

Conspiracy of Silence
By Netty C. Gross
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An alleged scandal at a flagship Orthodox Jerusalem high school is exacerbated by suggestions that it was allowed to fester for years

STUDENTS MILL AROUND THE corridors of Netiv Meir, an all-male yeshivah high school located on the main drag of Jerusalem's largely ultra-Orthodox Bayit Vegan neighborhood. Portraits of bearded, glum and famous rabbis share wall space with ads for an Orthodox rock concert. In the halls, teachers talk to students, who are preppy-looking even if there's an odd tzitzit, or ritual fringe, protruding from under a shirt. There's a security guard, who wants to know why I am in the place. In short, everything seems normal. But it's not. The 46-year-old live-in school, until recently the jewel in the crown of the religious Zionist Bnei Akiva yeshivah network and the darling of the parent National Religious Party, is reeling from a sex scandal. Indeed, some feel that the affair has visited as much pain and anguish on religious Zionists as Bar-Ilan University student-turned Rabin assassin, Yigal Amir.

In the last week of April, charges were filed against Rabbi Ze'ev Kopolovitch, for 15 years Netiv Meir's rosh yeshivah, or principal. The charismatic, 52-year-old rabbi is accused of sexually abusing 19 students between 1991 and his dismissal in 1997. The 23-page indictment describes him as a pedophile, who promised good grades to male students, who allowed him to kiss and touch them in intimate areas. In the 1,500 pages of evidence gathered by police, it's alleged that Kopolovitch asked his victims to strip and masturbate with him, threatening bad marks if they refused.

Kopolovitch, the indictment alleges, arranged late-night study sessions for favorites at the Netiv Meir dormitory, in its infirmary or at his nearby home, stressing the importance of a relationship "beyond the spiritual." The alleged contact with Kopolovitch was the first sexual encounter for many of the victims. Some reportedly needed psychological counseling to recover from the trauma. Kopolovitch, married and the father of three, denies the charges. Through his lawyer, he has reportedly said he is the victim of a witchhunt orchestrated by students "who didn't understand me" and a power struggle at the yeshivah.

THE CHARGES AGAINST Kopolovitch are serious enough, but they're only part of the story. There's also the "conspiracy of silence," as police call it. Investigators say Kopolovitch's alleged behavior was known within the school for several years and tolerated by the governing hierarchy of the religious Zionist movement. Top rabbis were allegedly aware of what was going on, but didn't stop it or report it to police or social workers - a criminal offense.

Netiv Meir had a close relationship with leading figures of religious Zionism, including former Ashkenazi chief rabbi Avraham Shapiro, former Bnei Akiva yeshivah network chairman Rabbi Avraham Zuckerman, and his successor, Rabbi Haim Druckman, who in late March accepted the No. 2 slot on the NRP's Knesset slate. Police believe Shapiro and Zuckerman knew about Kopolovitch's alleged abuses for five years and did nothing; Druckman forced the rabbi to resign in 1997 after a Jerusalem weekly published the allegations - but failed to inform law enforcement authorities.

Another theme echoing through the case is the deferential treatment afforded NRP high-ups

by the legal system. The initial police request to question the three rabbis languished on Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein's desk for months after it was made early last year. Rubinstein allowed Shapiro's interrogation to take place by correspondence, and let Zuckerman and Druckman be questioned in their homes. Explaining that decision, a Justice Ministry statement said that Shapiro and Zuckerman are both in their 80s, and cited "overall circumstances, including the nature of the investigation and the type of offenses." All three rabbis denied knowledge of Kopolovitch's alleged abuses. In late April, Rubinstein said the rabbis would not be indicted for failing to notify authorities. But indictments for this failure are being prepared against former rosh yeshivah Eliyahu Grossberg and Haim Zvi Rosenberg, the vice-principal. The three rabbis were not, explained Justice Ministry spokeswoman Orit Shemesh, "educational employees," and as such the requirement to report to the police under Section 368D/b did not apply. Shemesh declined comment when asked if the case didn't also come under Section 368D/a, which requires any citizen who has "reasonable basis" to believe that an offense has been committed against a minor by those responsible for him to report the case to the police or a social worker. Tellingly, a senior NRP official told The Report that the Justice Ministry quietly informed the party a month ago, before Druckman was put on the Knesset ticket, that the trio would not be indicted. "We knew they were off the hook back then," said the NRP official. Should the ministry be giving confidential information to a political party? The spokeswoman for the ministry would not comment. WHEN IT COMES TO SEX SCANDALS, the modern Orthodox are as defensive and tight-lipped as the ultra-Orthodox. Yair Sheleg, an Orthodox journalist at the daily Ha'aretz, says that fits small, closed communities - that kibbutzim are "notoriously reluctant to come forward in reporting rapes."

Many Orthodox rabbis decline to talk about the case. Others have explanations for the tendency to cover things up. "Religious Zionists still haven't emerged from our ghetto," says Rabbi Yehudah Gilad, of the religious kibbutz movement's Yeshivat Ma'aleh Gilboa and a Knesset candidate from the moderate Orthodox Meimad party. "I think it's changing, but for the most part, we aren't mature or confident enough as a group to step forward and accept criticism. Some of the insecurity is a reaction to the culture war with the secular. Orthodox people know modesty is one of their emblems, and when a sexual scandal unravels, the thinking is, 'Why give the secular a rope to hang us. Let's deal with this internally.'" Asked how he'd confront a similar crisis, Gilad parses it out carefully. "My first concern," he says, "would be for the student's welfare. Next, I'd inquire what the law required me to do, and implement it." Shmuel Reiner, the rabbi of Kibbutz Tirat Zvi and dean at Yeshivat Ma'aleh Gilboa, says the Orthodox community is "paying a price for our emphasis on modesty, on not being forthcoming about sexuality. When something like this happens, we're unequipped to deal with it." Reiner says the Kopolovitch case has had two immediate effects: High school yeshivot, which insist that students board at the school, "have declined in popularity and I'm happy. The rabbis in these yeshivot have too much of a hold on kids' lives." And, Reiner says, he and colleagues have become increasingly careful about being alone with students or touching them, however innocently. "I travel all over the country seeing soldiers, but I'm sure never to be alone in my car with students."

ZE'EV KOPOLOVITCH WAS raised in an Orthodox Zionist family from Rehovot. His religious identity was blurred; he joined the Slonim hasidic sect and showed up for his first teaching job at a Bnei Akiva school in Pardes Hannah in the 70s, wearing an ultra-Orthodox hat and long coat. "His nickname was 'Crembo' (a popular chocolate-covered marshmallow treat), recalls one former student there. "Black on the outside, white on the inside. He was warm, physical, charismatic, pushing the idea of being more religious rather than being more right-wing

politically. When I heard of the charges, I said it must be a misunderstanding. There was no hint of sexual impropriety back then." In 1982 Kopolovitch was asked to take over at Netiv Meir by Rabbi Aharon Bina, the yeshivah's founder. Opened in 1953, the school has always been at the center of a tug-of-war between nationalist and ultra-Orthodox factions. The appointment of Kopolovitch, who tried to accommodate the nationalists but leaned toward the ultra-Orthodox, created a furor among the more politically oriented faction. Still, the school flourished during his tenure.

Over the years, stories about his alleged sexual activities also flourished in the school. A Purim video made by a student reportedly was rife with innuendo; students complained to other teachers and rabbis but their complaints went unheeded.

His downfall came as a fluke. In 1994 it looked like Kopolovitch might simply fade away. After heart surgery, he retired. But a fight erupted over the future of the yeshivah, which went four months without a principal. Kopolovitch was persuaded to return. Then, in 1997, after a Jerusalem weekly referred to allegations about him in a larger story on the religious-nationalist power struggle in the yeshivah, Druckman, as head of the Bnei Akiva network, asked him to leave.

These days, Netiv Meir is a fossil of its former self. It used to take in 120 students a year and turn away hundreds more; for the 5760 academic year, only 49 new students have signed up. Kopolovitch is said to be a broken man. He is no longer allowed to pray in Jerusalem's Slonim shtiebl or other synagogues, and has taken refuge in the tiny Sokhotchover hasidic sect.

It remains to be seen whether the case will have any effect on the NRP's chances in the upcoming elections. One NRP source insisted "this story won't affect us politically. Druckman was cleared of any wrongdoing." Others disagree. One parent, whose son attended the school until the scandal broke, makes no bones about her feelings. "Kopolovitch," she says, "was sick. The rabbis who protected him were evil. They will never get my vote again."

<https://www.jweekly.com/1999/04/30/former-yeshiva-head-indicted-on-sex-charges/>

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Justice Ministry officials said it has taken a long time to file the indictment because of the investigation of the other rabbis and because Kopolovitch's lawyer asked to see the indictment and respond to it before it was presented to Jerusalem District Court.

The lawyer's response was not immediately available.

According to the indictment, Kopolovitch systematically selected a group of students each year and gave them preferential treatment in and out of class at the residential high school. He gave some of them private lessons in the early morning, brought them to his home or met them in the school health clinic when it was empty.

"For seven years, during the period between 1991 and 1997, the accused committed sexual crimes against students studying at the yeshiva," the indictment reads. "These crimes involved various types of sexual conduct, beginning with kisses (including on the mouth), fondling (including the chest area, the crotch and the sexual organ), and ending with masturbation through hand or body contact."

One of the students whom Kopolevitch allegedly forced to have sex was 14 years old.