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## 2 Rabbis Are Accused of Molesting Girl on Plane

[June 02, 1995](#) | BETTINA BOXALL and J. MICHAEL KENNEDY | TIMES STAFF WRITERS

A prominent New York rabbi and his assistant appeared before a federal magistrate Thursday on charges that they sexually molested a teen-age girl on a flight between Australia and Los Angeles this week.

In a detailed affidavit accompanying the complaint filed in Los Angeles, federal authorities allege that the ultra-orthodox rabbi, Israel Grunwald, fondled the minor and that his assistant, Rabbi Yehudah Friedlander, sexually abused the 15-year-old.

Through their attorney, the two, who were arrested when they got off the plane Wednesday, denied any wrongdoing.

"It did not happen," attorney Mitchell W. Egers said. "There's no question whatsoever about their innocence."

He dismissed as inaccurate passages from the affidavit in which Friedlander is quoted as saying that he sexually touched the girl after she initiated the episode.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Carolyn Turchin set \$10,000 bail for Grunwald, a leader of the Pupa Hasidic sect and the head of a large congregation in Brooklyn.

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The bail hearing for Friedlander was continued until this morning after some confusion arose over the disposition of a 1991 arrest in which he was charged with a sexual offense.

There is no apparent dispute about Friedlander's arrest in Montecello Township, N.Y., on Oct. 4, 1991, but one entry in the court records apparently stated that the case was dismissed, while another said that he was convicted and sentenced.

"I am aware there was some mix-up of some kind," Egers said. "We'll clarify it by tomorrow."

Egers, a Los Angeles attorney, said he was not familiar enough with New York law to know what the charge, sexual offense third degree, means.

"It may be something that really didn't amount to anything," he said. "I'll put the whole picture together by tomorrow."

About 15 supporters from New York and Los Angeles attended the court hearing, chanting from prayer books as they waited for the proceeding to begin.

In New York, the Orthodox community said Grunwald's incredulous followers were calling from around the world.

"He's a well respected person and very well liked," said Rabbi Bernard Freilich of the Council of Jewish Organizations in New York. "It's an impossible story. It's unbelievable. We're in total shock," Freilich said. "He's an ultra-orthodox rabbi. He wouldn't even speak to a girl, much less touch her."

The nine-page affidavit submitted by an FBI agent quotes Friedlander, the teen-ager--a U.S. citizen who was traveling alone--and a passenger who says she witnessed the incident.

According to the complaint, Grunwald, 44, leaned over an empty seat toward the girl, commented on her jewelry, touched her necklace and fondled her breast.

At some point, Friedlander, 44, exchanged seats with Grunwald. Then, the affidavit alleges that despite the girl's persistent protests, Friedlander fondled and molested her while she was covered with a blanket, trying to sleep.

The affidavit quotes a passenger from Michigan who, in a telephone interview with the FBI, said she saw a man she described as a rabbi lean over an empty seat and grope the teen-ager under her blanket for five to eight minutes.

After later talking to the teen-ager, the passenger alerted the flight crew, which contacted authorities in Los Angeles. The two men were arrested by airport police Wednesday morning as they left the plane.

Friedlander is charged with sexual abuse of a minor, and Grunwald, scheduled to return to court June 21 for a preliminary hearing, is charged with abusive sexual contact. The affidavit states that in comments to the FBI agent, Friedlander said the girl had guided his hand into her shirt and pants and "seemed" to want him to touch her.

"I did it, I shouldn't have done it. But it happened," Friedlander is quoted as saying.

Among the supporters who filled three rows of the courtroom during Thursday's hearing was Rabbi Boruch Shlomo Cunin of Chabad of Los Angeles.

"Not only is he internationally known, but [Grunwald] and his assistant are married and reputable," Cunin said later. "The rabbi is a leader of thousands of thousands of thousands of followers both in America and Israel and Australia--all over the world. . . . I believe they'll be totally exonerated."

Grunwald, who had gone to Australia to lecture on the Talmud at the invitation of that country's Jewish community, comes from a long line of rabbinical scholars. Freilich said Grunwald's father was the grand rabbi of the Pupa sect in Hungary. Grunwald and his brother now lead the group.

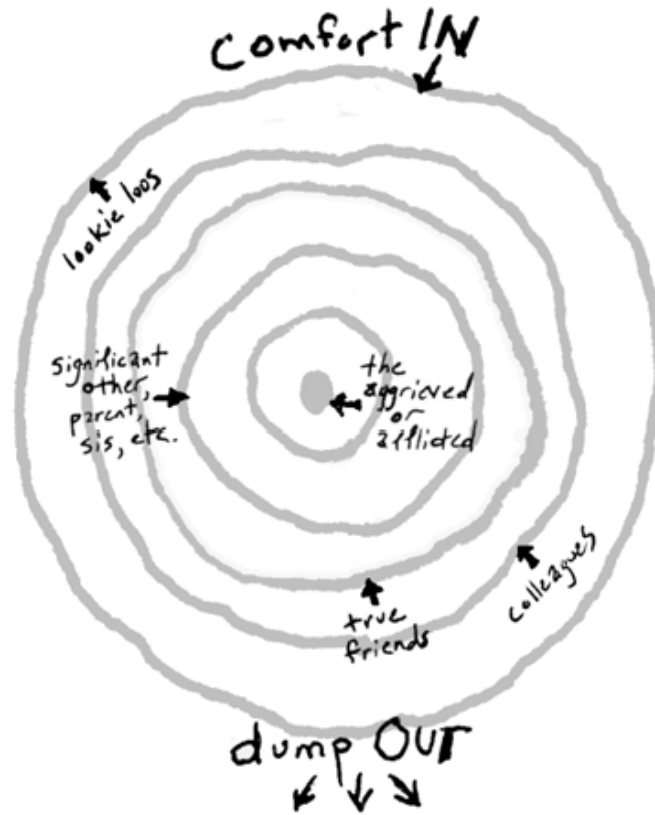
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