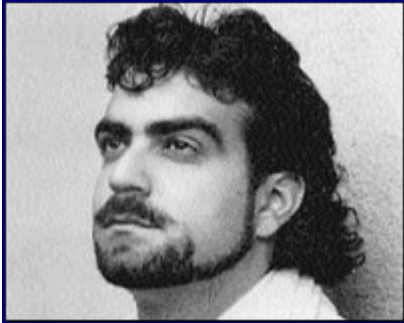


Charismatic Rabbi Faces Charges

by [Wendy J. Madnick](#)

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Michael Ozair

Michael Ozair is, by many accounts, charming, charismatic and an excellent teacher.

He is also in jail.

The once-popular instructor at schools like Shalhevet High School on Fairfax Avenue and Sinai Akiba Academy on Wilshire Boulevard, who was an active participant in the Happy Minyan at Beth Jacob Congregation in Beverly Hills, was arrested earlier this month and charged Aug. 15 with the 1997 sexual molestation of a then-14-year-old girl. At press time, he was in custody at the Twin Towers Correctional Facility in Los Angeles, with bail set at \$95,000. A preliminary hearing is set for Sept. 4.

The complaint first came to the attention of the Los Angeles Police Department about a year ago, according to Lt. Dan Mulrenin, who oversees the LAPD's Sexually Exploited Child Unit.

"The reason it waited so long is because the victim was apparently in therapy and did not report this to the police until Aug. 22, 2001," Mulrenin said. "There is one additional victim, but that victim has refused to cooperate and does not want to pursue this matter."

Police and prosecutors were guarded about who initiated the charges -- three counts of a lewd act on a child and one count of oral copulation of a child under 16. Jane Robison, a spokeswoman for the Los Angeles County District Attorney's office, said that in general "when allegations of rape or sexual assault occur, the victims are taken to the hospital and there are a long list of questions they must undergo. With an older case, we have to have independent corroboration, someone who can testify. It cannot just be the word of the victim." Robison also mentioned that "by law, there are people who are mandated reporters [of sexual assault], including clergy. So if the victim were to tell a teacher or a therapist or a clergy member about the attack, [that person] would have to report it."

Ozair, 33, could not be reached for comment and his attorney, Daniel Hustwit, did not return repeated calls from The Jewish Journal.

This is the third arrest of a rabbi charged with child molestation this year. What makes this case unique was the esteem with which Ozair was held by a variety of influential people and organizations. In addition to his involvement in the Happy Minyan (of which he was not the leader, members insisted, despite press reports to the contrary), Ozair led the Mystical Wednesdays program for OLAM for about a year, from summer 2000 until 2001. He was featured in an OLAM Magazine article titled "You Had Me at Shalom" (which characterized Ozair as "the cool, charismatic, ex-Dead Head and self-acknowledged Seeker of Truth") and in a June 2000 Jewish Journal article about an event called

"Building Bridges of Spiritual Unity." Ozair also was scheduled to lead a Yom Kippur spiritual service at the Roxbury Park Community Center in Beverly Hills.

Ozair's problems began to surface several years ago. In June 1997, the year of the alleged incident, he left his full-time teaching position with Sinai Akiba. It was not until September 1998 that he landed another teaching position, this time with Shalhevet. However, his employment was terminated for undisclosed reasons in August 2000, according to Shalhevet president Dr. Jerry Friedman. Ozair then returned to Sinai Akiba for a brief stint in early 2001, said headmaster Rabbi Laurence Scheindlin.

"He was coming once a week to do some work on tefillah with some of the classes," Scheindlin said.

Both Friedman and Scheindlin stated that there were never any complaints about Ozair's behavior at their respective schools. Indeed, a number of people interviewed noted that parents and students at each school were fans of Ozair.

"To his credit, there are a number of students on whom he had a very positive influence at Sinai Akiba," said Rabbi Steven Weil, leader of Beth Jacob. "He launched them on a path of morality, decency and theological searching. Many of these young men have become outstanding stars in the community."

Despite the rabbi's popularity, Weil said leaders at his shul decided to expel Ozair last year.

"He was banned from Beth Jacob Congregation over a year ago by myself and by Marvin Komorsky, our executive director, because we felt he was a threat," Weil said. "We were concerned for the safety and well-being of certain individuals in the community."

Weil said he was saddened to see an organization like the Happy Minyan, which has operated out of Beth Jacob for about eight years, taken in by someone like Ozair.

"Because they are such a welcoming, open community, they attract people who are often needy or searching. Unfortunately, such people can often be taken advantage of," Weil said.

Although Weil declined to elaborate whom the congregation was protecting with Ozair's expulsion, some people close to Ozair have said that it was around the same time that Ozair's marriage fell apart and that his wife and children sought protection at a battered women's shelter.

An incident last year might also provide some insight: According to Sgt. Steven Seeger of the Beverly Hills Police Department, Ozair turned himself in to that department on Aug. 15, 2001, and was briefly in custody on a probable cause warrant.

"This was in regard to a warrant issued for his arrest under Penal Code Section 422, making a threat, which means making a credible, criminal threat to do harm to someone else," explained Seeger, adding that an underlying crime report showed the initial complaint that led to the warrant involved a charge that Ozair had made a threatening phone call or calls. The case was dropped within days by the district attorney's office because of insufficient evidence.

(Several sources also questioned Ozair's credentials as a rabbi. Ozair's Web site states that "his rabbinical training was at Kol Yaacov Torah Center in Monsey, N.Y." However, administrators at Kol Yaacov tell a different story, saying he applied to the school and visited it in August 1997, but never enrolled.

"He said he wanted to try it out, so he popped in for a couple of hours a week for about six weeks, but he was never officially accepted as a student," said Rabbi Leib Tropper, the school's educational director.)

Douglas Schiller, like other members of the Happy Minyan, was reluctant to discuss Ozair, who was one of the group's founders and mainstays.

"I can see easily why somebody would call him charismatic or a good teacher," Schiller said. "I think we're all surprised and saddened by what has happened."

Weil said it was important to see that it is possible for a person to have good qualities and still commit a crime.

"These people, the Baruch Lanners and the Michael Ozairs, are multidimensional individuals, which is why the Ozair incident has been very painful to many people whose lives he touched in a legitimate sincere way," Weil said.