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News

# Hasidic Enclave Keeps Its Secrets Amid Elusive Rebbe's Tight Control

*Sex Abuse Trial Offers Rare Glimpse at Insular New Square*

By Frimet Goldberger

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**NEW SQUARE, NEW YORK** — To his hasidim, Rabbi David Twersky is nearly akin to God.

But that does not mean he exempts himself from the obligations God imposes on all Jews, at least as traditionalists understand them.

Like his followers, Twersky prays to God three times a day. But unlike other Hasidic grand rabbis, Twersky does not pray in the main synagogue with his hasidim. He worships, alone, in an adjoining room. When he has completed his silent readings of the daily prayers known as the *Shmoneh Esrei*, he knocks on the wall to signal the waiting congregants outside. Only then can the communal service move forward.

Similarly, Twersky's home in New Square, New York, the exclusively Hasidic upstate enclave where he presides over his sect, has its own mikveh, or ritual bath, built exclusively for him and his sons. His followers use the communal bath.

And when Twersky feels a need to get away from the community he leads — where more than half his followers live below the poverty line — he can summon his black Cadillac XTS and instruct his chauffeur to drive to his multimillion-dollar lakeside vacation home in Nyack, New York, which also sports a private mikveh.

For outsiders, such regal privilege may inspire disapproval. But for his followers, the separateness that Twersky cultivates only increases the holiness with which he is regarded. To them, he is a revered *tzadik*, a higher spiritual being endowed with saintly wisdom.

That aura of grandeur filled the parents of 14-year-old Laiby Stern with both high hopes and deep trepidation when they set off for an audience with Twersky in 2006. They were coming to tell their holy leader something horrifying that required his immediate intervention: Recently, after a long period of being clearly troubled, their son had related to them that their neighbor, Moshe Menachem Taubenfeld, a 55-year-old father of 20, and a highly respected teacher of Torah and Talmud to adult men in the community, had been sexually molesting him for five years.

As Laiby, now 21, explained to me during a recent interview, "He [Taubenfeld] took me into a room, made me pull down my pants, and started touching me in inappropriate places. I couldn't make sense of what was happening. I was 8 years old. He said, 'Don't tell anybody; it's between you and me.'"

But when Laiby's parents finally were able to haltingly explain why they had come, Twersky exclaimed in Yiddish, "*Ich veis nisht, in ich gleib nisht!*" ("I don't know it, and I don't believe it!")

"He looked genuinely shocked [at the accusation]," recounted Avrumi Stern, Laiby's older brother, who accompanied the parents. The family left the Rebbe's office as they had entered: sad, scared, and with no idea what to do next.

Over the next few months, the family secretly sent Laiby to therapy — secretly, because therapy comes with a stigma attached to it in ultra-Orthodox communities. But the financial cost was too much for the family to bear. Again Laiby's mother approached the Rebbe, pleading for help to pay Laiby's therapy bills.

"He refused to pay and made her shut up about the whole thing," Laiby's brother said.

This was not the first time that Twersky has been alleged to have directly quashed the effort of an alleged sexual abuse victim to find help and support to get out of his situation.

New Square resident Deb Tambor was 20 when she sought her rebbe's help in 2000. According to her account, she told him she had been sexually abused by a close relative since childhood. Tambor, who subsequently left the New Square community and tragically [took her own life](#) last year at the age of 33, recounted the meeting with her rebbe in a personal diary entry she kept a year before she died.

"[D]on't ever tell anyone you spoke to me about it!!!" Twersky told her, according to Tambor's August 5, 2012 diary entry, transcribed just as she scrawled it and published here for the first time. In the entry, she refers to him not by name but as "the grand egoist of Skver."

Expressing her undimmed rage in the entry, Tambor continued, "u two faced idiot!! U believe in hell??? If there is one it's a place u will burn for eternity." [sic]

Abe Weiss, a former Skver Hasid who became Tambor's live-in boyfriend after she left the community, described his own experience when, at age 18, he tried to tell Twersky about an incident six years earlier in which his teacher at a Skver school in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn pulled his pants down and raped him in the school's boiler room.

"Take this *shaygetz* out of here," he recalled the Rebbe shouting to his followers. The Yiddish term is commonly used as a pejorative for a non-Jewish boy.

Child sexual abuse is a crime. And secular law authorities, with their special units trained in investigating abuse allegations, have the kind of expertise in such cases that few rabbis can command. But they first must know about the existence of such an allegation. New Square, with its isolated rural setting, appears to be an especially insular enclave from which such allegations rarely escape, even more so than urban redoubts of ultra-Orthodoxy, such as Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood.

As concern about child sexual abuse has grown in the broader society around them, the leaders of New Square have taken steps that they say address the issue in their enclave. Among other things, they have established a vaad, or committee, to deal with sexual abuse cases from within the community. But by the admission of its own leader in a 2010 press interview, this committee does not see reporting sex abuse crimes to the police as one of its obligations. In fact, it sees passing judgment on and punishing alleged perpetrators on its own as its unique prerogative.

And while New York State law obligates psychotherapists and social workers to report certain classes of cases of suspected child sex abuse to law enforcement authorities, a therapist at the Refuah Health Center, New Square's multi-level health center that treated Laiby Stern, noted to me that the law does not require reporting in all cases, and that he, in fact, does not do so.

Yet on their own, Laiby Stern and his family finally reported what they say happened to him to legal authorities. And in January Taubenfeld is expected to go on trial in Rockland County, New York on a charge of second-degree course sexual conduct, which carries a maximum prison sentence of seven years.

Efforts by the Forward to reach Twersky for comment on this story, including several calls to one of his top aides and to his son, Rabbi Chaim Meyer Twersky, were unsuccessful. Twersky himself refused delivery of a Federal Express letter from the Forward outlining the questions it wished to discuss with him. Yet Laiby Stern's breaking of the silence may be a sign of cracks that are beginning to appear in the strict insularity of New Square, which Twersky has ruled up to now with iron control. Still, New Square's leaders do not appear to be anywhere close to slackening their efforts to control the lives of the village's residents to a degree that would be scarcely imaginable anywhere else in America.

A small yet densely populated jurisdiction in the upstate Town of Ramapo, the Village of New Square was established in 1954 under the leadership of the Skverer Rebbe Yaakov Yosef Twersky. It has been led by his Romanian-born son David Twersky since Yaakov Yosef's death in 1968. As the sect's Rebbe, David Twersky also leads Skverer hasidim in Brooklyn, Europe, Israel and worldwide.

Now 74, Twersky presides over New Square's 7,000-plus residents with the help of a trusted inner circle of advisors who ensure that the wheels of the village keep spinning. And despite Twersky's own distance from day-to-day affairs, he runs a very tight ship.

"You wouldn't even get a driver's license without permission from the Rebbe. If you want to move, say, from Williamsburg to Boro Park, you would need to ask permission," Pinches Dirnfeld, a former Skverer Hasid, said, referring to two heavily Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn. Others gave similar accounts of needing to ask permission to make key personal decisions, such as starting or leaving a job. Kenneth Gribetz, a criminal defense attorney and former Rockland County district attorney, told a court recently while defending a client from New Square that even 18-year-olds need written permission to leave the community. Male and female residents of New Square are required to walk on opposite sides of the street. Televisions, Internet connections and newspapers are prohibited.

"The Rebbe is not only the supreme spiritual leader, but he also has extreme control," said Shulem Deen, a former Skverer Hasid. "There is also a strong sense among his hasidim that he owns the village and therefore has the right to run it as he pleases."

Yet technically, according to present and former New Square residents, Twersky does not legally own anything. Not the chauffeured XTS Cadillac; not the Toyota crossover in which his wife is separately chauffeured; and not his multimillion-dollar vacation home in Nyack.

The ownership trail of Twersky's vacation home illuminates this pattern. In September 2006, the lakefront vacation home was sold by its previous owners to a newly established private entity called Menucha — the name means "rest" in Hebrew — of Nyack LLC, a private entity, for \$2.25 million. The deed was signed by Jacob Fischel and Fred Schonfeld, members of the New Square *kehillah*, or religious community board. But in December 2009, Menucha, in turn, sold the home for \$197,468 to Congregation of New Square. As it happens, this was the precise amount of delinquent taxes Menucha owed on the home to the city of Nyack, New York. Four months later, in April of 2010, the \$2.25 million home was transferred back to Menucha of Nyack LLC for zero dollars.

The rationale for these property transfers and the prices accompanying them is not entirely clear. But in a deposition he gave in a civil dispute related to the property, Jacob Fischel, one of Menucha's officers, stated that company's purpose in selling the home to Congregation of New Square was to exempt it from property taxes by getting it classified as a religious institution. After the city of Nyack rejected this effort, Congregation of New Square deeded the property back to Menucha for nothing.

A similar arrangement may be in place for Twersky's Cadillac. According to the New York State Department of Motor Vehicles, the car has an official type of license plate reserved for the vehicles of government entities and officials, and is

registered not to Twersky but to the village government of New Square. Yet in response to a Freedom of Information Law request filed by the Forward asking for information about the car carrying the license plate, the Village of New Square responded that it had “no record of the information you have requested.”

Meanwhile, many of Twersky’s followers in New Square are living a very different lifestyle. Almost two-thirds of the village’s residents live below the U.S. federal poverty line, and the median household income, according to the [2012 Census](#), is \$24,075 while the median family size is 5.5.

According to Deen, “Even people who don’t necessarily love him believe he has the power to control.” This is reflected, he said, in the *takkanas*, the unwritten, yet well-known religious by-laws of the village. “For example,” he said, “you can’t have a minyan” — a public prayer service — “on Shabbos outside of the Rebbe’s minyan.”

The requirement that New Square residents pray only in the Rebbe’s minyan — extreme even by the standards of other Hasidic sects — was central to [the fate](#) that befell Aron Rottenberg, a New Square resident who chose to pray regularly at a nearby nursing home where a close friend of his was being cared for.

Rottenberg’s decision to pray with his friend led to a ruling by the New Square rabbinic court finding him in serious violation of the community’s rules. Soon after, groups outside Rottenberg’s house smashed windows and dumped his daughter’s school desk and books on the front porch, as recounted in local police reports. And on May 22, 2011, an early-morning attack left Rottenberg with third-degree burns over more than half of his body.

The attack came from Shaul Spitzer, then 18 and one of a group of acolytes who lived with the Rebbe and served his daily needs. Spitzer tried to set fire to Rottenberg’s home while the family slept inside. When Rottenberg’s son saw Spitzer on a surveillance camera the family had recently installed, Rottenberg ran out in the night at 4 a.m. to confront the teen outside his house, and the two struggled. During their fight, Rottenberg burst into flames from the gasoline-soaked rags Spitzer was trying to throw onto the property.

After four days of silence, Twersky told his followers in an address in Yiddish at the New Square yeshiva that such behavior was imprudent. “Because this terrible thing happened, maybe it’s good to say it again and let everyone know that, God forbid, do not fight with force,” Twersky said. “It makes troubles. It’s against our way, the way of Skver.” The speech, which was recorded, was [later posted](#) as an audio file on the website Failed Messiah.

In February 2012, Spitzer was sentenced to seven years in prison for first-degree assault. His attorney, Paul Shechtman, told the court, “He loved his rebbe too much. He thought he was enforcing the rabbi’s rules.” At his sentencing hearing, [according to The Journal News](#), a local Rockland County daily, Spitzer was quoted in his pre-sentencing report as having said that he acted with others. But his lawyers emphasized at the hearing that the teenager was never ordered to go after anyone by Twersky or by Twersky’s advisers. Twersky’s attorney, Frank Snitow, also denied his client said or did anything to incite Spitzer’s attack.

In April 2012, someone paid Rottenberg \$2.3 million to settle a suit the burn victim had filed against Twersky and Spitzer alleging that they had violated his civil rights. Snitow, Twersky’s attorney, told me, “I believe Rabbi Twersky did not pay that himself.” Twersky had earlier denied the charges in the complaint. Snitow declined to offer further information on the settlement. After consulting her father, Rottenberg’s daughter, Malka Elbaum, told me that Spitzer had signed the settlement on behalf of both himself and Twersky. Under the settlement’s terms, she said, part of the sum was used to buy Rottenberg’s New Square home, as he and his family sought to leave the community. Rottenberg did not know who the purchaser was, according to his daughter; the money was deposited in an escrow account. The settlement itself is sealed.

Former Skverer hasidim say they are not surprised that Twersky did not sign the settlement. Twersky, they say, generally deals with his community at a remove via intermediaries who are close to him. He rarely speaks publicly to his followers.

In 2008, a committee of six prominent members of the New Square community was established to handle sex abuse cases from within. Known as the Vaad, the committee was formed with help from the Orthodox children and family services agency, Ohel. The committee cites three foundations for its mission: education, prevention, and taking care of the abusers and their victims. But in [a 2010 interview](#) with the Jewish Star, an Orthodox publication, its chairman, New Square businessman Isaac Breuer, did not respond directly when asked if his committee would report child sex crimes to law enforcement authorities.

Seeking the authorities' help when there is no other way of getting abusers off the street was "definitely an avenue," he said, "but I'm not sure this is the most effective [way]." Instead, said Breuer, citing a "leading *gedolai HaTorah*" — Torah sage — "It is our job to put the hammer on him."

Breuer did not return repeated phone calls and emails from the Forward requesting an interview. But last year, News 12, a local news station covering Rockland County, found [at least one case](#) in which "the hammer" seemed absent. According to News 12, unnamed New Square religious leaders instead helped a sexual abuser flee to Israel.

"Yossi," a New Square youth who went on camera but was identified by only his first name, told News 12 that Herschel Taubenfeld — a brother of Laiby Stern's alleged abuser, Moshe Menachem Taubenfeld — had molested him three times a week for four months when he was supposed to be counseling him. But when he went to the Vaad with this information, Yossi told me, the only action they took was to send Taubenfeld to Hillel Sternstein, a licensed New York social worker who worked at the time with Ohel on sex abuse issues. Sternstein declined to comment on the case.

Unsatisfied and still afraid, the 16-year-old youth took an unprecedented step: He reported his abuse to the police and actively assisted their subsequent investigation. Among other things, he taped a conversation with Taubenfeld in which the man tearfully pleaded forgiveness for having molested the teen. But before law enforcement authorities could arrest him, New Square's religious leaders sent Taubenfeld to Israel to teach at a yeshiva. Yossi told me that Taubenfeld approached several of his family members and offered to pay \$100,000 to drop his allegations.

Kenneth Gribetz, Taubenfeld's attorney, denied this allegation.

Later, Taubenfeld returned and turned himself in to face 30 misdemeanor charges of forcible touching, third degree sexual abuse and endangering the welfare of a child. Rockland District Attorney Thomas Zugibe reached a plea deal with Taubenfeld. In exchange for pleading guilty, he got six years probation and was required to register as a sex offender. Nevertheless, News 12 found him continuing to teach young children at the New Square Yeshiva in August 2013.

"It was like a slap in the face," said Yossi, who was meanwhile ostracized by the community. "Everything I'd worked for for months was in vain."

Zugibe termed the prosecution "trailblazing" and said the plea deal was "appropriate based on the facts."

Rockland County Assistant District Attorney Jennifer Parietti told me that the local magistrate who originally heard Taubenfeld's plea tried to convince her office to drop any reference to sexual abuse in the charges altogether. That would have spared Taubenfeld from having to register as a sex offender.

The local magistrate, Manhattan-based attorney Stuart Salles, holds court in a small room inside New Square's only boys' yeshiva. The longest-serving judge in Rockland County, Salles has been New Square's magistrate for 40 years thanks to the bloc vote the New Square community gives him in local judicial elections, in which he runs unopposed. He serves in the office pro bono.

"I grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and struggled to support myself before I became a lawyer," Salles told the Forward when asked why he serves in the post. "I felt it was an honor to give back to people and say thank you to God for my good fortune. I am very religious. We all are."

Asked in a follow-up call about his role setting charges in the Herschel Taubenfeld case, Salles said, “I’m not answering any questions about that,” and hung up the phone.

The New Square Vaad’s decision to merely refer Taubenfeld to a therapist was reportedly not the only such case; the Jewish Star article spoke of at least [one other](#).

When told that the Vaad, in at least some cases, did not report abuse to law enforcement authorities, Zugibe, who came under heavy fire from critics over his plea deal in the Herschel Taubenfeld case, was outraged. “I’m unfamiliar with this,” he said. “But that is downright offensive, and all it does is create a next generation of sex offenders, by not prosecuting these people and moving them along. This is disgraceful. One thing the evidence shows is therapy doesn’t work. You have to supervise them and punish them.”

In principle, even an alleged sex abuser who is referred to a therapist could end up subject to prosecution if the therapist reported him. But under New York State law, therapists (along with teachers, doctors and camp counselors, among others) are only legally obligated to report suspected cases of child abuse when the suspect in question is a parent, legal guardian or primary caretaker of the child. And at New Square’s Refuah Health Center, Sam Rosenberg, the therapist who treated Laiby Stern, made it clear he did not make it his practice to report all such cases that come before him.

“[We report] if the victim is in a situation in which he’s in danger,” said Rosenberg. “But if the victim no longer lives in the house, we’re no longer mandated to report.”

Rosenberg, a licensed social worker, told me he has dealt “with both victims and perpetrators” at Refuah but claimed to never have been involved with the Vaad, or to have been contacted by the committee for matters concerning sex abuse victims, perpetrators or their treatment.

“I would rather not talk about it at this point, since Refuah is part of New Square,” he said.

Yeshiva University law professor Marci Hamilton, a leading scholar of sex abuse law, and author of “Justice Denied: What America Must Do to Protect Its Children,” lamented the discretion that New York’s mandated reporting law allows therapists.

“Refuah is responsible for how its employees handle such issues, and the harm that accrues to these children if their employees take an overly narrow interpretation of the law so that a child is abused again,” she said.

Refuah’s general counsel and spokesperson, Alexandra Khorover, told me, “Our policy is that our providers comply with the applicable law regarding reporting child abuse.”

Asked for the number of reports of abuse filed in the last five years by Refuah providers, Khorover said she could not obtain that information and declined to comment any further.

Zugibe, the DA, is aware that the ultra-Orthodox community tends to distrust outside authorities. Building a relationship of trust is an uphill battle, he said.

“The problem is twofold: You have those people who really believe that they can’t trust the system. That [alleged perpetrators] are not going to be prosecuted... Then you have the real ugly side of it, and that’s leaders who have taken it on their own to basically intimidate witnesses and [are] trying to prevent them from coming forward. That’s what concerns us,” Zugibe said.

Pressed on who he believes is intimidating victims in New Square, Zugibe said, “We don’t know who the person is who intimidates... We’ve had situations where victims came from the community and said they were subjected to intimidation.” These victims did not say the intimidation came from Twersky, said Zugibe, but he added, “They’re telling

us they were under a lot of pressure to not report.”

Zugibe cited his establishment of a [special victims unit](#) heavily focused on sex crimes as evidence of his long-term commitment to addressing the issue. He said his office has also been meeting with leaders of the ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic communities to attempt to instill trust that if a case is reported, there will be justice.

“Our laws are fair and we prosecute evenly. That’s the message we’re trying to put out there,” he said.

In the past year, since Yossi came forward, things seem to have shifted, if ever so slightly. The precedent he created seems to have planted seeds of change in residents’ minds. Despite their absolute faith in the system and in the Rebbe’s ways, the younger generation of parents, who are now raising school-aged children, is showing a receptiveness to change.

Rabbi Yakov Horowitz, dean of Yeshiva Darchei Noam in Monsey, New York, director of the Center for Jewish Family Life and Project YES, and a longtime [advocate](#) for child safety, said that ultra-Orthodox millennial parents are less reluctant to go to the authorities.

“The very painful headlines of these past few years have progressively gotten more parents and community leaders to understand it’s a human problem, not a Jewish one, and that we’re not immune from issues of child abuse,” Horowitz said.

Twersky even approved allowing Horowitz himself to hold a child safety workshop in the village last spring. The workshop, which attracted a sizable group of New Square fathers, included distribution of a Yiddish version of Horowitz’s [children’s book](#), which talks to young readers about their bodies and the previously taboo subject of sexual molestation. Horowitz plans to hold a second workshop in December.

But asked if he had urged the New Square fathers who attended his workshop to consult with law enforcement authorities if they suspect their child had been abused, Horowitz declined to comment.

Horowitz’s stress is on sex abuse awareness and prevention rather than prosecution. And that may be the best way to breach the community’s high walls. But it does not solve the problem of perpetrators roaming free and the failure of New Square leaders to report them to law enforcement authorities or support their victims in doing so.

“There are a lot of nice people living in New Square,” Laiby said, indicating that he does not want to cast blame on the community as a whole. “But the people who run the show... need to be held accountable for their actions... I’m not looking for revenge; I’m looking for justice.”

*Contact Frimet Goldberger at [goldberger@forward.com](mailto:goldberger@forward.com)*

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