

Teacher is Accused of Molesting Child At Hebrew School by Joan Fleischman
Miami Herald - August 23, 1984

A teacher at the Hebrew Academy in Miami Beach was arrested Wednesday for allegedly sexually molesting an 11-year-old male student during class.

Michael Ashbal, 34, of Hollywood, is accused of fondling the youngster "at least weekly" between September 1983 and the end of the school year, June 1984, according to the arrest affidavit.

Ashbal, who surrendered to authorities, was booked into Dade County Jail late Wednesday on a charge of lewd and lascivious conduct and released on \$5,000 bond. A hearing is scheduled for 9 a.m. today.

Ashbal "has completely denied" touching the child, attorney Ross Zimmerman said.

"There's no truth to it at all," said Zimmerman. "It's sad when you have a man teaching for 12 years and suddenly this type of allegation is made against him. As far as anyone's concerned, he is guilty until proven innocent. He loses his job. His friends and neighbors hear about it. It really is just an upsetting and unfair situation."

Michael Fischer, executive vice president of the Hebrew Academy, 2400 Pine Tree Dr., said Ashbal has been suspended pending the outcome of the charge. The private school, with a student body of 600 and a faculty of nearly 100, is cooperating with police and the state attorney's office, Fischer said.

Ashbal has worked at the school since 1976, Fischer said. He taught two classes a day in Hebrew language, customs and ceremonies, with about a dozen students in each class, Fischer said.

Parents of students in Ashbal's classes first learned of the allegation Monday from Dade Assistant State Attorney Abe Laeser, according to Fischer.

Laeser, a member of the board of the Hebrew Academy, also is in charge of the investigation, Chief Assistant State Attorney George Yoss said. He said Laeser, accompanied by detectives, called the meeting at the school "to determine whether there were other incidents which we should be aware of and they should be aware of so they could talk to their children."

Police said they have since interviewed the majority of the 24 students and are aware of no other allegations.

Detectives, who have been investigating the case since the first week in August, said the youngster, 10 and in the fourth grade when the first incident allegedly occurred, did not tell his parents about it until several weeks ago because he was "embarrassed and afraid." It was only after recent publicity about child molestation that the boy's family came forward, investigators said.

According to the affidavit, Ashbal "frequently . . . would tell the victim to come to (his) desk

and sit in a chair at (his) side or in (his) lap. While the victim was seated in the chair or in (his) lap, defendant would reach into the victim's pants and touch the victim's buttocks and or genitals. This occurred at least weekly from September 1983 through June 1984."

The fondling allegedly took place in the classroom with other students present, according to detectives James Mazer and Rocco DeLeo. They said the other children were unaware of what was going on.

Zimmerman said the child was often at the front desk because he was getting extra instruction in Hebrew.

"The child's grades were improving dramatically," he said.

The charge against Ashbal is a second-degree felony that carries a maximum prison term of 15 years upon conviction, Yoss said.