

As 'Jewish Taliban' sect is tossed out of Iraq, its leaders stand trial in New York

BY ASAF SHALEV NOVEMBER 5, 2021



Members of the Lev Tahor sect prepare to depart from La Aurora International Airport in Guatemala City on a journey to Iraqi Kurdistan in Oct. 2021 (Courtesy)

(JTA) — To get from Guatemala City to Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq, travelers can't exactly catch a direct flight.

But that's the route taken in recent weeks by some 70 members of a small Orthodox sect that has been trotting the globe for more than 40 years in search of a safe haven to practice a fundamentalist version of Judaism — one that has led the Israeli press to dub it the "Jewish Taliban."

From Erbil, the group, whose sect is formally called Lev Tahor, had planned to cross a border into Iran and settle there, according to a group of activists who have been monitoring Lev Tahor's activities.

The activists include former Lev Tahor members who escaped, estranged relatives of the group and Hasidic businessmen concerned by allegations of child abuse in the sect. The activists asked to remain anonymous out of concern for their safety and privacy.

Lev Tahor's choice of Iran is perhaps connected to its espousal of anti-Zionism. The sect's leaders requested asylum from the Islamic Republic in 2018.

Whether Iranian authorities had intended to welcome the group is unclear. But the activists told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency that in recent days, before the next phase of the journey could begin, local Kurdish authorities scuttled the plan, detaining the group and deporting them to Turkey.

Established in the late 1980s in Israel, Lev Tahor adheres to an extreme interpretation of kosher dietary rules and requires women to be covered from head to toe with black veils. The sect's rules allegedly demand that female children be wed to older men.

Some of the sect's leaders are being tried on child abduction charges right now in the New York City area — a development that has gained little attention even in Israeli media outlets that have covered the sect's international movements closely.

Lev Tahor has an estimated membership of 200 to 300, including adults who were born into the sect, as well as dozens of children. A sizable number of followers are believed to be Israeli citizens.

While the sect is tiny, its potential to cause international incidents — as well as the way it defends itself by tapping into narratives of Jewish persecution — have attracted outsized attention.

The prospect of Israelis crossing en masse into the enemy territory of Iran had spurred an Israeli media frenzy with speculation about what would happen to them. Some expressed concern that they could become bargaining chips like Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who was held hostage by Hamas in Gaza for more than five years until Israel agreed in 2011 to release more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in

return for his freedom. That prisoner exchange remains controversial in Israel a decade after it took place.

What led Kurdish authorities to block the group's passage, why Turkey agreed to serve as a waystation for them and how Israel reacted to the potential for a new dispute with Iran is unknown. Also unclear is why Romania, which is where the group is said to have landed after leaving Turkey, agreed to accept them.

The activists who track Lev Tahor tip off the media on certain matters but are reticent to release too much information for fear of compromising their own sources or inadvertently endangering the rank-and-file Lev Tahor members whom they hope to help.

And as civilian volunteers, the activists themselves don't always fully understand the diplomatic maneuvers that have taken place. Split between Israel and the United States, the community of advocates focused on Lev Tahor pays for private investigators to hound the sect, and also lobbies law enforcement and diplomatic officials around the world to act on suspicions of child abuse.

Their primary foe, and the leader of Lev Tahor, is a man named Nachman Helbrans. He rose to the head of the sect following the 2017 death of his father, Shlomo Helbrans, who founded Lev Tahor.

Nachman Helbrans didn't participate in his group's exodus from their compound in Guatemala and he didn't make it to Iraqi Kurdistan. That's because he is being tried over allegations of child kidnapping in a federal court in White Plains, New York, just north of New York City.

Helbrans and eight alleged accomplices are on trial over the 2018 abduction of Yante Teller and Chaim Teller, who were 14 and 12 when they were taken from their mother in Woodridge, New York, a Catskill Mountains hamlet, and transported to Mexico.

Three weeks after the abduction, American law enforcement and local police discovered the children outside Mexico City. At the same time,

authorities also arrested three men: Helbrans, Mayer Rosner and Jacob Rosner.

According to court documents, Jacob Rosner is considered the husband of Yante within Lev Tahor, and the kidnapping was an attempt to force Yante and Chaim back into the fold of the sect after their mother had smuggled them out. Several others have been arrested in connection with the case including, most recently, brothers Yaakov, Shmiel and Yoel Weingarten, who were picked up in Guatemala by local authorities earlier this year.

On Wednesday, prosecutors finished presenting witness testimony and other evidence, triggering the next phase in the Lev Tahor trial, in which the defense will make its case.

The activists who monitor Lev Tahor have enlisted an informal spokesperson in Shana Aaronson, the executive director of Magen for Jewish Communities, an Israeli nonprofit dedicated to combating sexual abuse.

Even though several Lev Tahor leaders are on trial and the sect's members are dispersed, Aaronson said the fight is not over and it is not yet time to wind down efforts to help alleged victims.

“These children are suffering right now,” she said. “They don’t really fully understand what’s happening. They are being dragged from one country to the next. They are half-starved to begin with, incredibly sleep-deprived, and completely dependent on the leaders of the cult, who control their passports and their flights.”

Lev Tahor leaders have said that the sect is being persecuted for its religious beliefs, a claim that, according to Aaronson, is key to maintaining the sect's internal cohesion. Aaronson acknowledged that efforts to impede the sect, including calling to arrest its leaders or helping individual escapees, can play into the persecution narrative.

“They’re all convinced that they’re being persecuted,” Aaronson said. “There’s obviously a tremendous desire on the part of every advocate — and hopefully more law enforcement — to prosecute, not to

persecute but to prosecute, the abusers who have preyed on so many people in this community for so many years sexually, physically, financially, spiritually and psychologically.”

Aaronson hopes media coverage will help break through and convince members of the sect not to fear outsiders.

“We all really want them to be safe,” she said. “It’s important for me to say that because they do read these things. At least some of them do.”