

PURE AS THE DRIVEN SNOW, OR HEARTS OF DARKNESS?

By **Shay Fogelman** Haaretz 18 mars 2012

Haaretz spent five days with the controversial 'Lev Tahor' Haredi community in Canada to uncover the truth about the sect and its charismatic head, Rabbi Shlomo Helbrans. Part one of a two-part series.

Rabbi Shlomo Helbrans is trying to get me to repent and become religious. To this end, for the past four months he has been spending hours with me on the phone from Canada. He believes I have a good Jewish soul that somehow got lost, and insists he can, and must, show it the way back. I disagree with him about the soul, the Jewish thing and the path, but do find many other interesting subjects to discuss with him.

Rabbi Helbrans is a bit disappointed that I haven't become religious yet, but he's not giving up. He keeps trying at every opportunity. He maintains that discussion of God should not be relegated to the realm of fate, but rather that it is an absolute and provable truth. Therefore, before he would consent to be interviewed, he insisted that I devote 10 hours to listening to him present his proofs. Helbrans declared that if I came to him with an honest desire to explore the truth, I would no longer be able to deny God and his Torah, as given to the Jewish people at Sinai.

Despite my skepticism, I acceded to his demand. Because of this same skepticism, I also agreed to pledge to him that if I was in fact convinced, I would change my life and become religious. Helbrans was satisfied. He was so keen and confident of his success that, before I boarded the plane for Canada, he suggested that I cancel – or at least postpone – my return flight. I didn't change my plans, but I do admit that, at least once, I did try to picture a Shabbat without a cigarette.

Shlomo Helbrans heads a small and controversial Hasidic community called Lev Tahor ("Pure Heart"). It is a zealous and insular community, situated at the outer fringes of the Haredi world. Helbrans and his disciples would surely be pleased with this description. Stringency – or true piety, as they would have it – stands at the heart of their community life. They don't see any negative connotation in the word "extremism," either. On the contrary. In many senses, theirs is an ideology that remains unshakable, even in the face of waves of criticism and derision.

Lev Tahor came into being in the mid-1980s in Jerusalem. In the early 1990s it followed Rabbi Helbrans to the ultra-Orthodox enclave of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, and from there to the town of Monsey, upstate in Rockland County. About a decade ago, the community settled permanently in the Canadian town of Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts, Quebec. Throughout this time, the name of the community – and especially that of its leader – was associated with various scandals, including some that reached the courts or were the subject of police investigations in the United States and Israel.

The community currently numbers about 50 families, but it has hundreds more supporters and admirers, living mostly in Haredi areas of Jerusalem, Beit Shemesh and the United States. Some of them adopt certain aspects of the community's extremist outlook, others emulate the women's unique manner of

dress, or some of the community's customs. At least one or two new families join the community each year.

Then there are those who oppose Rabbi Helbrans and his community. Their number and strength is much bigger. They view the community as a dangerous cult, and its leader as a guru who employs brainwashing techniques on his followers. They refer to the community as Lev Tameh ("Impure Heart") or as the Sabbatean Cult, and call Helbrans a false messiah and the "Sabbatai Zevi of our times." (Zevi was a 17th-century rabbi who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah.) Wall posters and pamphlets distributed mainly on the Haredi street assert that members of the community mortgage their property, independence and their very souls to Lev Tahor. "Everyone, without exception, is like a slave before him [Helbrans], and commanded to lie and deceive as necessary in order to satisfy the appetite and desire of the 'Rebbe,'" are just some of these publications' claims.

Opponents of Lev Tahor say that Helbrans, or his emissaries, beat wayward Hasidim and their wives. They say that teenage girls in the community are married off at a young age, in violation of the law. They also accuse the rabbi and his followers of polygamy, sexual exploitation and abuse of minors.

But not only in the Haredi world is the Lev Tahor community considered controversial. In the past, the authorities in Israel, the U.S. and Canada tried to determine whether this was a legitimate Hasidic community or a cult that should be outlawed. It was in this context that the community's name returned to the public consciousness last Rosh Hashanah. Media reports several days before the holiday said that two sisters from Beit Shemesh, ages 13 and a half and 15, had been sent to the Lev Tahor community in Canada by their newly religious parents. After an intervention by their grandmother, the girls were detained at Montreal Airport and returned to Israel three days later.

The negotiations that preceded my visit to Lev Tahor lasted three months and included dozens of phone calls and meetings with people with close ties to the community. Helbrans and his people were extremely wary. They say that all of the media coverage about them has been unfair. They state that reporters for both secular and religious newspapers just quoted rumors and derogatory statements about them, without any attempt to discover the truth. Publicly, the members of the community do not generally respond to the accusations made against them. They try to avoid interviews and being photographed, certainly when it comes to the Israeli press. They have also never filed a lawsuit alleging slander. They do not recognize the Zionist court system in principle, and so cannot use it.

It's hard to figure out why Helbrans agreed to be interviewed for the first time, and why he allowed a reporter to visit his community. Perhaps his great eagerness to get me to see the light and change my ways played a key role in the matter.

During my five-day visit to Lev Tahor, I was given complete freedom to speak with any member of the community – men, women and also children. All of the community institutions were opened to me and I was permitted to question Helbrans on any topic, and to confront him with any suspicion or claim. All the community members also agreed to be photographed, even though this never usually happens, not even at wedding or other celebrations.

The full openness and the answers I received in Sainte-Agathe left me with a positive impression about the community and its way of life. But at the same time, the nagging doubts never ceased for a moment. Only later, after I returned to Israel, did I learn to what extent some of them were true.

Strictest of all

Morning mist covers Sainte-Agathe. Visibility is zero. It's late January and the snow that fell all night has turned the streets white. The thermometer in the car reads minus 20 degrees Celsius. The weatherman is saying that with the wind chill factor, it feels like minus 30. The lake at the base of the town is frozen over. There are no ducks and no boats. The hundreds of tourists who descended upon the town for Christmas have all left. Here and there, decorated Christmas trees whose time has passed have been stuck in the snow on the side of the road.

Against this white backdrop, it's impossible not to notice the Lev Tahor women as they walk the streets of the town clad all in black. The robes that cover them conceal the contours of their bodies as well as their footsteps. And in the fog, they appear to be floating over the snow.

Sainte-Agathe is about a two-hour drive north of Montreal. The population of 10,000 is comprised mainly of French-speaking Catholics, but there is also an English-speaking population and a single synagogue that belongs to Chabad. The town is surrounded by mountains, forests and lakes, and is considered an attractive tourist destination, especially in summer. In the winter, the area is home to several of Canada's preeminent ski resorts.

The homes of the Lev Tahor members are concentrated on four small streets on the eastern outskirts of the town. They are typical suburban North American homes, either one or two stories, with tile roofs. Out front are wood fences and green lawns, but in the winter all is covered by five feet of snow. There are also a few homes scattered through the area that belong to local Christians, as well as some small wooden vacation cottages. In the center of the neighborhood, a large, three-story building is currently being built. When completed, some of the community's institutions and its synagogue will move in.

All the females of the community, starting from age three, are covered from head to foot in a type of long black robe. A black scarf covers their heads. Only their faces, from forehead to chin, are exposed. In Israel, this burka-esque attire has earned them the moniker "Taliban women." The Sainte-Agathe residents sometimes refer to them as the "Amish women." Their entire culture and imagery – the males of the community also wear a specific uniform – is similar to that of the Satmar Hasidim, only with longer tzitzit (tassels). The children wear identical hats and everyone, aside from Helbrans, wears the same eyeglass frames. In addition, from age three all the males have the hair on their head shaved once a week. Their beards and sideburns will never be touched.

Melting pot

The Lev Tahor community follows other customs that seem quite peculiar to an outside observer. Many are also practiced in other branches of Hasidism, but nowhere as scrupulously as here. The prayers in the synagogue, for instance, often last up to twice as long as the norm; the words are pronounced slowly and with great emphasis, often with loud shouting. "Hoarseness is a sign of piety," the Hasidim joke. The community's diet is quite limited. While based on the

familiar laws of kashrut, their interpretation of these laws is exceedingly stringent. For example, they will not eat chickens or their eggs.

They say that genetic engineering has made chickens tref (nonkosher), and so they will only eat the eggs and meat of geese. For halakhic [Jewish religious law] reasons, they insist that all fruits and vegetables, including tomatoes, must be peeled. They will not eat rice, green onions or leafy vegetables for fear of tiny bugs. They eat a lettuce leaf once a year – from the Seder plate – but only after thorough cleansing that lasts at least half an hour.

They make their own wine. They will only drink cow's milk from a dairy that will allow them to milk the cows themselves. They bake their own bread. The only kashrut approval they will accept is that which comes from Helbrans personally. They do not buy any prepared or preserved foods and use natural, unprocessed ingredients as much as possible. The children do not eat candies bought from a store, but only chocolate that is made at home. For other sweets, they eat mostly fruit and all types of roasted nuts and seeds.

Throughout my visit to the community, the people insisted that I eat together with them. They invited me to dine in their homes, wanting to fulfill the mitzvah of hospitality, but also for fear that I might foil Helbrans' master plan and eat tref at one of the goyische restaurants nearby. For that reason, every night as I prepared to head back to the hotel, they also furnished me with a bag filled with seeds, nuts and baked goods prepared by the Lev Tahor women.

The customs and prohibitions followed by the Lev Tahor community have an explanation and an internal logic. The people there say their way of life is completely within the bounds of the halakha and Jewish tradition. That there is nothing new or different about what they are doing. Their central worldview derives from the attempt to return to the principles of Hasidism, as they see them. They place a great emphasis on "observation" and on processes that resemble meditation, and combine traditions from other types of Hasidism. Other customs that have been adopted by the community come from Mizrahi Jewish tradition.

Helbrans takes great pride in the integration and equality between Mizrahim and Ashkenazim within the community. The Hasidim also noted with satisfaction that, unlike in many other communities in the religious and ultra-Orthodox world, in Lev Tahor there is no ethnic discrimination. Ethnic identity does exist, but here its significance is confined to the folklore aspect. For the sake of unity, prayers are recited in the Hasidic fashion, but at gatherings and on holidays, various liturgical tunes that people bring from home are included.

When making a shidukh, a marriage match, the parents' ethnic background is of no importance, so today many of the families in the community are mixed. Children are given names that are popular in the Hasidic world, but also names that are popular in Mizrahi tradition. One of Helbrans' grandchildren is named Masoud, after Rabbi Masoud Abuhatzaira (also known as Baba Sali). Another granddaughter, Sulika, is named for "the Moroccan saint," who according to Jewish legend was executed for refusing to convert to Islam.

The Hasidim I spoke with in Sainte-Agathe see themselves as the only ones following the true path, as the guardians of the walls, as the defenders of the last flame left in the Jewish world. They have contempt for other branches of Hasidism, which they view as overly compromising, describing them as

despicable and degenerate. They consider other streams in the ultra-Orthodox world completely unworthy, especially those that enjoy the patronage of the State of Israel. And in their eyes, religious Zionism does not even count as a Jewish movement.

The basic requirement demanded of Lev Tahor Hasidim is simple: to worship and serve God at every given moment, with all their heart and soul. Their libraries contain only Jewish books. There are no televisions, radios or computers in their homes. Concepts such as free time, broadening one's horizons or self-fulfillment, in their standard Western senses, do not exist here. The walls of their homes are also bare of any decoration; no pictures, amulets, photographs of rabbis. For the most part, the sole adornments are candlesticks, menorahs or silver religious utensils, all kept behind a glass case. In some homes, embroidery and other crafts done by the women are also displayed.

You won't find the children of Lev Tahor out playing ball. They don't have one. Nor are other games meant to help children develop physical coordination played. "This is not the human being's purpose," they say. There are books in Yiddish, puzzles, Lego, toy cars, plastic kitchen utensils and stuffed animals (kosher animals only). A father of a 2-year-old says: "You wouldn't believe how fascinated he was one day by an onion."

Another family said their children loved to draw and sing, and do role-playing games. In this particular family there are 11 siblings. Sometimes, with the eldest daughter acting as director, one of the younger children takes their father's old shtreimel and dresses up as a bridegroom, while another wears an old dress of their mother's and plays the role of the bride. There are always enough siblings around to hold up the sheet they use as the wedding canopy. The boys like to go out and play in the snow: They don't build snowmen, but during school breaks they take little plastic sleds and slide down the street. This year they also built an igloo.

Goose eggs

Schooling begins at age three and is devoted entirely to sacred subjects. All the boys study in three heders, divided according to age. The girls are taught separately, and only at home. They assemble each morning in groups, according to age, and their lessons are given by women in the community. There is a different teacher for each subject: reading and writing, math, English, French, history and geography. The law of the province of Quebec allows for homeschooling, as long as the studies include a number of mandatory subjects, similar to those that are part of the core curriculum in Israel. In the name of the value of multiculturalism, so revered in Canada, Lev Tahor – like the Satmar community and other isolationist groups – is currently fighting for its right to follow a different method.

Employment is not perceived as something to strive for. A Hasid who can receive financial support from his parents will always prefer to study all day instead. Some of the Hasidim work outside the community, mostly as independent tradesmen or in temporary jobs working on computers or in customer service centers. The community also supports a number of teachers; three men who work in the community's independent publishing house; and two managers, who are responsible for the Lev Tahor institutions and handling whatever problems arise. Donations to the community are limited, and so a large portion of the

construction and maintenance work is done by the Hasids themselves. Unlike some other Hasidic groups, Lev Tahor is not backed by any financial titans or state authorities.

Everyone here lives very modestly and simply. Two or three times a week, each family receives a food delivery straight to the door. This way they do not have to make contact with strangers, and the prices for buying in bulk are better. Sometimes there are no goose eggs. Sometimes there are no vegetables. When I visited, there was no cow's milk, so they drank coconut milk. "What really matters is Torah," they say.

Every so often, the community tries to come up with business initiatives to bring in more income. In the past they tried to start a business making fruit compotes, and they also thought about building coops for a species of chicken that they consider kosher. But the necessary investment was too large and the weather conditions were not suitable. Their isolationism and aversion to the modern world also makes it hard for them to form business ties, and most do not speak French, the dominant language in the province. For some families, the child allowances given by the Canadian government are the main source of income.

Another key element of the community's economic support system is the value placed on mutual assistance. This is not a collective in the usual sense. Each family has a separate bank account, private assets and property. But each family unit is also bound to the communal framework, and to the other units that make up the whole. About a year ago, a religious penitent couple and their three small children came from Israel to join the community. The father, who requested anonymity, says that in their first half-year in Saint-Agathe, they had no living expenses: "Every day – morning, noon and night – somebody would come, knock on the door and bring a hot meal for the whole family. Someone in the community also took care of paying the bills and the property tax in the first months."

Real depression

After hours on the phone with Helbrans, I wondered what to bring him from Israel when I came to interview him. He, of course, yearned to see my lost soul repent; I just wanted to bring him some small, symbolic gift. I searched for something that would touch him, that would stir some memory, even emotion perhaps. I ended up buying him a large packet of Turkish coffee with hel (cardamom), with Badatz kashrut approval. I figured it was something he hadn't smelled in years. Bingo. Helbrans was ecstatic when he saw the gift. He asked one of his aides to make us some coffee. The latter returned a few minutes later with large glass mugs, as if we were drinking half-liters of beer.

And I brought him something else, too: the new book by poet Eli Eliahu. To my mind, Eliahu's poetry is truly marvelous. Beyond its keen emotional punch, it distills a secular, Hebrew and liberal ethos that is neither apologetic nor self-effacing before its roots – Jewish, ethnic or otherwise. I hoped it would give Helbrans a little glimpse of my world. When we met the next morning, he told me he had read the book. He complimented Eliahu on his writing ability and his rich language. He quoted whole verses and said that he had cried at times while reading it. I asked which poem moved him the most. He looked at me in astonishment: "I didn't cry from excitement! I cried from sorrow. I cried from pain. I cried over your life, over the life of Eli Eliahu. I cried when I understood

in what kind of hard and terrible world you live. A world without truth, without hope and without faith. These poems caused me great sorrow, for you and for him. Real depression.”

I was stunned. “Give me back the book,” I said to him. “You didn’t understand me and you didn’t understand Eli. Apparently it wasn’t the right gift. I’ll send you something else in the mail, when I get back to Israel.” He held out the book indifferently and said: “No problem. But send that Eli Eliahu here, too. Maybe I’ll be able to get him to repent.”

Helbrans’ obsessive concern with getting others to repent and become pious derives in large part from his own biography. Erez Shlomo Elbarnes was born in Jerusalem in 1962, the only child of secular parents, graduates of the Mahanot Haolim Zionist youth movement, who enlisted in the Nahal and married during their time serving at Kibbutz Hulta. They wanted to name him after a tree. They thought about Alon but settled on Erez. They added the name Shlomo to his birth certificate in memory of his grandfather.

Erez’s childhood friends from Jerusalem’s Kiryat Yovel neighborhood described him as “a curious kid with an active imagination.” They say that he loved animals, and that he kept chickens and a cat named Cleopatra in his parents’ yard. “He was a kid who loved nature,” they say. He would spend hours hiking the rocky hills around the neighborhood searching for frogs and turtles. He was a member of the local Scouts group. Filmmaker and screenwriter Yoad Ben Yosef, who knew him from when he was a toddler, still remembers how they would play Cowboys and Indians in the park next to the neighborhood community center during summer vacations.

At school he was a good student. Not the best in his class, but good enough to be accepted into a class for gifted students. He was also popular among his classmates. Not the king of the class, but not someone who could be ignored, either. All of his childhood friends who were interviewed for this article said he had a keen sense of right and wrong, and would be outraged by what he saw as injustice. Some recall him getting hit when standing up for the weak and ostracized. His mother, Yocheved, says she was called to school a number of times over such incidents.

The attraction to a more religious way of life began before his bar mitzvah. “I was just curious to know why I’m alive and why the world exists,” Helbrans recalls. “I wanted to understand what it all meant.” He says he asked these questions to his parents and teachers, and every adult he knew. He also searched for answers in the books that were available to him as a boy. His mother remembers that the school janitor had to be called at least twice after Erez got locked in the library at the end of the school day.

Helbrans says he did not find any satisfactory explanations anywhere until he met Yosef Yagen, who was an energetic Haredi youth and a leader of the religious penitent movement that was beginning to grow in Israel at the time. Today Yagen is a Haredi rabbi living in America. The two young men met at the time through relatives, and they hit it off right away. Yagen showed the curious Erez the “code method” in the Bible, in which by means of skipping letters at regular intervals, one uncovers meaningful words. “That may have been the first thing that really excited me,” Helbrans says, adding with a laugh that he still

recalls “what kind of beating Yagen later got from my father, who realized that he was the one who got me to become religious.”

His parents were vehemently opposed to their son’s return to religion. “It went against our whole outlook,” says his mother. His parents remained nonreligious and still live in Jerusalem. Over the years they have visited their son a few times and remain in close touch by phone with his six children and 18 grandchildren. But at the time, when they learned of his new interest in religion, they barred him from going to the synagogue and tried to keep him from having any connection with elements they thought could influence him in that way. Erez kept on studying in secret. And it seems like that struggle over the return to religion is still felt in the community today.

The big change occurred after Erez met, at Denmark High School, history teacher Dr. Abraham Fuchs, who was observant and wore a kippa. Erez tried to get explanations and answers from him. Fuchs noted the boy’s interest in religion, and in Hasidism especially, and suggested that he join him one evening for a tisch at the Belz yeshiva. His parents were alarmed when they heard about the idea, but the history teacher promised them that he would personally see to it that the boy did not suddenly become religious. His mother says she was sure the whole class was going to take part in the visit: “If I’d known that he was the only one going, I wouldn’t have let it happen.”

The holy Shabbat atmosphere in the Haredi neighborhoods captivated him and a few weeks later, Erez was wearing a kippa and tzitzit. He started keeping kosher and insisted on transferring out of his coed school. His parents refused. When the conflicts escalated, he ran away from home and found shelter in several different Haredi yeshivas. Twice the police searched for him. The welfare authorities also got involved. In the end, it was agreed that a compromise would be found with the help of Rabbi Dov Bigon, a former kibbutznik who became religious. He recommended sending the boy to the Mercaz Harav Yeshiva. And that’s what happened.

“A year later he called me at work and said he didn’t want to be with hypocritical religious types,” says his mother Yocheved now, describing how the process of her son becoming ultra-Orthodox began. Erez was 15 now and his parents could no longer impose their authority. He embarked on a journey into the heart of the Haredi world, via yeshivas in Bnei Brak, Jerusalem and Safed. He taught at a Chabad school, then aligned himself with Braslav Hasidism; later on he became attached to the Toldot Aharon and Satmar sects.

His classmates from yeshiva remember him as “a real Torah scholar with a very sharp mind.” They say he was brimming with curiosity and that he managed to acquire a great deal of Torah knowledge in a relatively short time. In those days, he also began to stand out for his skills of rhetoric and his talents as a teacher, and at interesting others in becoming religious. At 17, he was married in an arranged match with Malka Azulai, a girl from Kiryat Ata who had also recently become religious.

Following Satmar practice, Erez rejected his Zionist name and declared that henceforth he wished to be known as Shlomo. He also altered the spelling of his surname from Elbarnes to Helbrans. He says this was how the name was spelled in his grandmother’s old Yugoslav passport. He also notes proudly that his mother’s family also came from Serbia, and that both parents grew up in Ladino-

speaking Sephardi families. The Yad Vashem archives contain the names of a number of his parents' relatives, who perished at Treblinka, Poland.

Shlomo and Malka Helbrans lived in Safed for six years. There he ran the Braslav Yeshivat Hametivta and was mentored by certain prominent Hasidic rabbis, including Rabbi Eliezer Shlomo Schik, known as "the tzaddik from Yavniel," who heads one of the most extremist and isolationist Hasidic communities. In the mid-'80s, the couple and their three children moved to Jerusalem. In the Beit Yisrael neighborhood, Helbrans began to gather around him a small group of Hasidim, mainly religious penitents. Several of his first students now live in the community in Canada.

Writer Haim Be'er was a reporter on Haredi affairs in the late 1980s. He visited the young community in Jerusalem three times and recalls that it numbered no more than 20 yeshiva students. Helbrans agreed to speak with him but not to be interviewed, and so Be'er did not write about their meeting.

Be'er remembers the young Helbrans as "a radical, an original man with a different way of thinking," but he also saw "dangerous extremism" in him. "Helbrans was searching for his path in the Haredi world," he says, adding that, "for the religious penitent, someone who has family tradition or roots to draw upon, there are no boundaries or limits by which this extremism can be stopped."

Be'er says that during his last meeting with Helbrans, something odd happened in the community. "It was shortly before the first Gulf War in 1991. Yeshiva students were coming and going, moving packages. There was a lot of activity. At some point, someone brought in a pile of 20 passports and placed it on the table. Helbrans wasn't willing to divulge what the plan was. Hasidim around him said there was nothing here for them anymore. The next time I went there, maybe a week later, the place was empty. There was no trace of them."

In Part II, to be published next week, Shay Fogelman writes about Lev Tahor's policy on underage marriages, how its members really make a financial living, and speaks to people who left the community.

Partie II de l'article : 'When you're on the path of truth, you don't care what others say'

In the second part of Haaretz's investigation into the Lev Tahor Hasidic cult in Canada, Shay Fogelman speaks to the group's leader, Rabbi Shlomo Helbrans, about his prison time in America and the community's attitude to underage marriage, to a young man who managed to leave the religious extremists and to a mother who defend their hard-line way of life.

By Shay Fogelman Tags: ultra-Orthodox Jewish World

Rabbi Shlomo Helbrans' arguments for the proof of God's existence go on much longer than planned. After two and a half days, he still hasn't finished laying out all his points. We spoke each day for many hours – about his worldview, his community, his life. We debated quite a bit, mostly about God. But the conversations and interviews were generally pleasant, and laced with a bit of humor at times. He has a good sense of humor, and is able to laugh at himself, too. Once in a while, he said he was offended and tried to employ emotional manipulation. At times he was dramatic, at other times quite childish. He is a

fascinating interlocutor. He has a great thirst for knowledge, and is attentive and curious.

Our talks took place in his office, whose walls are completely covered with bookshelves crammed with holy books. In the middle of the room is a large table covered with an embroidered tablecloth overlaid with a sheet of plastic. Helbrans sat at the head of the table on a wooden, leather-upholstered chair adorned with delicate carvings.

Most of the time, one of the new Hasidim from the community was also present; he recorded the conversations and wrote down the main points. Every so often an assistant came in and handed the rabbi the telephone or whispered something in his ear. One aide or another served us coffee and cookies for hours on end. In the evenings there was wine and a hearty meal.

Like all the other Hasidim in the community, the aides always walked backward while leaving the room. Out of respect, they will not turn their back to their rabbi. Entering or leaving the room, they kiss his hand. They consult with him on just about everything and always accede to his authority. They call him the Tzaddik or Admor, as is customary in the Hasidic world.

The community's detractors say the honor shown to Helbrans is excessive and call him a power-hungry megalomaniac. They say his adherents mostly show him blind faith that derives from fear. I tried to test these claims, and to stretch the limits. At times I would joke about him with his Hasidim. When one of them spoke admiringly about the rabbi's dancing at a wedding, I said to him: "That kind of surprises me. He looks pretty fat." When they spoke reverently of his intellectual abilities, I said I thought he was "a little rusty." I joked again and again that he was a nudnik. No one was fazed by my provocations. Sometimes they laughed with me, sometimes they stuck up for him, but not in any way that went beyond what one would expect to find in the personality cults of other Hasidic sects.

Helbrans' critics also describe him as an extraordinarily charismatic manipulator and charlatan. They ascribe to him an almost demonic ability to brainwash people. In talking with him for hours, my impression was that these claims are quite exaggerated. He is an impressive man, no doubt, but not overwhelmingly eloquent. Though clear for the most part, his arguments are sometimes overly convoluted and tend to get lost in examples and anecdotes. Sometimes he forgets what he meant to say, sometimes he repeats the same thing a few times in the same sentence. Sometimes he exaggerates a bit, sometimes he gets boastful. Sometimes he is mistaken, or veers away from the truth.

Helbrans' first book of halakha is entitled "Derekh Hatzala" ("Path of Salvation"). It is well summarized by the subtitle printed in gold letters on its blue binding: "An illumination of what is occurring right now in the Holy Land, and the approaching erasure of the state, and of the magnitude of the danger to each and every one who is found there and resides there, and the path of salvation for each one who is found there and resides there, and many more important matters."

The book was published by the community in Canada and thousands of copies have been distributed throughout the Haredi world. Some are sent by mail but mainly they are passed from hand to hand, under the table, in synagogues and

yeshivas. Most of the Hasidim who have joined the community in recent years came to it after reading the book.

The main inspiration for Helbrans' doctrine as presented in "Path of Salvation" is drawn from the book that is a keystone for all the most extreme Hasidic sects – "Vayoel Moshe" by the previous Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Joel Teitelbaum. As in that 1961 work, Helbrans' main arguments against the State of Israel are based on Biblical prophecies, on interpretations of halakha and, above all, on "the three vows." In these vows, which appear in the Babylonian Talmud, the Jewish people vow to God not to migrate en masse and by force to the Land of Israel, not to provoke the nations of the world and not to establish independent rule. In the Haredi world, there is much debate surrounding these three vows. Helbrans, like the Satmar Rebbe, has chosen an interpretation that is vehemently opposed to the existence of the State of Israel. In a review of the book six years ago in Maariv, Adam Baruch wrote: "If only Yossi Beilin or Avigdor Lieberman could write such a modern, clearly and energetically argued intellectual political book." Lev Tahor Hasidim strive to avoid any contact with the State of Israel and its authorities. A few years ago, some of them appealed to the Canadian authorities to recognize them as refugees without a homeland. They observe the Fifth of Iyar (the Hebrew date of Israel's independence) as a day of disaster and mourning, often burning Israeli flags. But unlike Neturei Karta and other anti-Zionist Haredi sects, Helbrans insists he would not wave the Palestinian flag. "I'm prepared to identify with the suffering of the Palestinian people in the same way I identify with the suffering of any human creature on earth," he says. "But I have no opinion as to the justice of their cause or the way in which they are waging their struggle.

"A Jew who believes in the Torah cannot take a side in this struggle," he says. "The Zionist state must be annulled and quickly, from the Torah's point of view. Because of that same outlook, other peoples must not be enslaved. The Jewish people must wait in exile for redemption and the coming of the Messiah. I pray every day for this to happen, but I would be happy if it is done without any bloodshed."

The Shin Bet enters the picture

Helbrans' anti-Zionist stance was formed when he was still living in Israel. After embracing the Satmar Rebbe's doctrine, he began taking part in Haredi demonstrations and pasting up street posters denouncing the state. And when the ideas turned to actions, Helbrans and his followers started appearing on the security service's radar. A man who was part of the Shin Bet's Jewish Division at the time says, "The alarms were actually set off by information that came from the other side. One day, people in the field, who were monitoring the activity of radical Islamic organizations, passed on information about a Jerusalem group of religious penitents who'd sought contact with sheikhs and Muslim clergy. In the past we'd seen ties between members of the Haredi movement and different leaders in the Fatah movement or other secular Palestinian organizations. The background to it was always opposition to the state. But before this, we had never seen a single case in which extremist Haredim made contact with Muslim extremists." The official says that, for a long time, the Shin Bet was trying to get to the root of this connection and its motives.

Helbrans says that the connection was made in the summer of 1988, with what was then the Islamic Movement in Israel. “We had a problem with the Transportation Ministry,” he recounts. “They wanted to pave a road over ancient Jewish graves in Wadi Ara. From past experience we knew that it would be hard to stop them with protests and to prevent the desecration of God’s name. So we contacted Raad Salah, who had just been elected as mayor of Umm al-Fahm [Salah was first elected in 1989]. We held an urgent meeting with him and presented our case. There was much mutual admiration and respect between us as men of religion. He understood the problem and immediately offered to help. The next day, hundreds of young people from Umm al-Fahm came to the road. They showed us just how a demonstration is done. A few days later, the Transportation Ministry backed off the plan and the graves were saved.”

On the eve of the first Gulf War in 1991, Helbrans declared there was a real and immediate danger to the lives of Jews who remained in Israel. Together with two families and about 10 of his students, he flew to New York. There the small community was warmly welcomed by the Satmar sect, particularly the isolationist group known as Bnei Yoel. The hasty departure of the Lev Tahor Hasidim was the subject of much criticism in the Israeli press at the time. They were said to be “running away.” The parents of several of Helbrans’ followers accused him of brainwashing and kidnapping their children, and filed complaints with the police in Jerusalem. But because these people were not minors, the cases were closed.

The families’ pain was great. For some, the trauma is still ever-present. “They left many things that are dear to us. The land, first of all, but also the Jewish people. To say that they are right and everyone else is wrong is not the way of Judaism or the Torah. This separation is hard for me, but they are my brothers and I love them,” says Rabbi Gavriel Goldman, whose two brothers, Uriel and Michael, were part of the group who left Israel with Helbrans in the early 1990s.

The three brothers grew up in Jerusalem and were taught to love the Torah, the Jewish people and the Land of Israel. They took part in youth movements and served in the army. They belonged to the religious-Zionist elite. Gavriel, the eldest, is now the rabbi of Kfar Adumim, and struggles to explain just what attracted his brothers to the Lev Tahor ideology and way of life. “It’s the way they’ve chosen and they seem happy. But it’s hard for me to accept,” he says. “I wish they would sit down and have this discussion with me here. I would invite them to live with me. I would try to show them my world, which is much more complex – a world that contains both the Torah and Israel. Sometimes there are contradictions and you have to find a balance between different needs. This does not mean it’s a way of compromise. It’s a quest for the middle way, which is the way of Judaism. This is the reality and it is never painted in just black and white.”

Gavriel has visited his brothers in Canada but he says it was hard to communicate with his young nieces and nephews, who speak only Yiddish. He calls them on holidays and birthdays and tries to maintain a good, loving relationship. Despite the resentments of the past, their parents also try to visit their children and grandchildren in Canada each year.

’Angels in black’

A number of other relatives of Lev Tahor Hasidim were interviewed for this article. Some have trouble accepting or understanding their children’s decision,

but they respect it and remain in touch by phone. A.'s daughter became very religious when she was 14. A year ago, when she was 22, she joined Lev Tahor in Canada, with her husband and their two children. Since then she has assumed a different name. "I'm still not used to it," says A., who lives in central Israel. In her daily phone calls to her daughter, she continues to call her by her original name. "It's not easy for me to accept this change. It's not easy to deal with the physical and mental distance, but I've been there twice and she seems happy. She has a supportive community that provides a lot of mutual aid. When I left I told all the women I met there, 'You are angels in black.'"

A. was alarmed when she read stories about the community on Haredi websites, but her visits and talks with her daughter reassure her. "My impression is that the community is being unjustly denigrated," she says. "It's not a regular place and it's not for everyone. But I think people who are searching for themselves can find answers in this community. As a mother, I can honestly say I've never heard my daughter's voice sound as calm and peaceful as it does now. She grew up in a world of plenty. She never wanted for anything. But there was always this restlessness in her. She was always searching for something else. I'm sorry she had to find the answers in such a faraway place."

Aside from the distance, A. says it's also hard for her to accept the way her daughter dresses and the anti-Zionist attitudes that are prevalent in the community. However, she immediately adds, "I'm always telling myself I have to accept the choice that makes my daughter happy. Soon I'm going to start learning Yiddish, so I can talk with my grandchildren on my next visit."

Over the years, the media have also reported stories about families who could not accept their children's decision to join Lev Tahor. Just a few weeks ago, the supplement of the Makor Rishon newspaper carried an article about the Lev Tahor community. It told the story of Malka Masoudi, whose two sons, Aryeh and Yosef, joined the community more than 20 years ago. It reported that she had turned to the Lev Le'achim organization for help, saying, "Erez Elbarnes took my two sons and kidnapped them away from Israel to America without my knowledge or consent." The article also said she did not contact the police "because the boys were no longer minors." Aryeh and Yosef never resumed contact with their mother and they still live with Helbrans.

Another story in the article has been publicized several times before, mainly in the Haredi media. It is about a young man who spent several months in the community, about 20 years ago. His mother says that "Helbrans took him for a walk in the woods. The whole night he walked with him among the shadows and said: 'I know what you did.' He scared him so much that my son completely lost his self-confidence. Helbrans explained to him that only he could save him from evil."

The article goes on to describe allegations of violent actions by Lev Tahor Hasidim against the youth's parents, the police complaints and more. In conclusion, it says: "The method Helbrans has been using for the past 20 years is to influence the child to pressure his parents to allow him to learn in the yeshiva. And when this pressure doesn't work, Helbrans pulls out the heavy artillery" – what the article describes as false depositions that children file with the police against their parents. After a protracted legal battle, the youth was returned to his parents' home, with his mother describing him as "a broken vessel."

Helbrans denies the accusations. “These lies started 20 years ago and they continue to evolve in different forms. There is no truth to them. There never was any truth to them,” he says, although he does acknowledge that, over the years, a few families have been torn apart. Excommunications have been declared. Two couples divorced when one spouse wanted to join the community against the other’s wishes. One Hasid told me he had burned all of his childhood pictures. Another Hasid left his parents’ home with nothing but the clothes on his back, and has not returned once in the 20 years since.

There have also been cases of violence. Parents and other family members have sometimes come to the community and tried to forcibly take their children back. Complaints have been filed with the police from both sides, each accusing the other of provocation. Helbrans says he has been hospitalized at least twice after taking a beating. There have also been appeals made to the rabbinical courts, primarily in the United States, in an attempt to excommunicate the community. To this day, most of the controversy surrounding the community has been aroused in the wake of struggles like these.

But Helbrans does not draw all his followers from secular or religious Zionist families. Currently, about a third of the community’s members are Haredim from other Hasidic sects in the United States. Another third are people with Israeli roots who’ve recently become more religious. And the last third is comprised of Hasidim from the first generation that grew up within the community.

The bitter struggles triggered by Haredim from other sects joining Lev Tahor have been even more fierce than those that have occurred in secular families whose children joined the group. In fact, most of Helbrans’ real conflicts with the Haredi world began after Hasidim – including some with very distinguished family pedigrees – left their Rebbes to join the court of Helbrans, who is derisively referred to as “the kibbutznik who found religion,” and who comes from a Sephardi background to boot.

In this particular arena, the language used in the struggle is especially crude and harsh. “Shlomo Helbrans tormented and shredded the hearts of men and women, and stole good and decent children from their parents’ homes, and turned them into beggars, and lunatics, who shame their fathers and mothers, and who tell their fathers and mothers: ‘You have not seen him [Helbrans],’ and do not heed them,” says one flyer that was distributed around Monsey and in New York City. At the bottom is a hotline number one can call with complaints about Helbrans’ behavior.

A similar flyer in the Satmar community concludes with the words: “He is the biggest scoundrel in Jewish history. Let us put an end to the darkness. This same man who was born in impurity in the kibbutz of the Zionists shall preach no more. Please help before it’s too late!”

Helbrans now has at least four followers in his court who come from preeminent Hasidic families and who gave up their standing and high positions in other important Hasidic sects, including the Kasho, Boyan and Satmar sects. This has caused an unprecedented sensation in the Haredi world.

Allegations of corporal punishment

Helbrans is an excellent interviewee. Nearly every line he utters could cause a sensation. The State of Israel: “The worst sin of all.” Torah Sages: “Who decided that they’re the greatest sages? It’s all deals and politics.” Chabad: “The notion

that the Rebbe is the Messiah is nothing more than idol worship in the guise of Judaism.” Haredi political parties: “A tragedy.”

He believes there is one eternal and absolute truth. And that anyone not following it acts in error. Of course, he purports to know just what this path is. His disciples harbor that same powerful sense of internal truth – otherwise they’d have nothing to look for here. Their criticism of the entire world, Haredi and otherwise, is coherent for the most part, and based on an elaborate and fully formed worldview.

However, Helbrans says he also ready to acknowledge that he could be wrong. “The search for truth is the purpose. And at its base there exists the assumption that one could also be wrong. Otherwise, there would be no search,” he says. “If you convince me I am wrong about something, and that there is another truth, I won’t be able to avoid embracing it. I strive to maintain an open line of communication with the Hasidim, to hear them, to accept criticism and to amend things if there are mistakes.”

The customs and lifestyle of the Lev Tahor community have been consolidated over the past 25 years. On occasion there were attempts to write down a code of regulations, as is done in other Hasidic sects, but the frequent changes and numerous additions have been preserved instead as a kind of Oral Code. Like the leaders of other religious groups, Helbrans also aspires to return to the sources, to the foundations of early Hasidism. He believes all the community’s customs, no matter how controversial, have a halakhic [Jewish religious law] anchor and historic precedent in the Jewish world.

One of the most serious allegations leveled at Lev Tahor in the past had to do with the use of corporal punishment. Publications of the Va’ad Shomrei Mishmarot Hakodesh in New York said that in his yeshiva, “Helbrans gave beatings to Hasidim who are his servants, causing them to pass out and to shed blood and more.” In a 2004 article in the Haredi newspaper Besha’a Tova, Natan Nussbaum reported: “Helbrans himself goes to the extreme, adopting this way in all areas of life. Especially in the area of repentance for sins. For example, on every day of the year, he adopts the custom that was practiced by Shlomei Emunei Yisrael on Yom Kippur Eve, to receive lashings (malkot), as a means of repentance. The community also practices this throughout the year, and their daily prayers are also similar to that of the High Holy Days and more. From time to time, Hasidim fall to the ground to absorb ‘malkot’ that are meted out by whip, in order to repent for their sins.”

Speaking by phone from America, the reporter retracts many of the things that were said in the article. His real name is not Natan Nussbaum, and he is a Breslov Hasid living in New York. “I didn’t really check into those things,” he admits today. “There was a lot of talk that this is what they do. I personally never heard any first-person testimony about it.”

Another article that was recently printed in Makor Rishon described similar things. Yocheved Ma’uda detailed how for weeks she would hide at night in the women’s section of the synagogue, in order to see what the Hasidim of Lev Tahor were up to during the time her son Sinai was there: “Helbrans’ method was to establish these small groups in which the students would confess their sins and flog one another.”

In addition, the Makor Rishon reporter also quoted several former Lev Tahor Hasidim who wished to remain anonymous: “The former students tell of indescribable suffering inflicted upon them by the Rosh Yeshiva – having to roll in the snow, hundreds of lashings that cut the flesh of their backs, and other types of severe harm.” Aside from these statements, in recent years there has been no direct and verified testimony that these things are indeed happening. Not from any of the dozens of people who were interviewed for this article. Nor have any complaints to this effect been filed with the police.

Helbrans also denies that any such policy was ever employed in the community, but he does say that he and some of his Hasidim have had experience with some of these things. “If you take Judaism seriously, you cannot ignore the whole world of the ‘righting of wrongs’ that is found in the kabbala and the books of Musar (spiritual discipline). It’s an ancient halakhic tradition and all of the kabbalists, without exception, discuss it. In all of the books of responsa, the greatest halakhic arbitrators are asked what the remedy is for this or that deed.

“Since the days of the Second Temple, the practice has been for things to be done symbolically and with desire and consent. We never deviated in these matters from the written halakha. There were a few incidents, that were done by a few people on their own. It was never a policy in the community and I can’t understand why such accusations are hurled at us. I can count on one hand the number of times in which Hasidim rolled in the snow as part of a tikun, for having transgressed a negative commandment. This is something that is very common today in many other places in the Hasidic world. Maybe it bothers them that we did it better than they did,” he says jokingly.

Helbrans also says that, as in other Hasidic communities, here, too, on Yom Kippur Eve they also receive 39 symbolic lashings, but he insists that beyond this there are no other tikunim that involve corporal punishment. “Today these things no longer have a place in the way Lev Tahor works. Because of the libelous accusations, they are officially prohibited. From my personal life experience and the community’s experience, I haven’t been able to find a way to bridge between these ancient traditions and our way of work, which is based on looking inward. With fasting and self-mortification, you can’t keep your head clear to look inward.”

Child marriages

Lev Tahor has also been accused of having minors enter into marriages. In the course of talking with various people involved in the community, the names of at least seven recently married couples came up where one or both of the couple was under the age of 16 (which is against the law in Canada). One former Lev Tahor Hasid says that in all of these cases, the marriages were not formally registered with the authorities until the minor reached the age at which he or she could be legally married. He says that other couples composed of minors were sometimes sent to Missouri, in the United States, where marriage is permitted from the age of 15, with parental consent.

Helbrans’ first reaction to these accusations is insistent: “Of course I support marriage at as early an age as possible. According to the halakha, if the two young people are ready, they can marry as early as age 13. If I could have, I would have married a number of couples at this age who I thought were ready. But this is against the law in Canada. Here the minimum age is 16 and we adhere

to that. Meanwhile, there are also cases where couples are not ready even at this age.”

In the course of preparing this article, when I had already returned to Israel, at least one case came to light in which a wedding ceremony was held by Lev Tahor at which the bride was still two weeks shy of her 16th birthday. Helbrans' response: "I'm in shock." He says he knew nothing about it. "This is a mistake that was apparently caused by various elements in the community." I requested photocopies of the passports of the couples who were alleged to have married under the minimum age permitted by law, but at press time, evidence refuting the allegation was only received in regard to one couple. Meanwhile, from other sources came several ketubot (Jewish marriage contracts) proving that marriages of minors were in fact held in the community in recent years. Helbrans insists this is a mistake.

Helbrans and his followers say the accusations made against them are part of a persecution campaign by those who will not accept their path, or those that were ejected from the community because they did not adapt to its lifestyle. This is what they say, for instance, about the last Hasid who left Lev Tahor. He is Nehemia Benzion Brodowski, 27, and he "escaped," as he puts it, from Sainte-Agathe in the middle of the night, together with his wife, Leah Shaindel. The couple now live in Denmark and their first child, a boy, was born about a month ago. Brodowski says he still follows the Lev Tahor path and that he and his wife still follow all of the community's kashrut rules and way of dress. But he adds that, "in Lev Tahor, everything is done right, but through coercion. We could not live that way any longer."

Brodowski says he joined the community two years ago. He has an Israeli mother and a Danish father and grew up completely secular in Denmark and then Sweden. At 19, he became religious and went to study at several Haredi yeshivas in the United States, which is where he first learned of Lev Tahor. His wife was born and raised in the community, the daughter of one of its most prominent families.

Brodowski says he secretly obtained a laptop computer a few months ago. He then conducted Internet research about the behavior of cults and religious extremist groups, and eventually concluded that Lev Tahor was "dangerous."

"The place is controlled by brainwashing and fear," Brodowski says. "I went through dozens of websites and studies about the subject, and I was stunned to discover how on every criterion Lev Tahor is run in a way that is typical of dangerous cults. People there have a blind and total yearning to please the Rabbi. They try their utmost to be good Hasidim and get lost along the way. They will do whatever they are told. They have no control over their lives. They have no free choice. They have no will."

Brodowski describes a series of punishments meted out to community members who don't live up to the strict code. He says he was forced to flee Sainte-Agathe with the aid of foreign elements after he was made to sign an oath in which he pledged to immediately give his wife a get (Jewish divorce decree) should the community's Beth Din or Helbrans himself order him to do so. As proof, he proffers the oath that he signed "under threat." For fear that he would be called upon to divorce his wife, he cut off all contact with the community.

Brodowski displays a version of the oath he was forced to sign by Lev Tahor: “I hereby take upon myself to be ostracized and ... cursed with all the curses written in the Sefer Habrit given to Moses at Sinai, if I should knowingly, after being warned, transgress any one thing of what I signed today being of sound mind ... and should I speak or tell about this path with any person, whether in speech or in writing or in any other way, anything that could cause financial or bodily harm. And also not to do any action at all in any manner, either by my own hand or by means of a messenger or by means of any deceit or ply that could cause financial or bodily harm or mental anguish to the Admor ... or to the Lev Tahor community ... or to anyone affiliated with the community.”

Helbrans denies all the accusations. He confirms the wording of the oaths that Brodowski signed, but explains that the man constituted a threat to the community. Helbrans: “If I were to find that there are people that feel frightened or pressured, even though they are here of their own free will, I wouldn’t keep them here for one minute. We are fighting for a path and a method that everyone is committed to, but it is done without any brainwashing or pressure.”

He says of Brodowski: “This is a fellow with serious mental problems who never fit into any framework.” Helbrans rejected similar claims I presented to him from others in the community in the same manner. Discussing one woman whom he suspected had spoken with me, he said: “She’s retarded. Plain and simple.” About another woman: “She is totally disturbed. For a long time we’ve been considering whether to throw her out or not.”

Family assistance

During my visit to Sainte-Agathe, the gravity of the deeds ascribed to Helbrans and members of Lev Tahor weighed on my mind. My wariness never left for a moment. Besides the meetings I scheduled with Helbrans and some of his Hasidim, I also went into the streets of the community without any prior coordination, I went into the children’s classrooms and the synagogue. At night, too, suspecting that awful things might be happening, I would leave the hotel and observe the houses in the neighborhood, looking for lights that were left on. Every foreigner who has visited the community in recent years, and who was interviewed for this article, described similar feelings. Relatives of Lev Tahor members, as well as Canadian journalists who’ve visited Sainte-Agathe, say they felt that, below the surface, other things were happening than what was presented to them publicly. I, too, often had the feeling that the community members were putting on a show for me. Not until I returned to Israel did I obtain recordings that were made in Helbrans’ office before a visit by an outsider. “There are things he doesn’t need to know,” the rabbi is heard instructing his followers.

From Christian neighbors in the area, I heard some complaints about the Lev Tahor people. The neighbors grumbled about the way their yards were neglected and about their peculiar dress that draws reactions from tourists, upon whom Sainte-Agathe’s economy is largely based. A large portion of the complaints had to do with the cultural differences. There was nothing about abuse, violence or illegal actions.

But the neighbors, like an outsider who pays a brief visit, cannot comment on one controversial institution that exists in the community, out of their sight. It’s called Ezrat Mishpacha (“Family Assistance”) and Helbrans says “It’s one of the

things I'm most proud of." He relates that the organization is headed by one of the most dominant women in the community, but insists that he takes responsibility for every decision or action. He describes this organization as a kind of "communal welfare bureau," whose role is "to keep an eye on all the families and help those in need. If a woman is sick, for instance, we make sure to send help to her at home. Or if we get reports that there are certain problems in education that need fixing, or domestic problems – such as complaints from a wife about her husband, or vice versa – the righteous women of Ezrat Mishpacha will do everything to help and to solve the problems."

Others in the community offer a different view of the organization. They describe it more as a type of "modesty patrol." They say it's really a punishment mechanism for those who don't hew strictly to the community line. They say that each week at a meeting of all the women of the community, there are reports made about people who have deviated, however slightly, from the community's strict code of behavior. Some say it is sometimes family members who do the informing. The punishments include the silent treatment, confinement to the house or being sent to other homes in the community for "reeducation."

Helbrans contends that such depictions are nothing but a distorted interpretation of things. "There are no punishments in Lev Tahor," he declares. "The only punishment is expulsion from the community." Excommunications, he says, are only made "in the few instances when we think that someone must be removed from the community. When we think that he is unsuitable, and so he is forbidden to take part in the community or to use its institutions."

He confirms that, at his instruction or the instruction of Ezrat Mishpacha, several community members have been forbidden from speaking with others. However, Helbrans says, "This is not a fine or a punishment. Certain people can hurt one another and if Ezrat Mishpacha sees that this is the situation, it can order them not to speak to each other anymore. For example, one Hasid said his wife was chatting with another woman all day long. He complained that she was neglecting the house and the children. She admitted it, and so it was decided that these two women would only speak to each other once every two weeks. This kind of thing happens very rarely and the reasons for it usually concern a lack of productivity."

Regarding instances in which adult members of the community were sent to live in others' homes for a period of time, Helbrans says: "Everything was always done with consent. These are cases in which Ezrat Mishpacha recommends to a couple that the wife go and stay with her mother for a while if she's not feeling well, for example. Other cases occurred when we saw that a woman was developing a certain amount of mental stress that kept her from being able to function at home."

As for the transfer of minors to different families, Helbrans confirms it, but explains: "When a woman gives birth, all the children are moved to other families until she fully recovers. It can sometimes take up to a month. And here, too, it is always done with everyone's full consent and desire."

Elior Chen comes to town

Over the years, Lev Tahor's location at the extreme fringes of the Haredi world has attracted all kinds of seekers and fringe types to its ranks. This is also one of the important elements that make up the community. Helbrans categorizes those

who join Lev Tahor in two groups: “There are people who come because they seek the truth. They’ve heard about the community and they know it is the only place where they can live in the way that is right for them. And then there are people who come because they are terribly miserable and no one else is ready to help them. Only here in this community will they receive attention, warmth, love, patience and brotherhood. Sometimes they change, they get onto the right path and integrate in our way of life. We have many such success stories. But sometimes they don’t succeed.”

With surprising openness, some of the Hasidim in Canada told me about their difficult childhoods in broken families. One related that his Haredi father had been sentenced to 30 years in prison in America for raping his daughter. Ever since the trial, the family was torn apart. The mother “lost it,” the sister left the Haredi world. Another Hasid said he was sexually abused as a child. Another was kicked out of every school and institution he’d ever been in. He came to Lev Tahor when he was 18, and his friends recount that he couldn’t even read and write.

Lev Tahor has also attracted Hasidim who were rejected by other Hasidic sects due to poor marital ties, their background or other deviations from the accepted norms in that society. Teenage girls from Haredi families who fall into distress, for various reasons, are also sometimes sent to the community to be married off there.

The community’s isolationism and remoteness has also sometimes attracted people with dubious histories, who thought they would find shelter there. Some left of their own will, others were expelled by the community. The most well-known example is that of Rabbi Elijah Chen, who fled from the authorities in Israel after being accused of very violent and serious child abuse (he was dubbed “the abusive rabbi”). Four years ago, with the help of one of his followers, he fled to Canada and went to Sainte-Agathe. “He told us he was a scion of the Abuhatzera family and that he was being persecuted by the Zionists,” says Helbrans about their first meeting. “I hugged him. We gave him food and a warm bed for a few days, until we started to get reports about the charges being made against him in Israel.”

Helbrans says that, even with all his opposition to the Zionist state and its laws, he could not give shelter to such a man. Not to mention that he was also placing the entire community in danger because Interpol was already on Chen’s tail. Chen was forced to leave and fled to Brazil, from where he was subsequently extradited to Israel, tried and sentenced to 24 years in prison. Chen told one of his associates he tried to find shelter with Lev Tahor after he came upon a copy of the book “Path of Salvation” at a cemetery where he slept while on the run from the police. That’s how he learned of the community’s existence, he said.

A number of other negative fringe phenomena from the Haredi world have been mistakenly attributed to Lev Tahor in recent years, though. Because of the way the women dress, the woman known as “Mama Taliban” has been said to be a part of the community, as have the women the press came to call “The Abusive Mother” and “The Mother who Starves her Children,” as well as some of the Sikrikim in Beit Shemesh. However, these particular cases and people have no affiliation with Lev Tahor.

A white shirt in prison

"Listen well, Shay, listen well. I'll tell you very clearly. Anyone that I see has the potential to come back to religion, and I mean anyone, at any age. I will do my very utmost to see that it will happen," Helbrans said to me in one of our conversations. His wife Malka, who was standing on the other side of the room, appeared to clutch her head in disbelief, and whispered in desperation: "Oh no, not again. Not again." Helbrans looked at her and then turned to me, raising both eyebrows, and said: "What can I do? This is the truth." The Rebbetzin muttered, "I can't listen to this anymore," and left the room. "Hey, look, now you've got the big scoop," Helbrans said with a smile.

This dialogue may sound insignificant, but 20 years ago this kind of thinking got Helbrans involved in an episode that culminated with prison time and deportation from the United States. In February 1992, an Israeli boy named Shai Fhima Reuven arrived at Helbrans' home in the Borough (aka Boro) Park neighborhood of Brooklyn. Newspaper coverage of the story said the boy arrived there accompanied by his mother, Chana. Two years earlier, she had smuggled him out of Israel and away from his father, from whom she was divorced. This was a month before Shai's bar mitzvah and the mother wanted Helbrans to prepare the boy to be called up to the Torah. A week later, Shai began studying in the yeshiva and slept there four nights a week, with his mother's consent.

Shai was also given a bar mitzvah party by the Lev Tahor community. Newsday, which covered the story, reported that "more than 60 people attended, most of them Hasidim of the Rabbi, including Jackie Fhima, Shai's stepfather." With his mother's consent, Shai stayed on to live and study at the yeshiva for another whole month. During this time, he grew closer to the community and also began to follow its religious ways. Several times he told Helbrans and some of his Hasidim that his stepfather and his mother beat him, and that for two years they had not allowed him to have any contact with his father, who lived in Israel.

When his mother came to pick him up, Shai refused to go home with her and announced that he was also no longer willing to go to public school and study together with goyim. The mother objected and took the child, almost by force, back to the shelter for battered women where she was staying at the time. In the following weeks, Shai ran away back to the yeshiva several times and was only returned to his mother under threat and by force. In early April 1992, he disappeared.

Helbrans was arrested a few days after Shai's disappearance, but then released. "I don't care what Shai or Helbrans say. As far as I'm concerned, he is responsible for the kidnapping. Throughout these two years [of Shai's disappearance, from 1992-4], he knew where the boy was. He tricked all the investigators but that won't help him any because I know the truth," says Michael Reuven, Shai's biological father, with anger that clearly hasn't subsided at all over the years.

The New York police as well as the FBI investigated the case. And the parents also hired private investigators to try to find Shai. Helbrans' phone lines were tapped, surveillance vehicles and hidden cameras were set up near the yeshiva. "Helbrans burned two years of my life," says Reuven. "After I got divorced from Shai's mother, I started a new family. Because of the struggle over Shai, I neglected my business and my family. In the end I sold my house and later I got divorced, too."

Helbrans vehemently denies that he was involved in the boy's kidnapping. He claims to have no idea who was behind it. "If Shai Fhima would have come to me when he ran away, I don't think I would have refrained from helping him. But I would have done it differently," he says. "Besides, I have nothing to say about the kidnapping. I have no connection to it."

In February 1993, about a year after the boy's disappearance, Helbrans was arrested again, and this time his wife was arrested with him. The Jewish Advocate reported that Malka Helbrans was suspected of trying to prevent the child's mother from obtaining custody of him, and Helbrans was said to have tried to purchase custody of Shai from his mother. Hundreds of Lev Tahor and Satmar Hasidim came out to protest the arrests, which were made on Shabbat eve, and the fact that Malka Helbrans was separated from her infant son.

An organization from Brooklyn called the Central Rabbinical Congress raised \$250,000 to make the bail payment for Helbrans and his wife. Helbrans' trial began in January 1994 and lasted five weeks. According to the indictment, he was facing a possible 25-year sentence. The New York Times, which gave the story extensive coverage, reported: "Throughout the trial, the rabbi insisted that Shai fled to him because of beatings he was receiving at home. And his mother, Chana Fhima, insisted that her rights to the child had been ignored. 'You brainwashed him! You brainwashed him!' she shouted out in the courtroom. The rabbi insisted, clutching a prayer book to his chest, that he had nothing to do with the boy's disappearance and that he himself had tried to search for him."

Eight days after the start of the trial, Shai suddenly appeared at the Rockland County Sheriff's Office and asked to testify in court. He was questioned for many hours but would not reveal where he had been hiding for the last two years, for fear that "it would hurt the people and the families who helped me." Regarding Helbrans, he had this to say: "I told Rabbi Helbrans about the abuse I experienced at home and that I just ran away. I never wanted to go and learn in his yeshiva. I went somewhere else." He gave similar testimony twice in court.

Shai now lives abroad. He is not religious and declined to be interviewed for this article. He visited the Lev Tahor community about 10 years ago and remained on good terms with Helbrans and some of his Hasidim, even after he abandoned religion. In an interview about a decade ago with The New York Times, Shai was said to "still insist that he was not kidnapped or brainwashed by Helbrans. 'I was going after the religion, not after Helbrans.'" The piece goes on to say that "He does not speak with his parents about the two years when he was missing. 'They think I was brainwashed. I don't. So we just let it go.'"

At the end of the trial, Helbrans was convicted but not on the charges for which he had originally been arrested and sued. The New York Times reported that a settlement was reached with the Brooklyn District Attorney, in which Helbrans was charged with conspiracy to commit kidnapping in the fourth degree. According to the prosecution, Helbrans was recorded proposing to Shai's father that he would handle negotiations with the people with whom Shai was hiding, and so he therefore knew who they were and where they were. He was sentenced to six to twelve years in prison, additional time on probation and 250 hours of community service. All the charges against his wife were dropped.

The prison rabbi, Herbert Richtman, told *The Jewish Week* about Helbrans' time behind bars: "Helbrans wears only white shirts. I had to make a special effort for him because here, on Rikers Island, only guards wear white shirts ... The prison system decided that I would give him a white shirt each day and he would return it to me at the end of the day. This way, no one could use a white shirt to escape from the prison."

Helbrans received other religious privileges while in prison. For the first time ever in the New York prison system, a prisoner was excused from being photographed for the prisoners' album. Prisoners are photographed clean-shaven and Helbrans refused to shave his beard for halakhic reasons. In a precedent-setting decision by the New York State Court, a computer-generated portrait was permitted instead.

On the recommendation of the parole board, Helbrans was released after two years. The *New York Times* reported that the District Attorney launched an investigation to see whether he was released in wake of a personal appeal from a Hasidic fund-raiser for New York Governor George Pataki. Newspaper reports also said there was an investigation into whether Helbrans was given special treatment by officials during his incarceration and if they had any hand in his early release. The *New York Times* reported that records show prison officers transferred Helbrans to an open framework of working, even though he didn't meet the criteria for it. The investigator said the prison officers told him this was done at the instruction of senior officers. A spokesman for the Prison Authority called it a minor administrative error. Helbrans was returned to prison to complete his sentence.

Helbrans rejects the claims that he received special privileges in prison. "I might have been the first Haredi rabbi in this place," he says. "The system was dealing with someone it wasn't familiar with. But I didn't get any breaks. I paid a heavy price for something I wasn't involved in. My family also paid a heavy price." He says that one of the hardest moments was when his young son saw him in prison uniform and cried in alarm, "Tateh goy!"

Reuven, Shai's father, is not willing to accept Helbrans' denials of responsibility, but he does shed some new light on the story: "In retrospect, I can say that to a certain degree I was the one who led Shai to end up in Helbrans' arms. After his mother smuggled him out of Israel, I didn't hear from him for two years. After I exerted pressure on her family in Israel, she allowed me to have a brief phone conversation with him. This was two or three weeks before the bar mitzvah and I requested that he put on tefillin. I told him: 'If you see some Hasidim, those guys with the black clothes, go up to them and say: "I'm about to be bar mitzvahed and I want to put on tefillin. My father wants you to help me." They'll take care of you.' I don't know where things could have ended up. Shai was involved with a bad crowd at the time, maybe he would have ended up involved in worse things, like drugs."

God in colored markers

In the 1980s Helbrans was a rising star in the movement of getting people to "return to religion." He worked independently as well as with his friend Rabbi Yagen, as part of the Arachim ("Values") movement. Newspaper reports from the time describe him as "having tremendous persuasive powers," and say that "religious penitents in Jerusalem say he is impossible to resist." One widely

known legend had it that once, while waiting at a bus stop, he managed to convince a secular soldier to turn religious. “One soldier? Lots of soldiers!” he says now. “Every time I got on a bus I looked for a ‘victim.’ Sometimes I even got him to get off at some yeshiva.”

Helbrans’ proofs of God’s existence were disappointing. I was expecting a complex theological debate, and what I got instead was the familiar series of arguments used by rabbis who bring people back to religion. He presented, for instance, the prophecies of the destruction of the Second Temple as they appear in Chapter 28 of Deuteronomy and the fall of the Kingdom of Babylon as prophesied by Isaiah and Jeremiah, maintaining that these prophecies came true exactly as predicted. He also presented several more Torah verses and examples that he says prove the eternity of the Divine truth as it appears in the Bible. In making his points, he referred to other books and drew on an erasable board with colored markers. His handwriting was practically illegible.

Helbrans is not aware of the power of the Internet. He hadn’t heard of Wikipedia, and using satellite pictures from Google, I challenged his claims about the destruction of Babylon. I showed him the results of archeological excavations that were done there. The fact that Saddam Hussein reconstructed some of the buildings also stood in contrast to the biblical prophecies as he presented them. The conversation turned into a discussion about the smallest details. We found ourselves arguing over different interpretations of the meaning of the vision of the eagle that appears in the prophecy of the destruction of the Second Temple, and even about the structure of the bee’s digestive system. Because he purports to present an absolute truth, I insisted that it be beyond any reasonable doubt. So far he has not succeeded. For the time being, we declared it a draw.

The whisperers

I’d already talked for hours upon hours with Helbrans and some of his Hasidim and still I had great expectations ahead of the final interview in the Lev Tahor community – an encounter with the women. This was supposed to answer many of the questions I still had. Over five days in Sainte-Agathe I’d occasionally seen them walking on the street, usually in groups. Often I saw them peeking through cracks in the window blinds or from behind doors. In Lev Tahor, the women aren’t just kept out of the public sphere, they seem practically absent altogether. Whenever I came to the home of one of the families, they hurried into another room. When I passed them on the street, they would slip into one of the nearby yards. They usually remain inside the home and do not come out in public or among strangers. Even with their husbands they try not to be seen in the public space. They keep up their strict dress code even when alone at home. Taking the interpretation of women’s modesty to the extreme, they also hardly speak; they have adopted a soft tone of speech that is nearly a whisper.

We met in the evening in the living room of one of the Lev Tahor families. The children had gone to bed, the men had returned from the synagogue, the women had finished the housework. Outside it was snowing. Inside it was pleasant. They introduced themselves: L., 34 and a mother of 11; M., 35 and a mother of 9; Z., 22 and a mother of three; and H., 26 with one child.

They described their daily routine. They say most of the women in the community are full-time housewives. Three also work as teachers. Other women

in the community work at home as seamstresses. All defined their main work first of all as “worshipping Hashem.” They say they are good friends and that all the women in the community are very close, that they help one another with housework and child care. They all get together at least once a week for a Torah lesson given by one of the women. H. says she feels like they are “one big family.”

The women always give birth at the hospital in town. They also make sure that the children are vaccinated on time and receive any medical care they need.

L. and M. grew up in the Satmar Hasidic sect in America and came to Lev Tahor after they married. H. was born in the U.S., but before joining the community she lived in Israel for about a decade. Z., who became religious later in life, joined the community with her husband two years ago.

They say they’ve heard a little about the controversy that has grown lately in Israel surrounding the issue of the exclusion of women from the public sphere, but they say they have no interest in getting involved. L.: “It doesn’t concern us. We respect the society in which we live and we expect everyone to respect the society and the customs in the place where they live. Generally speaking, I think it was chutzpah on the part of that young Israeli woman to stir up anger and disputes. [She is referring to Tanya Rosenblit, who refused to sit at the back of a public bus in December.] If those are the society’s laws, people need to respect them and behave accordingly.”

They are familiar with the concept of feminism but M. says it has nothing to do with them. “It was meant for the outside modern world, not for Jewish women,” she says. “It’s not for me. I’m not looking for rights in order to attain political positions or to vote on policy. I’m not looking for equal rights in the workplace. That’s not the way of the Torah. That is what I follow, and only then can I be at peace with myself.”

As for the blessing that men recite each morning, thanking God “who did not make me a woman,” they say it actually attests to a flaw that exists in men. “I was created exactly in accordance with God’s will,” says L. “I say, ‘Blessed is He, who created me in accordance with His will.’ This is His perfection. Woman was created complete with no need to compare her to any other creature. Hashem created the world and woman’s nature. He did not create her so she should be unhappy with His creation. A woman who walks in the path of the Torah is one hundred percent happy with this.”

They told me about the handicrafts they do, about their hobbies and about the Yiddish books they read. They say they were the ones who wanted to introduce the dress code that is followed by the women in the community, even though there was resistance at first from the men, including Helbrans. They say they love the burka – that it’s comfortable – and they speak excitedly about the white robes they wear on Shabbat and holidays.

Their attire is made up of two dresses, a jacket with buttons, an apron tied on top of that, and on top of that a long robe and veil. L. insists that “the foundations of the community are not the way we dress but how we follow the path of Torah. And this attire is part of the Torah’s way. Sometimes I see women dressed in the style of the Western world and I don’t understand it. How can they walk in the streets like that? It’s so unrespectable and unworthy.

“Sometimes I feel the attention that my attire attracts,” L. adds. “People find it odd. We look different. But when you know exactly why you are doing this or that, it’s a lot stronger and more satisfying than all the judgmental eyes and the criticism. When you’re on the path of truth, you don’t care what others say.”

Throughout the interview, their responses are polite but formal. They were articulate and courteous, and never once interrupted one another. When I asked, all of them said they were happy. But throughout the interview with them, my attention and focus was often drawn to the green curtain with a floral pattern that was hanging in front of me. I couldn’t see the faces of the women who were sitting behind it. Nor their body language or hand gestures.

The green curtain was the condition that was imposed by the women in order to hold the interview. And this wasn’t the only curtain that I strained to see through during my visit to the Lev Tahor community. Their extreme worldview and way of life endlessly challenge liberal thinking. But even more so, Lev Tahor poses a challenge to the Haredi world. In many senses, it is putting forward new standards for this world, and defying the existing order.

The women’s attire is a good example of this. It may still be a marginal custom only practiced among the most extreme communities, but it is spreading and threatening some of the larger communities in the Haredi world, perhaps more than any other phenomenon that has arisen in recent decades. Because similar dress was adopted by a number of Jewish communities throughout history, to this day there has not been a single halakhic ruling from a prominent rabbi prohibiting it. The controversy around the women’s attire has become so great in the Haredi public that, in the last months, there have been a number of riots and demonstrations on this issue in Haredi enclaves in Jerusalem and Beit Shemesh.

The visit to Lev Tahor is unsettling. Days later I still had more questions that I knew neither Helbrans nor any of his Hasidim would ever be able to answer. They are closed off and isolated within themselves and have no possibility or ability to examine their lives in relation to the world around.

My attitude toward the community and its ways also shifted a number of times over that period. One minute the things they said sounded logical and legitimate; the next minute it all seemed very strange and unreasonable. In terms of the halakha, I couldn’t express criticism of Helbrans or find fault in the community’s way of life. I simply didn’t have the tools to do so. On the human, ethical and legal level, I found more than a few faults.

As if to add to the journalistic difficulty and emotional weight, during the research for this article I was also contacted by some family members of people in Lev Tahor, who asked me to help rescue their relatives. I also received a good number of phone calls from people who introduced themselves as opponents of the community and wished to warn me against writing anything positive about them. They claimed to have evidence of the terrible things that are happening in the community. I spoke with dozens of them. Most of the evidence was about the same controversial episodes from 20 years ago. Helbrans and some of his Hasidim also called several times, curious to hear my impressions.

For weeks I struggled to remove the fluttering curtains before my eyes, until proof came of the marriages of minors, as did the story of Brodowski and his wife who had fled, with which it was hard to argue. Perhaps we, perhaps I, have a side in us that wants to believe in something, perhaps it’s the side in me that wanted

to believe Rabbi Helbrans, too. The rabbi and his Hasidim who called me after the visit tried to provide answers and explanations in response to the arguments I raised about their alleged illegal actions. By this point, I could barely sense the curtain fluttering before my eyes.