

Rabbi apologises for sex abuse comments

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A prominent Australian rabbi has apologised for extraordinary comments he made about child sexual abuse and reporting paedophiles to police.

Former senior Sydney rabbi Boruch Dov Lesches, who is now one of New York's leading ultra-Orthodox figures, made his remarks in a recent conversation with a person familiar with a series of alleged child rapes and molestation carried out by one man associated with Sydney's Yeshiva community in the 1980s.

In a legally recorded telephone conversation obtained by Fairfax Media and provided to NSW police investigating the Yeshiva cases, Rabbi Lesches revealed he knew about the alleged abuse of one boy but did not go to police, instead warning the alleged perpetrator that if he did not stop both he and the boy would be sent away from the community.

Rabbi Lesches also suggested the boy may have consented to sexual relations.

"We are speaking about very young boys ... everybody says about the other one that 'he agreed to this'," he said.

He added that some non-Jewish boys – who he termed "goyims" – acted and thought in a sexual way from the age of five.

Reporting alleged abusers to police so many years after incidents occurred would "destroy them and their children" and cause pain for victims, he warned.

"If you start to do something about it [it] will not be productive," Rabbi Lesches said.

His remarks, published by Fairfax Media on Sunday, provoked a strong reaction on social media and fuelled debate on the attitudes of senior rabbinical leaders to reporting child sexual abuse to police.

In a statement issued on Monday, Rabbi Lesches said he regretted making the comments in the recent telephone conversation.

"I would like to apologise for statements made in a private telephone conversation that caused pain to the greater public," he said.

"I would like to make my position absolutely clear: Without any reservation, I endorse the rabbinical rulings encouraging victims of abuse to report to the police."

Despite Rabbi Lesches clearly recalling in the telephone conversation the alleged abuse of one Sydney boy, he said in his statement that he was "never informed of any allegations regarding minors prior to this call".

"In retrospect I am shocked to hear of these allegations, because I often entrusted my own young children to the care of the alleged perpetrator, without hesitation. I would never have done so had I known of the allegations," he said.

Fairfax Media can confirm that the alleged abuser, being investigated by police for sexually abusing at least four boys in the Sydney Yeshiva community, has privately admitted that Rabbi Lesches did speak to him about his activities with a boy believed to be about a decade his junior.

Rabbi Lesches also complained that he had not been contacted by Fairfax Media prior to the story.

In the days before the story was published, Fairfax Media sent emails to Rabbi Lesches' private email address, the main email address of the US Jewish community he leads and to one of his rabbinical colleagues in New York. A text message was also sent to Rabbi Lesches asking for him to respond.

The Rabbinical Council of Victoria said it was appalled by Rabbi Lesches' comments.

The group's president, Rabbi Meir Shlomo Kluwgant, said Rabbi Lesches' remarks represented a fringe view and that the wider Jewish leadership fully supported the reporting of sexual *abuse to police*.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/national/rabbi-apologises-for-sex-abuse-comments-20130624-2ortr.html>