion revoked.

That makes it unclear to the perpetrator, his victims and even those movement leaders responsible for discipline whether or not the rabbi has gone through that process, say both critics of the system and those involved in changing the process.

"There is a lot of leaning toward giving the offending clergy the opportunity to repent, and sometimes premature placement back in congregational or other settings," said Spitzer.

According to Stern of the CCAR's oversight committee, "We have to deal with the area of teshuvah. We haven't begun yet. All we know are the areas that we should be discussing and making recommendations, but nothing is foregone."

The great sages of Jewish tradition, from Maimonides to Joseph Soloveichik, have elucidated elements common to all repentance, according to Reform Rabbi

Arthur Gross Schaefer, who has written about sexual misconduct and repentance for the CCAR Journal: Reform Jewish Quarterly.

Repentance for sexual misconduct must include: self-examination, acknowledgment of wrong-doing, an appeal to the victims for forgiveness and some restitution for the damages caused, he wrote in the article.

"Teshuvah is not achieved simply by an offending rabbi saying that he/she is sorry, seeing a therapist or being placed on suspension for a period of time," he wrote.

"When we deal with the difficult issues of rabbinic sexual misconduct, we have not taken seriously our own tradition," said Gross Schaefer.

"Until we are willing to take teshuvah seriously," he said, "we are doing a major disservice to our victims, to our congregations and to our colleagues." □

Rabbinical seminaries offer scant training on sexual ethics

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen

NEW YORK (JTA) — When it comes to training rabbis in sexual ethics, most of the seminaries of America score an incomplete.

The four major rabbinical seminaries — the Reform movement's Hebrew Union College, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Yeshiva University — do not offer their students any full courses devoted specifically to issues of rabbinic sexual ethics and behavior.

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York runs a single-session seminar for senior students on ethical conduct that focuses largely on sexual conduct, said Rabbi Larry Raphael, who recently left HUC, where he worked as the dean of administration.

There is no course or seminar devoted to rabbinic sexual ethics at the Conservative movement's JTS, said Dr. Samuel Klagsbrun, chairman and professor of pastoral psychiatry at the seminary.

The issue comes up, however, in his courses on pastoral education, which are optional, and in part of a seminar devoted to personal conduct, Klagsbrun said.

"We teach Talmud and Shulchan Aruch, and we still don't do a very good job in helping rabbis to learn the ropes of real life issues," he said.

At the Orthodox movement's Yeshiva University, the issue of "appropriate rabbinic relationships with laity" is addressed in a pastoral psychology course which is very popular with rabbinical students, though not required, said Rabbi Robert Hirt, vice president of Yeshiva's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary.

At the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College students are required to take a daylong seminar devoted to sexual harassment, said Rabbi David Teutsch, president of the college. "Because it's a relationship of trust and power, and often of intimate knowledge of people's lives, the role of rabbi creates vastly increased responsibility for maintaining proper boundaries in relationships," he said.

The college also runs an annual seminar devoted to sexuality and gender issues, and requires students to take counseling courses which examine boundary issues for clergy.

Last year an RRC student was expelled for sexually harassing other students, Teutsch said.

"If the college doesn't model high standards and their clear enforcement, and work to create a sense of safety and openness around these issues, then where will rabbinical students learn how to create that sense of moral responsibility and safety inside the institutions where they are leaders later?" he said. □

BEHIND THE HEADLINES
Israel's international support faces new tests at U.N. session

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — The international community's increased acceptance of Israel in recent years is likely to be tested in the United Nations General Assembly, which opened its session this week.

Advances in the Middle East peace process began to erode the anti-Israel atmosphere in the international body in the past three years. But the new Netanyahu government's more hard-line posture has sown doubt and fears among Arab nations. As evidence, Arab foreign ministers in Cairo last weekend threatened to halt normalization of ties with Israel unless there is progress in the peace process.

Some worry that hard-won gains by Israel will be reversed in this General Assembly session as a result.

"Israel is going to have a tougher time in the General Assembly this year," said Harris Schoenberg, director of B'nai B'rith's U.N. affairs and executive director of the Coordinating Board of Jewish Organizations, a U.N. non-governmental organization.

Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy was expected to use his speech to the General Assembly and meetings with foreign ministers early next month to build international confidence by making explicit his government's commitment to peace.

Commitment to peace is 'bipartisan'

"The commitment to the peace process is bipartisan in Israel," said David Peleg, Israel's acting ambassador to the United Nations. "The [new] government of Israel is as committed to the promotion and expansion of peace" as the previous government. "There is a different emphasis," he said, "but the commitment is the same."

But it may be a hard sell in the international body.

The permanent Palestinian observer at the United Nations, Nasser Al-Kidwa, made clear he expects a change in atmosphere as a result of the new government's policies.

"The U.N.'s support for the peace process and the agreements [with the Palestinians] will not diminish," but it is "only normal" that "there will be a more contentious atmosphere." The Netanyahu government "openly calls for renegotiating parts of the agreements" and has "clearly indicated it is not abiding by timetables" for implementation already agreed to, said Al-Kidwa. He cited as an example the long-delayed redeployment of Israeli troops from most of the West Bank town of Hebron.

"We expect the General Assembly to take action" about the "many violations we believe are being committed by the government and its general lack of compliance," Al-Kidwa said. He singled out the Netanyahu government's decision to resume "settlement activity," which he deemed a violation of international law as well as the Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

Said Peleg: "We hope the 51st General Assembly will continue with the trend we've seen in the previous two or three [sessions] of adjusting its resolutions to the situation on the ground in the Middle East and progress in the peace process."

He said Israel would "regret it" if Arab delegations choose to use the United Nations "as an arena to put political pressure on the government of Israel."

Some well-placed non-Israeli sources believe that the diplomatic progress Israel has made in recent years is strong and deep enough to withstand some of the challenges it is bound to face.

Meanwhile, Israel advocates want to see an end to the now-routine resolutions dealing with the Middle East,

on matters ranging from Jerusalem to the Golan Heights to Jewish settlements.

"There is no justification for the General Assembly to adopt resolutions which deal with issues being discussed bilaterally," Peleg said.

Israel advocates are also calling for the dissolution of General Assembly committees and divisions in the U.N. Secretariat that they say serve as propaganda instruments for the Palestine Liberation Organization and are anachronistic. "There is no need for those organizations created by the General Assembly in the '70s as part of the political warfare by the Arabs before the peace process" was launched, Peleg said.

The Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices in the Territories, for example, makes no sense "at a time when most of the Palestinian population is being administered by the Palestinian Authority," he said.

Critics also single out the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, which, said Schoenberg, "spends \$6 million a year to propagandize for the PLO."

Both Schoenberg and Peleg have called for the money to be spent in direct aid to the Palestinians.

Al-Kidwa said that while the move to eliminate these committees gained some currency as the peace process advanced, in the new "circumstances, nobody is going to listen to these arguments."

Peleg said he also plans to continue efforts to secure a place for Israel in a regional group.

Israel is the only U.N. member without such a seat, which is a prerequisite to serving on key U.N. bodies, including the Security Council. Some Arab members of the Asian group, which is Israel's rightful place, have blocked Israel's membership.

Israel therefore has been pressing for temporary membership in the Western European and Others Group, but sources say resistance remains, particularly from Britain and France.

Wary of deteriorating political climate

Meanwhile, Schoenberg is wary of a deteriorating political climate at the United Nations.

He said he fears that the United States has a relative lack of commitment to the international body, which already has begun to trigger a rise in influence by extremist anti-U.S. and anti-Israel members.

He noted that the United States has been doing little about its more than \$1 billion in arrears. And he said despite pledges to use the United Nations as a high-profile instrument to promote peace, justice and democracy, the White House is being "intimidated" by an "aggressively anti-multilateral Republican Congress."

But the United States is up to date with its current U.N. bills, say U.S. officials, with the bulk of its debt coming from the cost of the Bosnia and Somalia peace-keeping exercises. The president has submitted a five-year payment plan to Congress, where it remains under review.

Regarding the General Assembly climate on Middle Eastern issues, a U.S. official who insisted on anonymity said, "The U.N. is finally catching up with the realities in the region." He added, "Israeli diplomats have been more and more involved in personal and professional relationships with the widest range of diplomats," as well as more involved in a host of U.N. bodies and programs.

"While there is much work to do," U.N. resolutions are "more balanced and supportive," he said. "The United States is working to accelerate" that trend, he added.

For his part, Peleg said he sees no evidence pointing to a flagging commitment by the United States to Israel in the United Nations. □