

## A not-so-saintly rabbi in Netivot

By

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It was a normal evening in early November. In Netivot, the town of memorial celebrations for saintly rabbis, quiet is something tangible - actually rare. Perhaps this was the reason why there was something disturbing about the quiet that prevailed outside. The little ones were already lying in bed in their pajamas when suspicious shadows were seen in the garden outside S.'s kitchen. Looking through the window, she made out three figures, and she felt something bad was about to happen. She knew these were the thugs of Rabbi Yoram Aberjil. At that very moment, her husband, A., was at the police station, filing a complaint of attempted assault by people he identified as the rabbi's followers. She was alone with her small children. "I knew that the outer door of the kitchen was not locked. That's how it is in Netivot. My whole body trembled."

S. pushed the stove against the door and ran to the "safe" room (reinforced against rocket attacks). She frantically emptied the wall closet and put the children into it. Meanwhile, the thugs entered the building. They hammered wildly at the door and shouted over and over for her to open it. A neighbor yelled from above: "What do you want here?" They said: "We've come to kill her."

"I took a carving knife and held it ready. The children started crying. I told them: 'Quiet. If you cry, it will be the end of us.' I held my hand over the mouth of the youngest child. One of the children said: 'Mommy, it's like in the Holocaust.'" The intruders continued to bang on the door and shout. Someone called the police, and when they heard the sirens, they ran off. "That night we packed our bags and fled," she related.

Until a few months ago, Rabbi Aberjil was the rabbi of S. and her husband. The two are in their late 20s, and, like all the members of the community, are newly religious. Over the last year, they decided to move away from the crowded community. They found an apartment outside of the area in which the community is concentrated, and moved the children to schools not identified with Rabbi Aberjil.

In the second week of September, S. relates, the telephone rang, and it was Rabbi Aberjil on the line. "I want you to know that your children are precious to me," he said. "I won't let anyone pick the fruit I planted. The next conversation will be really painful. I will follow you. I have ways of making you disappear in a hit-and-run accident. I will curse your children. I'm telling you, I have powers. Your children will be orphans."

At the end of October, they asked for help from a series of rabbis, among them the town's chief rabbi, Rabbi Pinhas Cohen. They unwittingly opened a Pandora's box. Other families of yeshiva students also came to Rabbi Cohen and told of threats made by Rabbi Aberjil. As a result of conversations with women, two files of evidence were compiled about what could be regarded as sexual harassment. Rabbi Cohen passed the complaints on to Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (the country's leading Sephardic rabbi) and to the Chief Rabbinate. Rabbi Yosef gave instructions to establish a special religious court to examine the complaints.

This is not the first time Rabbi Aberjil has found himself in trouble. Some 10 years ago, there

was another wave of complaints by women against him, which were examined by a religious court. He reacted strongly against the current accusations. "The town was seething. People I know who merely spoke with the women who complained were threatened with murder," said one rabbinic source in the town. Rabbi Cohen received threats by phone. His car and that of his wife were vandalized, and he lodged a complaint with the police. Other complainants were ostracized and expelled from Aberjil's study center, as was anyone who was in contact with them. Two of the complainants were beaten up. As a result of the various incidents, the young men and their wives lodged complaints with the police.

In early November, Rabbi Aberjil gave a speech that could be described as incitement to murder. It was circulated on ultra-Orthodox Web sites: "Whoever mentions my name, create a riot; tell him 'shut up, you sinner' ... If you have a prayer book, throw it at him; if you have a shoe, throw it at him; if you have a stone, throw it at him ... Take a stick and beat him until the man has to get to Emergency ... anyone who harms us. Because if he dies, nothing will happen; he died of wickedness."

According to the complainants and rabbinic sources who supported them, the police's handling of the matter was inadequate. They were abandoned by the rabbis, and this week the special rabbinic court decided to close the case for lack of evidence.

Rabbi Aberjil is an enigmatic character. He developed a kind of new stream in Judaism: Sephardic Hassidism, which draws from both the Chabad (Lubavitch) and Bratslav Hassidic traditions. In a town of "courts" and holy men, he has been able to create a unique image, and draw in the newly religious with magical cords. Both his admirers and his enemies agree that he is a deeply knowledgeable scholar. In his youth, he learned at an Ashkenazi ultra-Orthodox (but not hassidic) yeshiva. His style is that of a preacher, spiced with stories of miracles and frightening tales. A rabbinic source in the town explained that it is easy to turn the newly religious into followers: "They revere him. He says he has a connection to G-d, and the newly religious are excited by that. It would not make an impression on those who grew up ultra-Orthodox."

Aberjil gathered strength in Netivot by collecting these scattered souls under his authority. Aside from his community in Netivot, he has been able to attract other groups, among them businessmen who come to consult him. "He knows how to appeal to them. He keeps talking about negating oneself. It's like brainwashing, and they become dependent on him, like robots," said one of the female complainants. Some 300 men learn at the study center in Netivot, but about one third of them do not define themselves as his followers. The real disciples and their wives are a separate group. They get up early on Shabbat to pray with the rabbi, and to take part in his study session. On the eve of Shabbat, the women, dressed in white, walk considerable distances from their homes, wheeling strollers, in order to receive a blessing. "The women admire him," said the wife of one of the yeshiva students. "They behave like lovers." Students tell of long counseling conversations Rabbi Aberjil has with their wives. According to the complaints, these talks sometimes become intimate, and slip into the realm of sexual harassment.

"Yoram Aberjil presumes to be a marriage counselor," says journalist Yossi Bar-Moha, who has published investigations into the courts of kabbalists. "Neighborhood rabbis tell me that he destroys families. To this man he says, 'Your wife is no good,' to that woman he says, 'Don't marry him.'"

Many students relate that Rabbi Aberjil expresses himself as if he is blessed with supernatural powers. His powers captivated settlers, many of whom came to consult with him before the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. One of them, from the settlement of Morag, told Haaretz that he bought a house in the settlement one month before the evacuation, because of the advice and blessing of Rabbi Aberjil.

Another young man related that Aberjil despises other rabbis, with the exception of Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, and forbids his followers from listening to "Radio Hakodesh," the pirate station of the newly religious. "Don't believe any rabbi," he likes to say. "I alone have holiness. I alone am G-d-fearing."

According to rabbinic sources who supported the complainants, Aberjil threatened that he would shut down his institutions if he got as much as a reprimand. "The rabbis and the religious court judges have relationships of mutual loyalty, and they had no intention of seriously investigating the matter," said the source. There was an intervention by the chairman of the Shas party, MK Eli Yishai, who treats the rabbi - regarded as an exceptional vote-getter in the south - with kid-gloves. Last week, the complaints and the cassette recordings of the alleged incitement were handed over to Attorney General Menachem Mazuz.

"We innocently believed that we would find a cleaner life in the ultra-Orthodox community," said one of the female complainants. "For us this is a very strong crisis of faith. We expected that at least the chief rabbis would see the truth, but we were bitterly disappointed."

Rabbi Aberjil's secretary, Erez Reuven, said in response that no force had been used against any of the families. "Not one of us lifted a hand against them. The families should not have left in the first place, and of course they can come back to the town." Referring to the study session whose contents included incitement to murder, he said: "The rabbi educates toward 'ahavat Yisrael,' love of the nation; and by the end of the session he explained that he was against violence."

The Negev sub-district of the police gave this response: "The complaints were dealt with efficiently and sensitively. Proof of this can be found in the calm that is being preserved. The complaint against the rabbi regarding incitement to violence was lodged at the Netivot police station. Once testimonies have been collected, the cassette and the material from the investigation will be given to the attorney general, who is the person authorized to determine whether it is a matter of incitement, and whether to instruct the police to launch a [full] investigation."