

Is “Lev Tahor” a destructive cult?

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, numbers
and Deuteronomy

Introduction

Lev Tahor (in Hebrew Pure Heart) group, was founded in Jerusalem in the late 1980s, is now composed of about 200-250 adult people and almost 150 children, with a few dozen adherents in Israel. Departing from Hasidic ultra-Orthodox Jewish streams, it has created an autarchic community without clear bonds to Jewish traditions. As a small and secluded group, it regularly declared itself to be following the strict fundamental norms of the Torah (The Bible or Tanakh) and to have returned to the rituals of its ancestors.

It defined itself as completely separated by other Jewish streams and Rabbinical authorities and time and again imposes new arbitrary laws and punishment against its members. It ignores excommunication from leading Rabbis in the world. In this way it formed a separation from the fundamentals of Judaism: being part of the Jewish collective, (in Hebrew *klal Israel*) solidarity, and mutual assistance ('*Arvut hadadit*).

The founder, Erez Elbarnes, aka Shlomo Helbrans, was born in Jerusalem in 1962, repented to observant Judaism and left his secular curriculum at the age of 16.

Genesis: From Erez Elbaranes to Shlomo Helbrans, emerging in his twenties as a repentant Jew (Ba'al Teshuvah) and self-styled Rabbi



Year 2015: Helbrans, the Hassidic Admo"r (Master-Teacher-Rabbi) of Riminov Congregation, the incarnation of twelve saints



Lev Tahor is not a new group. Due to early marriages the founders in their forties are now mostly grandfathers. Their children grew up and married inside the group, without any knowledge of life outside, any skill to survive in a world they never see, of a language they will never know. Yiddish is the only language. Therefore, the third generation of newborns from endogamous marriages is socialized from the very beginning into a secluded, regimented, ignorant and poor form of life. This is their world. No math, English or mandatory curriculum, no toys, no books except religious texts. No “secular” or “gentile” (in Yidish: *Goyshe*) stimulations. In other words, no minimal tools to cope with the outstanding world.

- Similarly to other ultra-orthodox Jewish groups as Satmar or Toldot Aharon, Lev Tahor expressed harsh incendiaries against the state of Israel stating that only the true Messiah can declare the foundation of a theocratic state. So far, any Jew has the duty to leave the country, and to fight against the profanations of the secular state of Israel on the Holy Land.

Adopting anti Israeli attitudes



During the years, most Israeli family members were completely shunned by relatives in Lev Tahor and did not have access to their location in the U.S, Canada and Guatemala. Others were cursed by their children. Others witnessed acts of violence and abuse. Various whistleblowers spoke out. Time and again the allegation of violence were the same: consistent, clear, solid and convincing. Their reaction and their pain were disseminated by the Israeli Parliament Committee for the Rights of Children (2013), and attracted the headlines of the media. Besides these allegations anti-Lev Tahor activist claimed the lack of any stimulation for the children, physical violence and medical neglect.

Childhood



Torah and prayer: the daily routine



Concerned relatives in Israel



Exodus

The group first settled in New York, claiming that the first Gulf War was a sign of the imminent destruction of Israel. Helbrans as a rabbi of a small congregation was imprisoned for two years with charges of kidnapping a boy. In 2004, moved to Canada receiving the status of refugee by convincing the authorities that due to his anti-Sionist attitude, his life in Israel was in danger. He was granted the status of refugee and founded a new congregation in St. Agathe Quebec.

After almost 7 years of seclusion and lack of scrutiny by Canadian authorities, in 2011 investigations by police and youth welfare and education authorities brought the case of child abuse and neglect in court. One day before the ruling, in November 2013 the group escaped to Ontario, and a few month later, after two families were ordered to appear in court due to allegations of child abuse and neglect, all fled to Guatemala.

Quebec's Youth Protection Services was concerned about medication with melatonin to help control children behavior. Not learning the Quebec curriculum, leaving them unable to do basic math.

Forced to marry girl as early as at 14 to much older men.

Three families in particular S., C. and H. were the focus of concern of the authorities and their conditions were reported to Quebec Court, for an order to foster children in serious distress (Ontario Court Addendum, 2013).

Authorities of Quebec raided the Lev Tahor compound in August 2013 to take reports on the health and safety of the group's children. Social services had five kids removed and placed with a foster family. During subsequent visits to Ste.-Agathe, officials identified another 14 children from two families as being in need of intervention. In November 2013, a summons was issued for six parents (three families) to appear in court. But as said the group vanished in the night •

When authorities arrived at the compound of St-Agathe-des-Monts, in November, with the summons, they found the place deserted and in disarray. Lev Tahor had fled in the middle of the night on chartered buses to Chatam-Kent, Ontario. As Ontario's court stated, they precipitously left to evade the judicial procedure that had just begun, they left all their goods in the dilapidated houses that were purchased by the congregation.

Exodus: Leaving the U.S and Israel and Resettling in Sant-Agathe, Quebec, 2004



Exodus: After police and welfare raids and court's ruling concerning children in distress: resettling in Chatam-Kent, Ontario, November 2013



In February 2014, a judge in Ontario finally ruled that Social Welfare could remove the children from their homes. Lev Tahor had 30 days to appeal. In the meantime, however, the 14 minors fled. Two of them were detained at a Calgary airport, while immigration authorities in Trinidad and Tobago flagged and deported another six; all were placed (temporarily) in foster care of Haredi Families in Canada. The law continued to work in Lev Tahor's favor, and the group fled from Canada to Guatemala. Besides the overall lack of coordination between authorities in Canada, the quantity of children in danger, the lack of cooperation and cultural and linguistic gaps with the target population, and the lack of any person in the group likely to testify, all this made the welfare and legal action inefficient. As stated by Quebec's Department of Youth Protection and politicians it took too much time to try to seize the children.

After investigations in Ontario, escaping to Guatemala: San Juan La Laguna, February 2014



Merging with Toiras Jesed and converting Mayan Natives



Uriel Goldman a leading figure in Lev Tahor and three natives during their process of conversion in Guatemala



August 2014: An edict from a group of indigenous elders in San Juan, 150 kilometers west of Guatemala City, said that the Lev Tahor (Toiras Jesed included) members were no longer welcome in the lakeside town for reasons of incompatibility, and clashes of members with natives and with tourists. The decision was made to protect the culture of the local population and tourism. Despite the group applied to Human Right Commission, Lev Tahor decided to leave the town for its safety.

San Juan La Laguna: Opposition of Natives against Lev Tahor, claiming incompatibility and clash of cultures



For their own safety... moving again: August 2014.







Resettling in Guatemala City industrial area, April 2014

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2XSjtYfWfMY>

Spanish TV, Mitel Program: see full chapter in youtube.com: Los Judios ortodoxos en Nueva York y en Guatemala.

Police Raid in Guatemala City, Sept. 2016 following Israeli and Canadian authorities pressure and allegation of child abuse and neglect.



So far, at the end of September, based on Guatemalan news reports, the only confirmed information we had after one raid of local police, was that a few toddlers were found without an official registered identity, one child was taken for further medical examination, and one local physician who visited the children inside the compound didn't report any signs of disease or distress.

But Helbrans decided to leave again, resettling in Santa Rosa, close to Guatemala's jungle.

One proactive relative, Oded Twick, the rescuer of his sister's family from Guatemala City, 2015. He provided strong legal allegations to Israeli authorities urging to intervene. "Lev Tahor is a concentration camp in the jungle" (last post on his fb page)



Twick's campaign in social media



Concentration camp in the Jungle



Personal free association or Iconographic similarities?

2014

Chibok Boko Haram Kidnapping



Numbers: One proactive ruling after five years of investigation, April 25, 2017.

TIMES OF ISRAEL

After five years of investigation, collecting dozens of depositions, emerges the first judiciary definition of a dangerous cult. “Based on the conduct of the sect toward minors, it’s sufficient to call this group a dangerous cult that severely damages the physical and emotional well-being of the children of this community,” Judge Rivka Makayes of the Petah Tikva Magistrate’s Court says in her ruling.

352 paragraphs based on allegations, depositions, first and second hand testimonials on **12** issues mostly related to the definition of “what a cult should be”: leadership, secrecy, separation from the world, zealotry, deviant doctrines and rituals, obedience, fund-raising and voluntary donations of the members, missionarism, bonds and solidarity among the members.

The ruling comes in response to a petition filed to the court by the attorney sect members, and gives more support to local authorities to general and of implement “child protection actions” against two families members living in Israel.

Counter claims: Israeli persecutions and Anti-Semitism, Lev Tahor adopting Human Rights slogans



“Sionism and Anti-Semitism are our persecutors”



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Yellow Stars



As we can see the claim of persecution, holocaust, anti-Semitism and concentration camps is mis-used by both sides, either critics or sympathizers.

Leviticus: (Levi, lit. “He will join”) the Canadian lawyer assistant and legal consultant of Lev Tahor: Guidy Maman



Leading spokesman: Uriel Goldman, one of the first members at Lev Tahor's inception



Adherents: Haredi Burqas in Bet Shemesh, Israel



Sympathisers: Shawls' Women. Jerusalem



Deuteronomy:

Running away from Guatemala City and
resettling In the secluded compound of
Oratorio, Santa Rosa, Guatemala, September
2016



Santa Rosa: Separation of sexes from early childhood



Reaching the the Promised Land? Buying a lot and starting to build a factory.



June 2017. Running away again after pressure of Israeli authorities to investigate two families who illegally fled the country, and other allegations of child abuse. Resettling in Juarez in Chiapas Region, Mexico



Economic benefits for the locals

El Sol de México

June 29: “We come in peace. This religious community will promote new business, for the sake of the generations to come.”

Deuteronomy: Lit. “Repeating laws again”

While the group is very stringent in conduct dictated by Jewish law, it is particularly obsessed with a few specific issues such as eating norms of kosher food, modest dress, body purity, and early pre-arranged marriage (to prevent any impure acts during adolescence). They are more severe with new forms of prohibitions and zealotry, alien to other traditional Hasidic or ultra-Orthodox groups considered extreme like Satmar or Toldot Aharon, such as prohibiting the eating of chicken and eggs (because of allegation of genetic engineering), or covering women's feet with sleep sacks.

Shlomo Helbrans, the self-styled Rebbe, the only chain to God (as he claims), was not accountable to any authorities even those inside ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionist Judaism. The leader apparently forced use of psychoactive drugs, commanded physical punishment to take the “evil out”, and dictated feeding and living conditions (in basements) as punishment or mental pressure. Forced marriages between children of the group are decided and performed by the leader. Helbrans stated in one of his depositions, that he married off his child at the age of 13, achieving the blessed tradition of the past. We found material of set underage marriages of girls aged 13 and 14 with men aged 28, 30, and 35.

The leader also ordered divorces, and appointed masters who are directly subordinate to him and who manage the activity of the group. The “welfare commission” has the power to remove children from one family to another for a period of years, in cases where they believe that parents do not educate their children according to the leader's imperatives. The imposition of given names to newborns and changing names of new recruits can be seen an extreme step to take away any form of personal identity.

Sociologists as Ervin Goffman defines it as a degradation ceremony which strips away any “identity kit” inside a **total institution** (1991).

Among other punishments dictated by the leader: banning or rejection from the congregation for lack of obedience or reverence for authority; splitting up husband and wife either temporarily or by forced divorce; hitting, spanking, slashing, and temporary exclusion from the home or from the activities of the community.

The death of the leader outside the promised land.

On July 7, 2017, Helbrans was reportedly taking part in a purification ritual last Friday when he was swept away by an unusually strong river current. A report in local media and a testimonial by his mother, said his body was carried a kilometer downstream before it was recovered. The rope, used for his safety was torn. Only a few dispatches were disseminated by the media. Apparently, he was buried in Santa Rosa's lot in full secrecy.

What next?

- **The future of Lev Tahor**

Mass suicide? Demolition of the group? Inner clashes of succession to the throne? Israeli Entebbe-like special units raid to rescue the families? After the recent death of Helbrans, the cult of Lev Tahor, with all its vicissitudes and unusual peculiarities, raises in the mass media many questions about its future. It is impossible to foresee the future of the group. However we should take into account a few issues.

Lifespan. Lev Tahor is not a new group. Due to early marriages the founders in their forties are now mostly grandfathers. Their children grew up and married inside the group, without any knowledge of life outside, any skill to survive in a world they never see, of a language of a culture they will never know. Therefore, the third generation of newborns is socialized from the very beginning into a secluded, regimented, ignorant and poor form of life. This is their world.

On the **demographic level**, the high birthrate of each family, and the long reproductive span for women because of the early age of marriage, ensure a natural increase of group members. The recruitment of outsiders, especially young girls and adult men, opens avenues for diversifying the group's “endogamous pool” and potential for keeping high birthrate.

Organization. Most social control of members is implemented by the members themselves. Sneaking is a common practice. It seems that today a few proxies, including Nachman Helbrans (son of the leader), already act arbitrarily in “the name of the father“. There is already a separation of work and jurisdiction among a few “ministers”: public relations, economic management, education, “social welfare” etc. The flights from place to place show that obedient members are skilled, obedient and disciplined enough to accomplish complicated operations, all this without the physical presence of the leader. The cooperation of anonymous adherents can also explain the success in all these rocambolesque operations, forging passports, marriage certificates or medical prescriptions.

Autonomy. Since the leader was not subject to any Jewish authority but only to “his god” no strong religious reference or authority can influence the decisions and thus restrain Lev Tahor from more extreme actions. Many harsh and negative statements of leading Haredi personalities, interdiction and excommunication on behalf of the highest levels within Hassidism, didn’t cause any change to the character of the group, because it perceives itself being beyond any other Jewish group, representing the only authentic form of Jewish life based on the true fundamentals of the Scriptures.

Concerned Relatives. After their requests for assistance from Israeli, Canadian, American, Guatemalan authorities and the Interpol, they acknowledge the limited legal power of modern sovereign states. With the exception of a few escapes and rescue operations, as the years go by, they surrender to the separation and loss with sorrow and incurable pain. Despite scattered voices of wishful thinking during the last few days, the vitality of the anti-cult mobilization, after many disappointing failures, will probably gradually fade away. Probably somewhere in the middle of the jungle Lev Tahor most persistent and tenacious members will keep on moving in their quest for the “promised land”.