
Members of a Jewish Sect Lev Tahor Flee Canada for Guatemala

BY KARLA ZABLUDOVSKY 3/31/14 AT 11:03 AM

Lev Tahor is a little-known, ultra-Orthodox Jewish sect with a history -- one that belies its brief existence.

An insular community of perhaps 250 people that was founded in Israel before moving to New York, then to Canada, Lev Tahor faces scrutiny as some of its members are under investigation by Canadian child welfare officials. The local affair has become an international incident after several families tried to flee with their children to Guatemala. One family of eight plus one adult are, for the moment at least, living in the vibrant Guatemalan tourist town of Panajachel, where they draw curious stares with their traditional garb. Other families were intercepted trying to leave Canada.

Lev Tahor, which is anti-Zionist (its members believe that the Torah instructs Jews to remain in exile until the coming of the Messiah), dismisses the current drama as the latest form of persecution they say has bedeviled the sect since it was formed in the 1980s.

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The group, whose leader has served time in a U.S. prison on charges of kidnapping, came under investigation in Canada for child abuse and neglect, psychological violence, forced marriages of underage girls and not complying with the required nationwide school curriculum, according to Denis Baraby, director of Quebec's Youth Protection Services.

Late last year, just before a Quebec court ruled that 14 children from several families should be removed from the community and temporarily placed in foster care, the group moved to a small town in the province of Ontario, where a Quebec ruling could not be enforced.

In February, an Ontario judge decided to uphold the ruling and the community promptly filed an appeal. Shortly before they were due in court again in March in Ontario, the families of the 14 children fled Canada, along with the children. Two children were intercepted at Calgary airport awaiting a flight to Mexico and six children were intercepted in Trinidad and Tobago. Another six children, ranging from an infant to a teenager, made it to Guatemala with their parents and another adult.

Uriel Goldman, a spokesperson for Lev Tahor, says Canadian authorities are bent on destroying the religious sect. "They hate the community," he says, adding that Canada is buckling under political pressure from Israel to quash the group because of its anti-Zionist position.

Newsweek was unable to reach anybody at the Israeli embassy in Canada or in Israel for comment due to a strike at the Israeli Foreign Ministry.

Since they moved to the isolated town of Chatham-Kent, Ontario, last fall, the group says police visits remain relentless.

They say they are puzzled by the scrutiny and deny the abuse allegations. "The maximum thing they found was a child with a bruise," says Goldman. He says the group has acquiesced to Canada's requirements for teaching mathematics and English to the children. However, he grew agitated when describing pressure to add evolution and sex education to their curriculum.

Rabbi Shlomo Helbrans founded Lev Tahor (which means 'pure heart') in Israel in the 1980s, envisioning a return to Judaism in its original, purest form.

Lev Tahor is far from the mainstream of Judaism, says Menachem Friedman, a Jewish historian at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

In appearance, the group's members are not dissimilar to other ultra-Orthodox Jews, according to Friedman: men dress entirely in black, their payot streaming from hats down below their shoulders, and spend much of the day immersed in prayer and learning the Torah. Women cover their bodies in shapeless, long black dresses. They often marry during their early teenage years, have many children and then tend exclusively to their families and household chores. The two genders rarely interact outside the family.

“It is very much outside the consensus,” Friedman says. “There are almost no other extreme religious groups that tolerate such behavior. It’s very isolated.”

It is not the first time Lev Tahor has had problems with the law.

In the early 1990s, Helbrans moved his small community of followers from Israel to Borough Park, Brooklyn, where he opened a religious school with support from New York’s ultra-Orthodox community.

In 1992, Hana Fhima, a non-religious Jew from Israel who had immigrated to New York, wanted to prepare her son, Shai, for his bar mitzvah. On her aunt’s recommendation, she took him to Helbrans, whose influence rapidly turned Shai’s secularism into fervent religiosity.

One night, Shai didn’t return home. Fhima accused Helbrans of holding her son hostage and took her case to the Brooklyn District Attorney’s office. The search for Shai grew to involve the Federal Bureau of Investigations, the New York City Police Department, the New York State Police and international authorities, including Canadian and Belgian law enforcement authorities, according to a related case [file](#).

Shai resurfaced in 1994 saying he had run away and shortly after, the State Supreme Court in Brooklyn convicted Helbrans of kidnapping and sentenced him to a minimum of four years in prison. He was released on parole after serving two years and, in 2000, was deported to Israel.

Soon after that, Helbrans shepherded his followers – approximately 250 today, according to a group spokesperson, though experts say the number might be exaggerated – to Montreal, Canada. He applied for refugee status, claiming he had been persecuted in Israel for his anti-Zionist stance. Helbrans was granted a visa. But in February, an investigation by The Fifth Estate, a leading Canadian television newsmagazine, indicated he may have used misleading evidence to win approval from the country’s immigration authorities. Helbrans had submitted a video of Shai saying the kidnapping was a misunderstanding as part of his application but in an interview with The Fifth Estate, Shai said Lev Tahor paid him to make the recording.

A spokesman at the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada said he could not discuss any specific refugee claim, adding: “Testimony given under oath is presumed to be true unless the decision maker has specific reasons to doubt its credibility.”

For now, Helbrans remains in Canada. The children who were intercepted fleeing the country are in the care of Children's Services in Ontario. And the family of eight remain in Guatemala.

A court there ruled on March 17 that the family entered the country legally on tourist visas and is allowed to stay for three months with the possibility of one extension for the same duration. Guatemalan authorities say they expect to hear from the Canadian embassy or to receive an international arrest warrant.

Even if the international appeals come in, the case would have to be reviewed by Guatemala's Attorney General's Office. "Until that abuse is proven in Guatemala, Canada cannot proceed to take them back," says Ana Ines Carpio, spokeswoman at the Guatemalan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Canadian government is "engaging with the relevant authorities in Canada and Guatemala," says Ian Trites, spokesman for the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, without commenting on any other details on the case.

"It's going to be very long process from what I heard," says Baraby, the Quebec official, who helped intercept the children who were found in Trinidad and Tobago en route to Guatemala.

In the meantime, Fernando Lucero, spokesman for Guatemala's Office of Immigration says that the case is unprecedented in Guatemala and that he has no idea why the Lev Tahor family chose to seek safe haven there. Goldman says the families did research online and could not find any evidence of persecution against Jews there.

Rabbi Yosef Blau, senior spiritual advisor at Yeshiva University, says members of Lev Tahor might find temporary support in countries that have not followed their story but, "They are running out of places."

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