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Better Left Unsaid: Sexual Offenses and the Haredim

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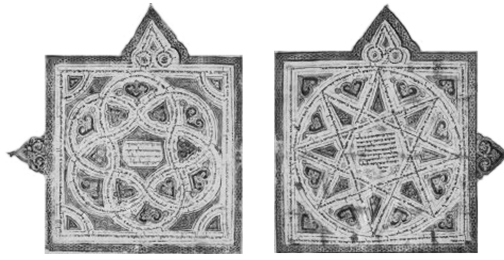
Abstract: The article examines when and how ultra-Orthodox news media reports on sexual scandals involving public figures within and outside the community, focusing on three recent cases involving Donald Trump, Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, and Chaim Walder. Through a comparative analysis of the reporting (or non-reporting) of these scandals in leading ultra-Orthodox dailies (*Hamodia*, *YatedNe'eman*, *Hapeles*, and *Hamevaser*), the weekly *Mishpacha*, and online news websites (*B'HadreiHaredim*, *KikarHaShabbat*, and *Haredim 10*) it explores the strategies employed by Haredi media when reporting on sexual offenses. It demonstrates that ultra-Orthodox media do not primarily serve as platforms for reporting news of public interest, but rather as agents delineating the borders of legitimate public speech.

Key Words: Sexual Offenses, the Haredim, Silence

Introduction

Unlike the secular press in Israel and elsewhere, the purpose of ultra-Orthodox news media is to provide Haredim with “information they should be thinking about and [protect the community] from information that may be contrary to the desired moral values.”^① Its (self-conceived) role is thus not to provide a critical perspective of its community or “objective” reporting, but to

^① Matt Evans, “Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media’s Role in Israel’s Religious-Secular Conflict,” *Middle East Journal* 65 (Spring 2011): 246.



reinforce Haredi values and “build what they see as the model society” by “[reflecting] less of what reality is and more of what reality should be.”^①

Producing “clean” news that adheres to the community’s religious values and norms in an effort to maintain “a holy community” is paramount, resulting in a high level of self-imposed censorship to avoid publishing “inappropriate” and “forbidden” content that violates their religious standards, including matters related to gossip, sex, and modesty such as prohibiting publishing photos of women or using their first names.^② The purpose is not to ignore issues or silence discussion, but to mark the boundaries of legitimate discussion.

To do so, *mashgichim* (content supervisors, i. e., censors) “read every word before it goes to print,”^③ carefully ensuring readers, including children, are not exposed to “forbidden” content. In the case of the daily newspapers, these censors are the official representatives of the rabbis who oversee and supervise their community’s newspaper.

Reporting on sexual offenses or even on controversial sexual behavior has long been considered a taboo and is extremely rare, particularly in the traditional printed press, whose censors are far more rigid in defining the boundary between what is fit and unfit to print. This resistance to report on sexual offenses increases when they involve members of the community. When compelled to cover cases of sexual abuse because they involve prominent public figures or officials, Haredi media outlets are careful to frame the story and use language that upholds avoiding gossip (*lashon hara*), avoiding public shaming (*halvanat panim*), and maintaining modesty (*tziniut*).

For example, euphemistic and coded language is used to describe sexual offenses instead of words like “sexual harassment,” “abuse,” and “rape.” The use of coded language does not assume a reader’s ignorance of the subject being addressed. On the contrary, the language is well-understood by readers, and

① Yoel Cohen, “Religion News in Israel,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 4 (2005): 181.

② Matt Evans, “Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media’s Role in Israel’s Religious-Secular Conflict,” 246.

③ Simeon D. Baumel, “Communication and Change: Newspapers, Periodicals, and Acculturation Among Israeli Haredim,” *Jewish History* 16 (2002): 164-166.

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censors are aware the public likely knows and gossips about the taboo subject.

Scholarly literature on ultra-Orthodox news media is rich and has explored different aspects.^① When scholarship addressed the topic of sexual offenses and Haredi news media, it did so within the broader context of discussions on modesty and on generally avoided topics. Two examples are usually provided but not broadly elaborated on and comprehensively analyzed—the August 1990 scandal that erupted when *Yated Ne’eman* published an article on an attack on a female soldier that accidentally included the word “rape,” and when former Israeli president Moshe Katzav was indicted on rape charges in 2007 and forced to resign.^②

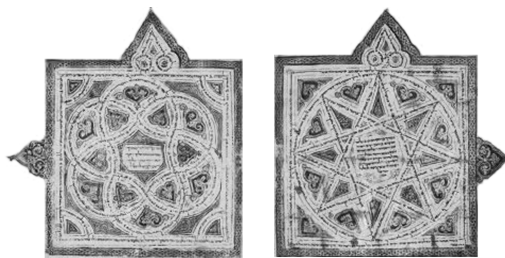
Other, more recent examples, particularly several that occurred within the community, are yet to be examined and compared. Further, in the above examples, analysis was limited to the established Haredi printed press and did not account (and in the case of the 1990 scandal, could not) for the evolution of the Haredi media landscape, including the rise of online news websites that have largely freed themselves from stringent rabbinical editorial oversight and new newspapers.

Given the diversity of ultra-Orthodox media, a thorough comparative analysis of when Haredi media outlets choose to report on sexual offenses and how they do so (how stories are framed and described, and what linguistic tools are used, such as omission and euphemistic language), is important for a broader understanding of the community and the nuances of Haredi media.

This article examines when and how ultra-Orthodox news media reports on sexual scandals involving public figures within and outside the community,

① See, for example: Menachem Michelson, “The Ultra-Orthodox Press in Israel,” *Kesher* No. 8 (November 1990): 12e-21e; Kimmy Kaplan, “The Media in Haredi Society in Israel [Hebrew],” *Kesher* No. 30 (November 2001): 18-30; Simeon D. Baumel, “Communication and Change: Newspapers, Periodicals, and Acculturation Among Israeli Haredim,” 161-186; Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” *ESSACHESS. Journal for Communication Studies* 10 (2017): 113-128; Oren Golan and Nahki Mishol-Shauli, “Fundamentalist Web Journalism: Walking a Fine Line Between Religious Ultra-Orthodoxy and the New Media Ethos,” *European Journal of Communication* 33 (2018), 304-320.

② See, for example: Simeon D. Baumel, “Communication and Change: Newspapers, Periodicals, and Acculturation Among Israeli Haredim,” 164; Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 117.



focusing on three recent cases involving Donald Trump, Yehuda Meshi-Zahav, and Chaim Walder. To do so, the study comparatively analyzes the reporting (or non-reporting) of these scandals in the main ultra-Orthodox dailies (*Hamodia*, *YatedNe’eman*, *Hapeles*, and *Hamevaser*), the weekly *Mishpacha*, and online news websites (*B’HadreiHaredim*, *KikarHaShabbat*, and *Haredim* 10).

Through the case studies, the study addresses and engages with several interrelated questions. What factors influence the decision to cover or not cover a sexual offense scandal? When covered, how is the scandal framed? What words and expressions are used or omitted? Though all are committed to avoiding engaging in gossip and public shaming, and preserving modesty, what are the similarities and differences in how independent Haredi media outlets and printed dailies interpret and define these borders?

I . Ultra-Orthodox Media—Reinforcing the Believers

The Haredi movement emerged in Europe in the early 19th century in response to the *Haskalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) movement, Reformism, and Secularism, insisting on strict observance of *halakha* (Jewish law) and resisting and opposing modernism and changes to Jewish social and religious practices.^① This observant community “lives in exile among Jews,” separate from its less or non-observant co-religionists in an “enclave” or “bounded” community — a group that endeavors to maintain a cohesive group identity by creating its own culture and distancing itself from outsiders by establishing physical and symbolic boundaries.^②

For the ultra-Orthodox, these boundaries function as “walls of virtue” designed to protect the community from malign and insidious outside influences of modern secular society.^③ The “wall of virtue” creates a distinction and separation between the holy, morally superior community of insiders

① Kimmy Kaplan, “The Media in Haredi Society in Israel,” 18.

② Oren Golan and Heidi A. Campbell, “Strategic Management of Religious Websites: The Case of Israel’s Orthodox Communities,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20 (2015): 467.

③ Gabriel A. Almond et al., *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 23-24, 31-34.

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following God's commands and the "evil," immoral outsiders who ignore God's commands and pose an existential threat to corrupt and destroy the community's observant way of life through the temptations of secular modernity.^①

However, the boundary separating inside from outside is not uniform, nor is it static; the ultra-Orthodox community is comprised of different groups divided over divergent religious interpretations and outlooks, each of which negotiates and defines its interaction with modern secular society in Israel.^② Nevertheless, the boundary exists even if it is in flux.

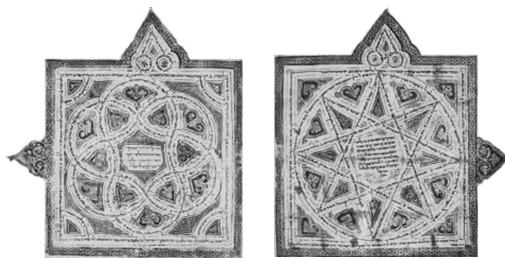
The ultra-Orthodox press was intended to be an alternative to the secular press, protecting the community from its influences while satisfying the demand for news within their own communities. These alternative media outlets adhered to Torah values and *halakhic* principles as understood by rabbinical authorities, and were intended to help develop the community's culture, forge common identities, and shape the perception of the world, both inside and outside the community.^③

The earliest Haredi newspapers were established by and affiliated with ultra-Orthodox political parties, and the four main daily newspapers today remain so. *Hamodia* was inaugurated in 1950 following the establishment of the Jewish state by Agudath Israel, connected to the Gur Hasidic dynasty. Until the 1980s, it was the ultra-Orthodox community's most important newspaper when a split within Agudath Israel between Hasidic and non-Hasidic currents resulted in the 1985 establishment of a new daily, *YatedNe'eman*. Founded by Rabbi Menachem Man Shach, *YatedNe'eman* became the paper of the Ashkenazi political party DegelHatorah and of the non-

① Gabriel A. Almond et al., *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalism around the World*, 34.

② Ibid., 85; Kimmy Kaplan, "The Media in Haredi Society in Israel," 18; Matt Evans, "Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media's Role in Israel's Religious-Secular Conflict," 240-241.

③ Kimmy Kaplan, "The Media in Haredi Society in Israel," 20-21; Yoel Cohen, "Israeli Haredi Media and the 'Female Factor,'" 367-368; Yoel Cohen, "The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel," 116.



Hasidic Lithuanian current.^①

More recently, two new newspapers emerged from splits with *Hamodia* and *YatedNe’eman-Hamevaser* and *Hapeles*. First published in 2009, *Hamevesar* is the newspaper of the Shlomi Emunei faction of Agudath Israel that former Knesset member Meir Porush established due to a split with the Gur Hasidim, who dominate *Hamodia*. *Hapeles* was founded in 2012 due to a leadership dispute in the Lithuanian Haredi community, becoming the mouthpiece of the more radically anti-Zionist “Jerusalem Faction” (*HapelegHayerushalmi*) aligned with Rabbi Shmuel Auerbach, which broke away from the BneiBrak-based Lithuanian leadership. Headed by former longtime editors of *YatedNe’eman*, the two dailies are fierce and bitter rivals, articulating different outlooks within the Lithuanian Haredi community.^②

The readership of ultra-Orthodox dailies has declined over the last decade due to the general fall in demand for the printed press, increasing internet access, and the appeal of “independent” outlets in print and online. According to the last available surveys on Haredi media in Israel, *Hamodia* had the largest exposure rate within Haredi society (16.6%) compared to *YatedNe’eman* (16.2%), *Hamevaser* (13.5%), and *Hapeles* (11.2%), but only *Hamevaser*’s exposure increased compared to previous years (up from 11.0%), while the other papers’ exposures declined (*Hamodia* from 18.1%, *YatedNe’eman* from 17.1%, and *Hapeles* from 13.7%).^③

Among the “independent” outlets, i.e., those not directly tied to a party or faction and whose target audience is the Haredi public as a whole (Hasidic and non-Hasidic), are the commercial weekly magazines *Mishpacha* (est. 1984) and *B’Kehila* (est. 1997) and the websites *B’HadreiHaredim* (est. 2008), *Kikar HaShabbat* (est. 2009), and

① Matt Evans, “Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media’s Role in Israel’s Religious-Secular Conflict,” 244; Simeon D. Baumel, “Communication and Change: Newspapers, Periodicals, and Acculturation Among Israeli Haredim,” 164-167.

② Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 116. On the newspapers’ rivalry see, for example: Yehuda Halevi and Avi Greenzieg, “Torah Scholars: Hapeles Desecrates Heaven and Spreads Hatred [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, February 17, 2014, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/750837>.

③ “TGI Survey of the Haredi Press – All the Stats [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.kikar.co.il/journalism/271693>.

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Haredim 10 (est. 2014). *Mishpacha* has significantly greater exposure within the community than *B'Kehila* (21% to 11%),^① while *B'HadreiHaredim* and *Kikar HaShabbat* are the most frequently visited Haredi websites.

“Independent” outlets are considered to be more “open” (i.e., publishing news on all Haredi parties) and tend to operate independently from rabbinic authority and their appointed censors—*Mishpacha* being an exception—while remaining careful to avoid upsetting the community’s sensitivities regarding immoral content.^② Their emergence has been an intensely contested issue, with Haredi leaders and the dailies frequently attacking the weeklies and websites as not being “kosher” enough and a threat to Torah values.^③

In 2009, for example, *YatedNe’eman*, *Hamodia*, and *Hamevaser* published warnings on the dangers of the internet that singled out for reproach “websites that call themselves Haredi,” accusing them of printing gossip and lies, spreading discord, and attempting to “Hellenize” (i.e., secularize) the community.^④ Similar accusations were leveled at the weekly magazines by rabbis, but, as noted above, independent publications, in general, are careful to adhere to and respect the community’s religious boundaries when considering what is fit to print, though they negotiate the boundaries differently.

At the core of rabbinic criticism lies the fear that the more independent weeklies and news websites erode their traditional authority rather than affirm it.^⑤ If Haredi weeklies and websites, like secular media, exist beyond rabbinical authority and the reach of their appointed censors, then the rabbis have no control over the information, the narrative, and defining the

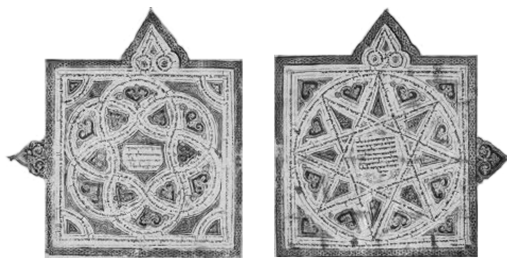
① “TGI Survey of the Haredi Press – All the Stats [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.kikar.co.il/journalism/271693>.

② Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 122.

③ Menachem Michelson, “The Ultra-Orthodox Press in Israel,” 14e.

④ ShacharIlan, “The Commercial Department of the Hellenists [Hebrew],” *The Seventh Eye*, December 14, 2009, <https://www.the7eye.org.il/19860>.

⑤ Heidi Campbell, “Whose Got the Power? Religious Authority and the Internet,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (April 2007): 1043-1062; Karine Barzilai-Nahon and Gad Barzilai, “Cultured Technology: The Internet and Religious Fundamentalism,” *The Information Society* 21 (2005): 25-40; Oren Golan and Heidi A. Campbell, “Strategic Management of Religious Websites: The Case of Israel’s Orthodox Communities,” 1044; Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 120.



boundaries between what is permitted and what is forbidden. In a survey conducted by Yoel Cohen, “82% of Haredi rabbis favored ‘to a large extent’ the supervision of newspapers, and a further 13% favored this ‘to some degree.’”^① Cohen’s survey also revealed that 77% of Haredi rabbis favor separate, Haredi newspapers under their supervision “to a large extent,” while another 9% favor it “to some extent.”^②

Rabbinical control over the media is intended to maintain the community’s boundaries by preserving and protecting it from outside influences deemed harmful to its way of life and religious worldview. Thus, the purpose and role of rabbinically-appointed censors are to ensure unacceptable content and ideas are not published while publishing content that reinforces its religious values and sense of holiness.^③

Natan Grossman, the former editor of *YatedNe’eman*, put it thus: “All in all, our role is to reinforce the believers. We provide them with information that will assist them in confronting the secular public and in persuading unbelievers. The paper is a propaganda tool.”^④ Content, therefore, “reflects less what reality is and more what it should be.”^⑤

Haredi editors ensure their paper’s content is “clean” and “family-friendly” and does not “defile” the homes of its readers, avoiding controversial topics involving gossip, crime, and sexual offenses, lest they lose subscribers as *YatedNe’eman* almost did when it published a story about an attempted sexual assault on a female soldier that used the word “rape,” which had been accidentally overlooked by an exhausted censor.^⑥ This approach does not assume the ignorance of readers who are likely aware of the controversial topics. Rather, it allows readers to remain ignorant while also protecting them from exposure to controversial matters they do not wish to be exposed to.

① Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 117-118.

② Ibid., 118.

③ Matt Evans, “Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media’s Role in Israel’s Religious-Secular Conflict,” 246.

④ Quoted in Menachem Michelson, “The Ultra-Orthodox Press in Israel,” 20e.

⑤ Matt Evans, “Exacerbating Social Cleavages: The Media’s Role in Israel’s Religious-Secular Conflict,” 246; Yoel Cohen, “The Media Challenge to Haredi Rabbinic Authority in Israel,” 116.

⑥ Menachem Michelson, “The Ultra-Orthodox Press in Israel,” 12e.

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These limitations pose a serious challenge that often prevents Haredi media from dealing with problematic topics, but not always. When articles on problematic topics like sexual offenses are published in newspapers, magazines, and websites, journalists employ a variety of techniques to carefully frame and report the controversial subject matter to avoid crossing boundaries of modesty and *lashon hara*.

Framing defines how reality is interpreted and understood by determining what issues are addressed and what is ignored, what details are included and what is excluded, where information is placed, and what is emphasized. All can impact the reader's perception of events and public opinion, as well as express the position of the media outlet itself on particular events.^①

In addition to framing, a variety of linguistic techniques are at journalists' and editors' disposal when reporting on problematic topics "through nuances of style and language,"^② including using neutral terms, euphemistic language, or omitting problematic words and phrases. These linguistic nuances reveal the diversity of ultra-Orthodox society and its media, distinguishing each outlet from another "by fine lines...that often mark the divide between the permitted and the forbidden."^③

II. Donald Trump—The Preferred (Immoral) Candidate

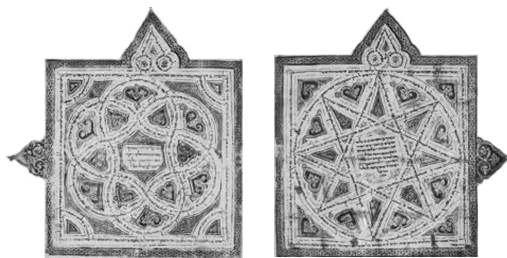
Few consider Donald Trump, the 45th president of the United States, to be a man of character and high moral standards. He is crude and rude, erratic and impulsive, arrogant and disruptive, a cheater and philanderer.

Yet, despite his character flaws, moral shortcomings, and immoral behavior, Trump still managed to secure a great deal of support from ultra-Orthodox Jews in the US and Israel. According to Deutsch, Haredi voters "appear to be a distinct exception" when it comes to Jewish voting patterns in the United States, as "a large majority [of Haredi Jews] supported Trump in

① Thomas Nelson, Zoe Oxley, and Rosalee Clawson, "Toward a Psychology of Framing Effects," *Political Behavior* 19 (1997): 221-246.

② Simeon D. Baumel, "Communication and Change: Newspapers, Periodicals, and Acculturation Among Israeli Haredim," 168.

③ *Ibid.*, 162.



the [2016] general election, though there were also pockets of dissent for a variety of reasons.”^①

How could ultra-Orthodox support a candidate who essentially embodied everything the community opposes? Part of the answer lies in the ultra-Orthodox’s traditional support for the Republican party; another was due to who his opponent was in 2016—Hillary Clinton.

Deutsch suggested that “not only did Clinton inherit the bad feelings toward President Obama that had long existed among many in the Haredi community, but her gender also likely hurt her with at least some Haredi voters.”^② Rabbi Gershon Edelstein urged his American yeshiva students in BneiBrak not to vote for Clinton and follow the advice of Rabbi Shmuel Kaminetzky, the head of the Philadelphia Yeshiva, to support Trump, declaring, in reference to Clinton, that “people who do not behave honestly and tell the truth, success is not their lot.”^③

Other rabbis in BneiBrak had urged American followers to “vote for the man and not the woman” because “death and poverty” follow the rule of a woman, while others could not conceive of a woman ruling the greatest power in the world, declaring there “would have been a flaw in creation” were Clinton elected.^④ This broad support for Trump was reflected in Haredi media, influencing how they framed and wrote about news damaging to his candidacy or involving his immoral behavior.

On the eve of the second presidential debate in October 2016, Haredi support for Trump faced a new and disturbing challenge. A recording of Trump making vulgar and lewd comments about women, saying he could do anything he wanted, just “grab ‘em by the pussy,” was released, igniting a

① Nathaniel Deutsch, “‘Borough Park Was a Red State’: Trump and the Haredi Vote,” *Jewish Social Studies* 22 (2017): 160. The Satmar community was a notable exception, supporting Hillary Clinton, and “roughly 70 percent of the Jewish electorate” supported her, in line with previous elections. *Ibid.*

② *Ibid.*, 167.

③ Eli Yakobi, “Rabbi Kaminetzky Explains: Trump Has Always Acted Truthfully and Honestly [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/772605>.

④ See, for example: Moshe Weisberg, “Kabbalist Rabbi Kook: We Were Saved from the Amalekite Clinton [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/772544>; Moshe Weisberg, “Rabbi Gross: If Clinton was Elected—It Would Be a Flaw in Creation [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/772561>.

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political storm in the United States.^① In the days that followed, more women came forward and publicly accused Trump of sexually harassing and sexually assaulting them, adding fuel to the political drama.^② While numerous allegations of sexual misconduct have been made against Trump, he has never been criminally investigated or charged, though there have been several cases of civil litigation against him.

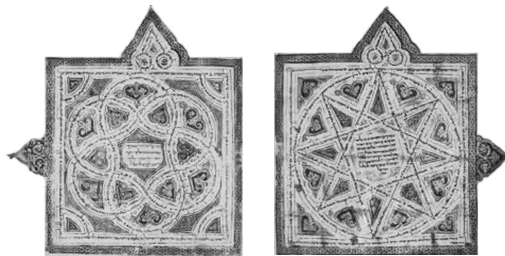
Given the centrality of the story to the presidential campaign and the importance of the American election to the ultra-Orthodox community in the US and Israel, Haredi media outlets were confronted with a development they could not ignore and that damaged their preferred candidate's electoral chances. How, then, did they choose to report on the scandal, and what similarities and differences emerged in the reports that appeared in independent outlets and party newspapers?

While not excusing Trump's unacceptable behavior and speech, stories that appeared online and in print nevertheless adopted his talking points and absolved him of wrongdoing. The reports described Trump as the victim of a political smear campaign and did not seriously engage with his sexual misconduct and infidelity. Moreover, as will be seen below, Haredi media outlets employed various euphemisms to convey that Trump had made unacceptable remarks about women without mentioning the sexually explicit nature of his remarks.

Articles on *KikarHaShabbat*, *B'HadreiHaredim*, *Haredim* 10 referred to "embarrassing recordings" that contain "problematic statements" and "harsh and ugly remarks toward women" and where he can be heard "speaking

① David Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation About Women in 2005," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html.

② See, for example: Megan Twohey and Michael Barbaro, "Two Women Say Donald Trump Touched Them Inappropriately," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/13/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html>.



rudely about women” using “derogatory language.”^① Online Haredi outlets noted the scandal had hurt Trump politically within his own party and threatened to unravel his candidacy, but none elaborated on the sexually explicit nature of what Trump specifically said about women. To do so would have crossed the boundaries of legitimate discourse and modesty. Given the general fervor with which Haredi readers follow political intrigue and the particular attention paid to the American elections, such elaboration was unnecessary; informed readers knew exactly what Trump had said.

Reports on the election scandal in Haredi dailies varied significantly in length, detail, and tone, and tended to be more reticent than the online outlets in reporting about the tape and its contents. In a short article, *Hamodia* related some of the accusations exchanged by the candidates, including the Clinton email scandal, Trump’s refusal to release his tax records, and Trump’s proposed “Muslim ban,” but avoided touching on the recording or the drama surrounding it.^②

Several days later, in an article reporting Clinton had widened her lead on Trump in the polls, *Hamodia* referred to Trump’s loss of support within the Republican party but did not explain why or that it had to do, in part, with the tape in which he made lewd comments about women.^③ *Hapeles* was only slightly more forthcoming than *Hamodia*, noting the second debate was held at the height of a public and media storm around Trump due to “problematic statements that he had made” that had caused the Republican candidate to lose significant support within his own party. While characterizing the debate as filled with “heavy barrages of insults,” the article did not elaborate on the

① Yoni Gabai, “A Battle of Tapes and Leaks on the Way to the White House [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, October 8, 2016, <https://www.kikar.co.il/world-news/211892>; David Leibovitz, “After a Collapse in the Polls: The Trump Brand Also Suffers a Painful Drop [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, October 25, 2016, <https://ch10.co.il/news/318886/>; Daniel Hertz, “Trump Versus Clinton: A Particularly Stormy Confrontation [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.kikar.co.il/world-news/212015>; Yoel and Bitelman, “Hillary Clinton Versus Donald Trump: Round Two [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, October 10, 2016, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/770690>.

② “Survey: The Democratic Candidate Won the Second Debate as Well [Hebrew],” *Hamodia*, October 11, 2016.

③ “A Sense of Panic in the Republican Party After New Poll [Hebrew],” *Hamodia*, October 13, 2016.

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nature of “the problematic statements.”^①

In contrast to *Hamodia* and *Hapeles*, *YatedNe’eman* adopted a different but common approach when covering controversial subject matter—employing condemnatory language to distinguish between the “holy” community and the secular outside, right from wrong. While this approach typically appears in editorials, *YatedNe’eman*’s A. Ben Aharon employed it in his news article, expressing his—and the paper’s—utter disgust with the state of American politics—and the state of American culture in general. Characterizing the second debate as a “mudslinging contest in front of the cameras,” *YatedNe’eman* lamented the level to which the American Republic—and its presidential candidates—had sunk, comparing the debate to something seen in “a banana republic” that revealed America’s “new and repulsive face.”^②

Unfortunately, the paper told its readers, the ugliness of the debate and the revolting manner in which the candidates spoke and conducted themselves by dragging skeletons out of each other’s respective closets had become the central story of the elections. Thus, it had to be covered.

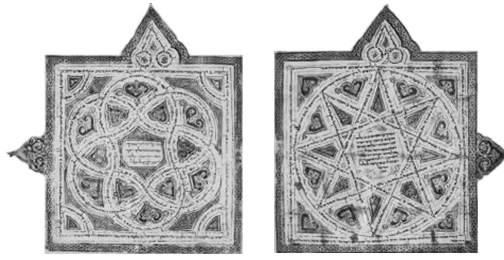
The article related that Trump had been asked multiple questions about “the tape,” including whether “he had changed since the days he spoke so harshly.” The lewdness of Trump’s remarks and the fact that they were directed at women was omitted. The article even reported Trump’s response to a question regarding his outrageous comments, in which he rhetorically asked whether Bill Clinton was not even worse than him, leaving only the knowledgeable reader to make the connection on their own between the former president’s sexual assault scandals and Trump’s lewd remarks.^③

Though *Hapeles* and *YatedNe’eman* had reported on the recordings, neither they nor the other Haredi dailies followed up with articles on additional sexual assault allegations against Trump. Only the online outlets covered the mounting complaints of sexual misconduct against Trump after the second

① Eliyahu Adler, “The US Presidential Race: The Candidates Debated a Second Time; Trump Loses Support of Republican Party [Hebrew],” *Hapeles*, October 13, 2016.

② A. Ben Aharon, “The Second Debate: A Mudslinging Contest Before the Cameras—Skeletons in the Closet Against Skeletons in the Closet [Hebrew],” *YatedNe’eman*, October 13, 2016.

③ Ibid.



debate until election day. For the dailies, the story about the recording was too big not to cover when it broke, but after that, there was no need to follow and expose their readers to the ins and outs of Trump’s sexual escapades and dalliances.

In January 2018, as Trump was completing his first year in office, the above reports regarding his sexual misconduct were in the news again and at the center of American political discourse. According to a report by *The Wall Street Journal*, Trump’s then-personal attorney Michael Cohen negotiated a US \$130,000 non-disclosure agreement with Stormy Daniels, the porn star who claimed she had had an affair with Trump in 2006 prior to the election.^① The hush money payment to Daniels was connected to a broader Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) probe into Russian interference in the election and resulted in the FBI raiding Cohen’s home and seizing documents.

However, unlike in 2016, revelations about Trump paying hush money to a porn star or his personal attorney being at the center of an FBI investigation were not addressed in online and print Haredi media save for a single article on *B’HadreiHaredim*, which focused on Russia and made passing mention of hush money paid to a “source” (*gorem*) before the election.^② It was not newsworthy, and editors and censors deemed ignoring a controversial story involving bribes and porn stars a more prudent course of action that upheld the values of modesty and avoiding gossip.

This changed dramatically in August 2018 when Cohen, appearing in a US District Court in Manhattan, implicated Trump in a federal crime. Having reached a plea deal with the government by pleading guilty to breaking campaign finance laws and tax fraud, among other charges, Cohen admitted to making two illegal payments to two women “in coordination with and at the direction of a candidate for federal office” during the 2016 election campaign to

① Joe Palazzolo and Michael Rothfeld, “Trump Lawyer Used Private Company, Pseudonyms to Pay Porn Star ‘Stormy Daniels,’” *The Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-lawyer-used-private-company-pseudonyms-to-pay-porn-star-stormy-daniels-1516315731>.

② Yanky Farber, “The FBI Raided the Offices of Trump’s Personal Attorney. He Fumes: This is a Disgrace [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, April 10, 2018, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/899486>.

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silence them and influence the election.^①

Cohen's stunning admission in court and agreement to turn state's witness against Trump, his former client and the president, was a political bombshell that Haredi media could not ignore. Yet, while both online and print Haredi outlets, except for *Haredim* 10, were careful to avoid any direct mention or suggestion that the story involved women, let alone women who were porn stars, each outlet adopted a slightly different approach to (not) reporting on the hush money payments.

In a snippet on its fourth page, *Hamodia* reported that Cohen had reached a plea agreement with authorities regarding Russian involvement in the elections, but did not offer further details and did not report on developments in the story that emerged in the days that followed.^② Like *Hamodia*, *YatedNe'eman* published only one report on Cohen, but provided readers with far greater detail. The article related the charges against Cohen, noting the lawyer's role in trying to influence the election by "paying hush money to figures outside the campaign who had embarrassing information about the president," and having done so on Trump's orders.^③ No details were given as to why the information would have embarrassed the president.

Similar to *YatedNe'eman*, *Hapeles* reported on the "dramatic development" that Cohen had hidden information from the public at Trump's direction prior to the election, arranging two payments to "sources" that could have revealed "negative information about Trump" to the public without providing further details. Moreover, the article obscured the fact that the unnamed "sources" were women.^④

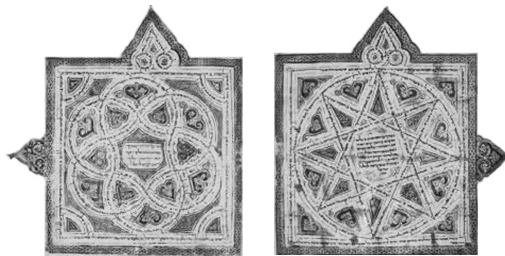
Striking a far different tone from the other three was *Hamevaser*. In a

① William K. Rashbaum, Maggie Haberman, Ben Protess, and Jim Rutenberg, "Michael Cohen Says He Arranged Payments to Women at Trump's Direction," *The New York Times*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/nyregion/michael-cohen-plea-deal-trump.html>.

② "The Trump Investigations: Campaign Manager Convicted; Former Attorney Entered into a Plea Agreement [Hebrew]," *Hamodia*, August 22, 2018.

③ R. Hofner, "The President's Former Attorney, Michael Cohen, Signed a Plea Deal [Hebrew]," *YatedNe'eman*, August 23, 2018.

④ P. Koren, "Trump's Lawyer Testifies: I Hid Information from the Public at His Direction before the Election [Hebrew]," *Hapeles*, August 23, 2018.



cover story for the paper, journalist Yaakov Lustigman claimed American law enforcement was conducting a “witch hunt” against Trump and had succeeded in turning Cohen into a state witness.^① Essentially repeating Trump’s talking points, Lustigman portrayed Cohen as a turncoat who had succumbed to the pressure and turned his back on Trump. Not a single mention of the hush money payments, the only charges on which Trump was directly implicated, appeared.

In contrast to the articles that appeared in the printed dailies, Nathan Pearl, writing for *Haredim* 10, was the most forthcoming on the nature of the hush money. Pearl wrote that Cohen had “admitted to paying hush money to two women so they would not speak about the relationships they allegedly had with Trump,” and “claimed Trump himself had ordered him to make the payments.”^② In comparison, Eli Rothman, writing for *Kikar HaShabbat*, wrote that Cohen had signed a plea deal in which he admitted that Trump ordered him to pay “to avoid serious embarrassment for himself [Trump] in the last presidential election.”^③ Rothman left it up to the reader to guess to whom or to what entity Cohen had paid the money and why the latest development in the “forbidden funds affair” was so dramatic.^④

III. Yehuda Meshi-Zahav — The “Good” Haredi

In March 2021, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* published a disturbing investigative piece revealing multiple allegations of sexual assault and sexual harassment of minors and women against Yehuda Meshi-Zahav (1959-2022), the media-savvy ultra-Orthodox founder and chairman of the ZAKA voluntary

① Yaakov A. Lustigman, “Drama in the United States: Trump’s Attorney Turned Himself In and Signed an Agreement as a State Witness with the FBI [Hebrew],” *Hamevaser*, August 22, 2018.

② Nathan Pearl, “Trump: Looking for a Good Lawyer? I Recommend Against Hiring Michael Cohen [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, August 22, 2018, <https://ch10.co.il/news/454396/>.

③ Eli Rothman, “Trump: If They Impeach Me, You Will All Be Poor [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.kikar.co.il/world-news/288597>.

④ *Ibid.*

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community emergency response organization.^① His picture plastered across the front page of *Haaretz*'s weekend edition, the article related how Meshi-Zahav had taken advantage of his position and fame to sexually abuse six victims over the course of several decades, the earliest dating to 1983 and the latest to 2011.

The investigative report came just days after Meshi-Zahav was declared the winner of the Israel Prize, the highest state-awarded prize, for his contributions to Israeli society. In the following days, more complaints of sexual abuse arose, and the first sexual assault complaint against Meshi-Zahav was filed with the police, which opened a broader investigation. In light of the accusations against him and amid the frenzy in mainstream Israeli media over the story, Meshi-Zahav announced he had resigned from his role in ZAKA and was giving up the Israel Prize.^②

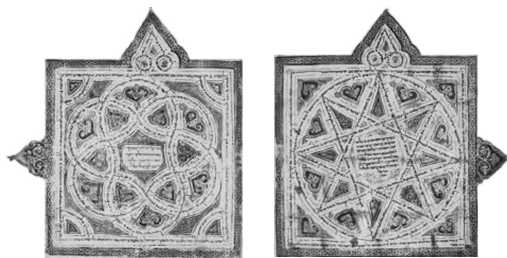
Raised in Jerusalem's ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Mea Shearim as part of the Eda Haredit community, in his youth, Meshi-Zahav was known for his public anti-Zionist activism within the ultra-Orthodox community, leading protests against the state of Israel and its institutions. He also served as the editor of the community's newspaper, *HaEda*.

Over time, however, he changed his views, infuriating some within the anti-Zionist Haredi community.^③ In the early 1990s, he founded the volunteer organization ZAKA to help identify and recover the remains of disaster victims, particularly those killed in suicide attacks. Through ZAKA, he worked closely with the Israel Police and other government institutions. Through his efforts, he was honored in 2003 as a torchbearer for Israel's Independence Day with torch-lighting ceremony. He also promoted reconciliation between the religious and secular communities in Israel and advocated for ultra-Orthodox recruitment into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and integration into

① Shira Elek and Aaron Rabinowitz, "Testimonies: Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Sexually Assaulted and Exploited Children, Minors, and Women [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, March 12, 2021.

② Aaron Rabinowitz, Shira Elek, Josh Brenner, Bar Peleg, and Jonathan Lis, "Police Will Check the Complaints Against Meshi-Zahav, Who Gave Up Israel Prize [Hebrew]," *Haaretz*, March 14, 2021.

③ Shai Eisenberg, "Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Returns to 'Eda' [Hebrew]," *B'HadreiHaredim*, January 6, 2009, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/70376>.



Israel's workforce.^①

Due to his activism, his work with the state, and his background as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, Meshi-Zahav became accepted among Israel's secular social and political elite, who viewed him as a bridge-building figure and symbol of unity within Israeli society. However, the things that made him, as an ultra-Orthodox person, acceptable among the Israeli establishment did little to endear him to the Haredi public, which considered him a marginal figure at best and someone who had “left” the community at worst.^②

While the Meshi-Zahav affair grabbed headlines in the mainstream Israeli press, as can only be expected of such a sensational criminal story, it went almost entirely unreported in ultra-Orthodox media. The dailies *YatedNe'eman*, *Hamodia*, *Hamevaser*, and *Hapeles*, as well as the weekly *Mishpacha*, did not mention the investigation at all and avoided reporting on subsequent developments in the affair, including Meshi-Zahav's suicide attempt in April 2021 and his death in June 2022 after more than a year of being in a coma. Like the printed dailies and weeklies, the oldest ultra-Orthodox website *B'HadreiHaredim* also did not cover the story. It would only mention it in June 2022, when it published an obituary about him.^③

The case of Meshi-Zahav presented a triple-fold discursive challenge because of (a) his eager cooperation with the Zionist state and his eagerness to accept the honors it bestowed on him; (b) the nature of the alleged offenses he committed, which allegedly involved homosexual acts with minors; and (c) the long, long period of the silencing of these acts in communities that take pride in their morality.

The decision of Haredi dailies not to cover the affair at all reflected a strict adherence to maintaining the “modesty” and “purity” of the “family-friendly” publications; they completely ignored a story that was no doubt the talk of the town regardless of having the techniques and tools at their disposal to cover it

① Eli Rotman, “Committee Member: The Time Has Come to Burst the Bubble of Ultra-Orthodox Recruitment [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, February 20, 2020, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/348438>.

② Zalcberg, “A Shaken Ship.”

③ Avrumi Pearlstein, “The Activist Yehuda Meshi-Zahav (z”l) Passed Away [Hebrew],” *B'HadreiHaredim*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/1405732>.

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without offending the community's religious and moral sensibilities. In this instance, they chose not to use any of those techniques.

Only *B'HadreiHaredim*'s online competitors, *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim 10*, chose to cover the affair, publishing their first articles after Meshi-Zahav resigned from ZAKA.^① Explaining the decision to cover the story despite its taboo subject matter, Chaim Iloz, the editor of *Kikar HaShabbat*, in an interview with the Religious Zionist newspaper *Makor Rishon*, explained the website could not ignore a case of this magnitude.^②

Iloz, however, emphasized that there were boundaries the website would not cross when writing on the issue of sexual abuse. He stressed that the website “did not need to go into details” but only needed to make readers aware of and “understand the seriousness of the actions and suspicions.”^③ Further, he added that the website is careful about publishing names and issuing judgment out of concern that the accusations may turn out to be unfounded and indictments against alleged criminals, dropped.^④

To stay within those boundaries, *Kikar HaShabbat* used indirect language to describe the sexual abuse allegations, stating that police were investigating “serious allegations” against Meshi-Zahav based on the testimonies of six victims he allegedly “attacked,” as reported by *Haaretz*, without elaborating further. The article quoted Meshi-Zahav at length, enabling him to portray himself — and for the article to reinforce the perception — that he was the victim of a smear campaign.

According to Meshi-Zahav, the accusations were “part of the price [he paid] for the path [he] had chosen,” while the article was no more than “an attempt to settle old scores and eliminate him.”^⑤ While informed readers could

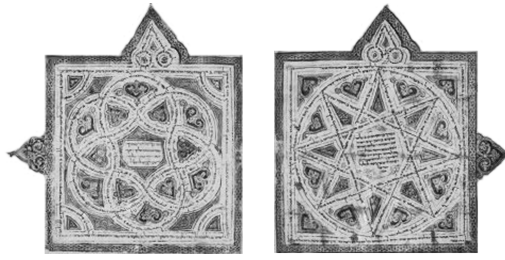
① “Meshi-Zahav Takes a Break from ZAKA and Gives Up the Israel Prize [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/387419>; Avi Katz, “Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Gives Up the Israel Prize and Takes a Break from ZAKA [Hebrew],” *Haredim 10*, March 12, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/660106/>.

② Bethel Coleman, “Silk Gloves: How Did the Ultra-Orthodox Media Deal with the Meshi-Zahav Affair? [Hebrew],” *Makor Rishon*, March 18, 2021, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/327093/>.

③ Ibid.

④ Ibid.

⑤ “Meshi-Zahav Takes a Break from ZAKA and Gives Up the Israel Prize,” *Kikar HaShabbat*.



fill in the details regarding the allegation, as the affair was a topic of discussion among the Haredi public, allowing the accused to portray himself as the victim, unchallenged, suggests greater sympathy with the accused than with the alleged victims of his abuse.

Similarly, *Haredim* 10 reported police were investigating allegations that Meshi-Zahav had “committed serious acts against women and minors” before printing, in full, Meshi-Zahav’s letter to ZAKA volunteers and workers in which he referred to the allegations as “unfounded plots,” “gossip,” and efforts to “close accounts [with him].”^① In the weeks that followed, *Haredim* 10 covered the Meshi-Zahav affair extensively, publishing a dozen articles on developments in the criminal investigation in which it continued to use indirect language so as to avoid explicitly stating the allegations had to do with sexual offenses, maintaining its use of “serious crimes” and “attacks against women and minors.”^②

A little over a month after accusations against him became public, Meshi-Zahav attempted suicide hours before a new expose on the allegations against him was to air on *Uvda*, an investigative program on Israel’s Channel 12. The macabre development presented Haredi editors with yet another choice and challenge—whether to address the taboo subject of suicide in addition to the taboo of sexual abuse and, if so, how. The dailies, as well as *Mishpacha* and *B’HadreiHaredim*, which had chosen not to address the sexual abuse allegations, remained consistent and ignored his attempted suicide as well, despite it being common knowledge within the community and within Israeli society at large.

Reporting on the suicide attempt, *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim* 10 wrote that the former ZAKA chairman had been taken to the hospital in critical

① Avi Katz, “Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Gives Up the Israel Prize and Takes a Break from ZAKA.”

② See, for example: “New Information Reaches the Police: Woman Claims Meshi-Zahav Attacked [Her] Four Years Ago [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, March 17, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/660995>; “Meshi-Zahav Affair: Some of the Victims were Summoned to Testify or File a Complaint [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, March 19, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/661181/>.

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condition after being found in his home by one of his sons.^① Without directly mentioning or suggesting Meshi-Zahav had tried to kill himself, both articles portrayed him as someone who had suffered a medical emergency whose causes were unknown.

The articles, however, indirectly suggested the possible reason for the deterioration of Meshi-Zahav's health was the combination of the recent *Haaretz* investigation into "serious acts" and "a series of abuses" attributed to him, the police investigation, and the about-to-air investigative piece on *Uvda*. No mention was made that the investigations were into alleged incidents of sexual abuse of young men and women and other minors.^②

Following Meshi-Zahav's death in June 2022 after more than a year of being in a coma, the three ultra-Orthodox websites published obituaries. *B'HadreiHaredim*, writing about the affair for the first time, referred to the sexual abuse allegations that prompted Meshi-Zahav's resignation from ZAKA as "a media storm" before stating he passed away after being in a coma without mentioning what caused his coma.^③

Its obituary, more than those that appeared in *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim* 10, embodied the community's complicated and ambivalent views of the man, paying homage to Meshi-Zahav's early activism on behalf of the community, his work in ZAKA, and for raising a Torah-observant family while also characterizing him as an outsider who had "left" the Haredi community and adopted "Israeliness."^④

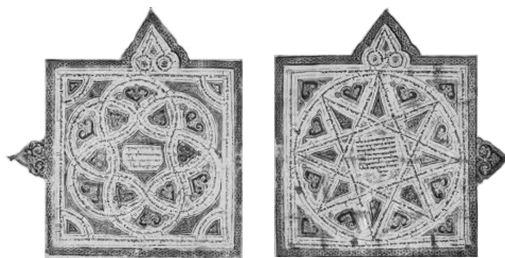
In contrast to *B'HadreiHaredim*'s obituary, those of *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim* 10 distinguished themselves from their online and print competitors in their respective attempts to acknowledge that Meshi-Zahav had attempted suicide. Both websites stated that Meshi-Zahav had entered a coma

① "Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Taken to the Hospital in Critical Condition [Hebrew]," *Kikar HaShabbat*, April 22, 2021, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/390210>; Chaim Twil, "Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Evacuated in Critical Condition; Sedated and Ventilated with Signs of Life [Hebrew]," *Haredim* 10, April 22, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/666644/>.

② Ibid.

③ Avrumi Pearlstein, "The Activist Yehuda Meshi-Zahav (z"l) Passed Away."

④ Ibid.; "A Year After: The Former Head of ZAKA Yehuda Meshi Zahav Passed Away at the Age of 62 [Hebrew]," *Haredim* 10, June 29, 2022, <https://ch10.co.il/news/752564/>.



after he had “harmed himself” and “tried to end his life” following the publication of a harsh investigation into “serious suspicions against him” that he had “committed serious acts against men and women, boys and girls.”^① Yet, even while acknowledging that Meshi-Zahav had committed a serious and reprehensible act forbidden by Jewish law by attempting to commit suicide, the websites maintained their stance that going into detail about the sexual nature of the allegations would cross a line — readers did not need to hear it from them, they already knew.

IV. Gossip Kills—The Chaim Walder Affair

Eight months after journalists Aaron Rabinowitz and Shira Elk published their expose on the Meshi-Zahav affair, the two published a second shocking report on sexual abuse allegations against Chaim Walder, a highly regarded and revered Haredi author and educator.^② Published in *Haaretz*’s weekend edition, the investigation was based on the testimonies of several women who accused Walder of sexually abusing them while they were minors.^③

Until the allegations were published, Walder had been considered a beloved and celebrated figure, particularly among the Lithuanian Haredi community. For over thirty years, he authored a weekly column in the community’s newspaper, *Yated Ne’eman*, and hosted a radio program on *Kol Chai*. He wrote dozens of books, including the widely-read children’s series “Children Speak,” that filled the shelves of ultra-Orthodox homes. He was a prominent children’s advocate and educator who established a child and family therapy center in BneiBrak, among other things.^④

Given his advocacy on behalf of children and families, the accusations of

① “After a Year in a Coma, Yehuda Meshi-Zahav Passed Away [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.kikar.co.il/death-notice/421938>; “A Year After: The Former Head of ZAKA Yehuda Meshi Zahav Passed Away at the Age of 62.”

② Aaron Rabinowitz and Shira Elk, “Women Testify: The Author Chaim Walder Took Advantage of Us Sexually When We Were Minors [Hebrew],” *Haaretz*, November 12, 2021.

③ Ibid.

④ Eli Bitan, “Ultra-Orthodox Society Falls Into Line and Renounces Walder [Hebrew],” *Makor Rishon*, January 7, 2022, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/443905/>.

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sexual abuse caught the community off-guard and left it in a state of shock, confusion, and anger. Searching for answers and clarity, the sexual abuse allegations against Walder were widely discussed and debated among the ultra-Orthodox public (to say nothing of Israeli society at large), even among rabbis, particularly on social media sites.^①

Answers and clarity, however, would not come from the Haredi media, which initially reacted to the *Haaretz* investigation, as with the Meshi-Zahav affair, with silence. Not a single story about the sexual abuse allegations appeared online or in print.

Why did these outlets — their censors and editors — choose to strictly adhere to the default approach of not reporting on such topics, particularly when they occur within the community and, in this case, involve a celebrated figure? How could *YatedNe'eman*, in light of the allegations and, to a certain degree, indirectly acknowledging their veracity, suspend Walder from the newspaper and cease printing his weekly column less than a week after the *Haaretz* investigation, but not publish a report on the matter?

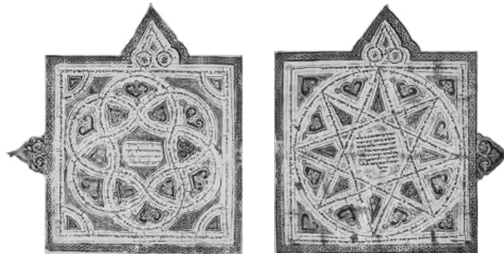
Censors and the rabbis they represented considered addressing the accusations to be crossing a red line. They feared that giving publicity to a scandal (about which most likely every Haredi household had already learned from other sources) would indicate that public and transparent discussion of the matter was considered legitimate — something the leaders of the community were eager to avoid.

However, Haredi media subject to less rabbinical control were not entirely silent. *Kikar HaShabbat* initially published an article on the affair before falling silent again, noting Walder had been suspended from the Haredi radio station *Kol Chai* due to “a series of allegations” regarding his conduct, including “serious allegations...he had behaved inappropriately towards his patients.”^②

The weekly magazine *Mishpacha*, in an editorial published two weeks

① Dana Bezalel, “This is How the Conspiracy of Silence Around the Write Chaim Walder Crumbled [Hebrew],” *Makor Rishon*, November 20, 2021, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/423359/>.

② “The Author and Educator Chaim Walder Suspended from Kol Chai Radio [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, November 17, 2021, <https://www.kikar.co.il/haredim-news/405626>.



after the allegations came to light, departed from the consensus approach of not covering stories on the subject of sexual abuse.^① It did so in an unprecedented manner, its editors having concluded that the affair, the topic dominating public discussion, could not and should not be ignored and that their magazine must play a role and express its views.^② However, the editors argued that they were adhering to the community’s boundaries regarding modesty and public shaming, which remained of utmost importance.

In an editorial entitled “No Time to Whisper,” the magazine acknowledged the pain and shock within the community while reminding readers that it was not the role of the magazine or of individuals in the community to pass judgment on serious and immoral behaviors.^③ Further, it emphasized that the discourse on the allegations, particularly ones so serious, should accord with *halakhic* guidelines, but the public domain was not the place for these discussions as they “could lead to public shaming, [figuratively] opening one’s wounds and shedding their blood.”^④ Indeed, “one injustice will not be corrected by another injustice, and not all means are kosher to achieve an objective.”^⑤ Without specifically mentioning Walder or the affair, *Mishpacha* suggested Haredi media adopt a different approach that engaged with the challenge confronting the press—confronting the sin of sexual abuse within the community without committing sin by publicly shaming victims and the accused.

It was only after Walder committed suicide more than a month later, in late December 2021, at his son’s graveside that Haredi media would engage in the affair to a greater extent, albeit to differing degrees.^⑥ As they had from the beginning, *Hamodia* and *Hamevaser* ignored Walder’s suicide and the affair entirely, neither publishing an obituary for him nor publishing an article

① “Editorial — No Time to Whisper [Hebrew],” *Mishpacha*, November 25, 2021.

② Amy Spiro, “Six Months After the Walder Abuse Scandal Broke, Has the Haredi World Seen Change?,” *Times of Israel*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/6-months-after-the-walder-abuse-scandal-broke-has-the-haredi-world-seen-change/>.

③ “Editorial — No Time to Whisper.”

④ Ibid.

⑤ Ibid.

⑥ On Walder’s suicide, see: Yehoshua Brenner, “The Author Chaim Walder Committed Suicide After Testimonies Published Against Him [Hebrew],” *Haaretz*, December 28, 2021.

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discussing the affair and acknowledging his death.

YatedNe'eman published an obituary for Walder, which was expected given Walder's status within the Lithuanian Haredi community and that he had authored a weekly column for the paper for decades. It also published a religious opinion of Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, the paper's overseer, which argued why the media was not the place for addressing issues like those involved in the Walder affair in an effort to justify and explain the silence of the Haredi press.

The obituary made no mention of the circumstances regarding his death, writing that the “renowned author” was “suddenly taken at an early age... to his heavenly home” while visiting his son's grave.^① Regarding the affair, the paper wrote that Walder “recently had been asked to temporarily stop writing his regular column and take a break from writing [in general].”^② Censors ensured that the sexual abuse allegations were not mentioned, nor was there even a hint that Walder was suspected—even convicted by a rabbinical court—of being a sexual predator. Instead, the paper maintained its “purity” by ignoring the issue so as not to present an immodest topic to its readers or publicly shame Walder.

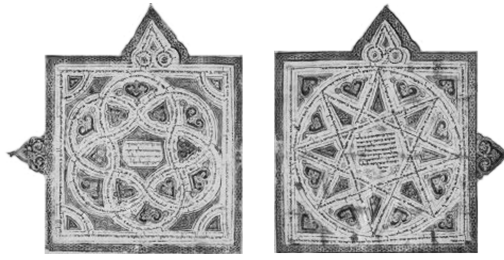
Hapeles, despite its long disdain and criticism of Walder, and its rivalry with *YatedNe'eman*, the paper from which it split in 2012, considered *YatedNe'eman*'s flattering eulogy for Walder a provocation. It published a scathing full-page rebuke reminding readers of the strict prohibition against praising the wicked who have sinned and erred.^③ The harsh rebuke appeared in the form of an exegesis without mentioning its journalistic rival, Walder, or the affair.

Employing this “condemnatory” editorial approach enabled *Hapeles* to maintain its “purity” while also reinforcing its own sense of “holiness” by teaching its rivals a moral lesson. Taking its title from Psalms 50:21, in which

① M. Berger, “Rabbi Chaim Eliezer Walder, May His Memory Be a Blessing [Hebrew],” *YatedNe'eman*, December 28, 2021.

② Ibid.

③ Rabbi AryehChaimson, “On the Agenda: ‘I Will Rebuke You and Present the Case Before Your Eyes [Hebrew],’” *Hapeles*, December 31, 2021.



God tells the wicked that He will rebuke them for their transgressions and lay the case against them before their eyes, the article proceeded to lay out “the case” against “the wicked”—Walder and *YatedNe’eman*. Urging readers not to follow *YatedNe’eman*’s path by justifying the wicked, calling evil good, and darkness light, it warned against strengthening transgressors with words and to not associate with those who agree with injustice; one does not praise an individual who transgresses the Torah and violates its commandments. Recalling Proverbs 17: 15 (“One who justifies the wicked and one who condemns the righteous, Both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord”), the article condemned those who knew an injustice had been committed yet continued to justify the transgressor.

On the same day that *Hapeles*’s rebuttal appeared, *YatedNe’eman* published the views of Rabbi Gershon Edelstein. In his “Torah Views” (*da’at Torah*) column, entitled “And You Showed Them the Way,” Edelstein, pushing back against critics, defended the decision by his paper and other Haredi outlets to not address any aspect of the Walder affair on their pages or websites.

Edelstein went so far as to suggest that Walder’s death was not a suicide, but murder, claiming public gossip and criticism drove him to take his own life. Referencing a passage from the Gemara that states, “one who publicly shames his friend [*hamalbin paneihavero*] has no share in the World to Come,”^① Edelstein accused those openly discussing the affair of publicly shaming Walder, thereby endangering their share in the World to Come.^② His arguments addressed a core question raised in public discourse and *Mishpacha*’s November editorial — whether Haredi media has a role in addressing taboo subject matter. Edelstein’s answer was clear — no, it did not, and to do so would amount to engaging in sin and emulating the behavior of secular Jews.

① *b. BavaMetzia* 59a. The passage in the Gemara addresses King David’s affair with Bathsheba and what God’s judgment is on one who engages in intercourse with a married woman. According to the text, such a man’s punishment is execution, but he has a share in the World to Come. However, the one who publicly humiliates another in public does not have a share in the World to Come, rendering the transgression of public shaming worse than adultery.

② Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, “And You Showed Them the Way [Hebrew],” *YatedNe’eman*, December 31, 2021.

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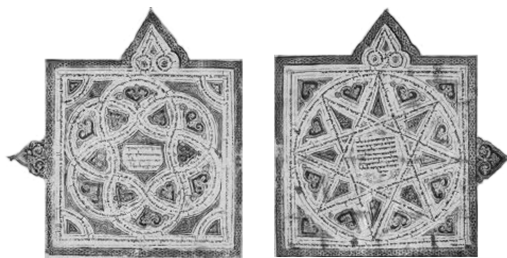
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Without mentioning Walder by name, Edelstein's opinion made a series of interrelated points on the issues of gossip and public shaming surrounding the affair — both the sexual abuse allegations and his suicide. Edelstein argued victims must consult with the appropriate authorities so the matter can be dealt with confidentially and with discretion, emphasizing that giving testimony (about sexual abuse) does not constitute “gossip” (*lashon hara*) and that “with discretion, there is wisdom.” Those spreading information, especially explicit and obscene descriptions of sexual abuse, in the media who are not personally affected by the matter are not helping the victims, but causing greater harm rather than good. Edelstein expressed his shock at how “the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” — the Haredim — could follow the path of “the evildoers” (*harasha'im*, e.g., secular Jews) by engaging in public gossip and seeking “revenge” through public shaming, stating the one who does so transgresses the Torah and is considered a murderer.^①

Turning his attention to the media, Edelstein bluntly stated that the media was not the place for addressing issues like those involved in the Walder affair. Newspapers and journalists covering the story were committing the prohibited act of public shaming and were responsible for ruining lives, “shedding blood,” and murdering those about whom they were publishing. In ruining people's lives, newspapers and journals were not acting in accordance with Jewish law, which dictates matters must be dealt with in a professional and discreet manner. His unambiguous and broad criticism of the “terrible faults” of modern mass media that covered the affair, however, was not enough.

Going further, Edelstein asserted the moral superiority of Haredi newspapers and of rabbinical editorial oversight and censorship, stating that ultra-Orthodox newspapers stood a world apart from their contemporaries by continuing to act responsibly by deferring to the rabbis in determining what issues should not be reported and what should be ignored. In other words, rabbinical authority would be upheld, and no one should expect the traditional ultra-Orthodox printed press to change its approach to these matters.

^① Rabbi Gershon Edelstein, “And You Showed Them the Way [Hebrew],” *YatedNe'eman*, December 31, 2021.



Edelstein suggested that other Haredi media outlets should consider themselves warned that deviating from the accepted approach would amount to transgressing Jewish law. Yet, was his warning warranted?

Given the perception of Haredi news sites as “free and independent” news sources that abjure the rabbinical editorial oversight of the daily press, it was assumed their coverage of the affair would match or even exceed *Mishpacha*’s. Yet, until Walder’s death, only *Kikar HaShabbat* had published anything about the affair, *B’HadreiHaredim* and *Haredim* 10 choosing to ignore it like the traditional press. All three, however, published obituaries for Walder that differed only slightly in their content, euphemistically noted his committing suicide, and carefully avoided casting judgment on or shaming Walder.

B’HadreiHaredim and *Kikar HaShabbat* ran similar headlines on their websites stating that “at the age of 53, the author Chaim Walder, of blessed memory, passed away,”^① while *Haredim* 10’s headline stated, “the author and educator Chaim Walder was found lifeless next to his son’s grave.”^② Their obituaries euphemistically spoke of the circumstances of Walder’s death as being “unfortunate” and “tragic.”^③ *B’HadreiHaredim* did not mention the affair, while *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim* 10 wrote of “serious accusations that he had behaved in an inappropriate manner” and “serious suspicions [Walder] had committed serious acts.”^④ The most fundamental difference between the obituaries published online and that published in *YatedNe’eman* was *Kikar HaShabbat* and *Haredim* 10’s decision to mention the accusations against Walder.

Haredim 10, however, set itself apart further from the other two online outlets and the printed press. Its obituary was the only one to mention that Walder’s death came shortly after Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu, the head of the Safed

① “At Only Age 53, the Author Chaim Walder, May His Memory Be a Blessing, Passed Away [Hebrew],” *Kikar HaShabbat*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.kikar.co.il/death-notice/408708>; “Blessed be the True Judge: The Author Chaim Walder Passed Away at 53 [Hebrew],” *B’HadreiHaredim*, December 27, 2021, <https://www.bhol.co.il/news/1318641>.

② Chaim Twil, “The Author and Educator Chaim Walder was Found Lifeless Next to His Son’s Grave [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, December 27, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/711348/>.

③ Ibid.; “At Only Age 53,” *Kikar HaShabbat*; “Blessed be the True Judge,” *B’HadreiHaredim*.

④ Chaim Twil, “The Author and Educator Chaim Walder was Found Lifeless Next to His Son’s Grave.”

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rabbinical court, had announced his ruling against him based on the testimonies of 22 women.^① Further, the website published multiple articles on the affair, including on the rabbinical court's proceedings, exploring the affair's impact on Walder's victims and Haredi society at large, and how to discuss the affair with children.^②

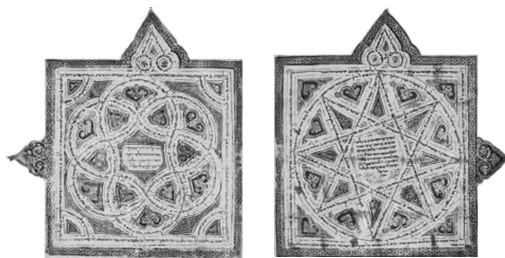
Haredim 10 reported on an interview Eliyahu gave to the Israeli radio station *Reshet Bet* in which he declared that he was not surprised that Walder committed suicide, calling it “an attempt to silence the victims.” Going further, Eliyahu stated, “such people do not go to Heaven,” comparing the severity of Walder's acts to murder and even expressing a degree of relief that Walder was dead, stating “the world had become a bit purer” as “dozens of other girls had been saved from harm.”^③

Only the weekly *Mishpacha* raised, in the context of the affair, the question of what the role of the Haredi press is when such scandals arise. Though not a direct response to Edelstein's *da'at Torah*, *Mishpacha* published a column entitled “We Cannot Ignore,” in which the magazine's editors doubled down on their position. As they had in November, the magazine argued that the ultra-Orthodox community, including its major media outlets, must not evade addressing the serious allegations against Walder (though it did not mention his name). To remain silent and try to run away from it would be irresponsible; the easy, evasive path was to be avoided. The moment demanded a response, despite the complicated nature of the

① Chaim Twil, “The Author and Educator Chaim Walder was Found Lifeless Next to His Son's Grave.” On the Safed Rabbinical Court and its judgment against Walder, see, for example: Dana Betzalel, “Rabbi Eliyahu: We Received Serious Testimonies from Individuals Harmed by Chaim Walder [Hebrew],” *Makor Rishon*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.makorrishon.co.il/news/423931/>.

② See, for example: “How Will the Chaim Walder Tragedy Affect the Ultra-Orthodox Public's Attitude Toward Assaults? [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, December 28, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/711639/>; “The Chaim Walder Affair: What Do You Say to Children Now? A Parental Educator Explains [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, December 28, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/711704/>; “Chaim Walder Affair — Court Secretary Reveals: They Presented Evidence, They Burst into Tears [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, December 29, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/711886/>.

③ “Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu on the Late Writer Chaim Walder: He Will Not Reach Heaven [Hebrew],” *Haredim* 10, December 28, 2021, <https://ch10.co.il/news/711635/>.



affair, declaring, “woe to us if we speak and woe to us if we don’t.”^①

The editorial acknowledged that “these issues have never been discussed in the ultra-Orthodox community nor in an ultra-Orthodox newspaper. On the other hand, the ultra-Orthodox community has never faced such a complex, difficult, talked about, and irrepressible hour.”^② Further, it lamented that the affair managed to break down the defensive walls the community has built to protect its children and those used by the ultra-Orthodox press to avoid dealing with difficult issues, as avoiding the issue offers “protection” in difficult times and “protects children from information that may harm their souls.”^③ Yet, the unprecedented manner in which the affair was being discussed among the Haredi public rendered the above meaningless in the eyes of the magazine’s editors. They asked, what good is a policy of silence when children are already aware?

Challenging the common view that media was not the place for such talk, the editors stated that the role of the media was to be a responsible, involved actor that leads the desired social process under the guidance of spiritual authorities. However, as they had before, the editors emphasized that the magazine would do so “only according to the Torah and rabbinic authority, and will guard against crossing halakhic and moral boundaries that are forbidden to cross.”^④

Conclusion

The way in which the scandals above were (and more often were not) reported reveals Haredi media outlets, regardless of rabbinical editorial oversight, adhere to and respect the community’s religious boundaries on gossip, public shaming, and modesty when considering what is fit to print. Ultra-Orthodox media does not serve as a platform for reporting news of public interest, but rather as an agent delineating the borders of legitimate public speech.

① “Editorial — We Cannot Ignore [Hebrew],” *Mishpacha*, December 30, 2021.

② Ibid.

③ Ibid.

④ Ibid.

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Yet the boundaries are negotiated differently. This results in a degree of diversity among Haredi media outlets, whose differences are nuanced by the taboo subjects they choose to (not) cover, how they are framed, and what language is (not) used.

The dailies, directly and tightly controlled by censors on behalf of rabbinical leaders, are the most averse to publishing stories on sexual offenses, particularly those that emerge from within the community, but the above examples illustrate that the weeklies and websites also share the aversion. Still, websites are more likely to publish articles on sexual offenses, employing a variety of linguistic techniques, including using neutral terms, euphemistic language, or omitting problematic words and phrases.

Yet, the commitment to publishing “clean” news that avoids “inappropriate” or “forbidden” content remains paramount, as not doing so may result in the loss of subscribers and readers. The result of this commitment means Haredi media outlets remain spaces where meaningful discourse on sexual offenses within and outside the community is absent.

Some thought the Walder scandal would constitute a turning point in the relationship between the Haredi community and the media it consumes when it comes to the subject of sexual offenses. Given that the dailies maintained their traditional approach to not address these issues at all and that websites largely failed to be free and independent voices, it is doubtful whether any significant change has indeed occurred in recent years. Only with the revelation of a new scandal will one be able to tell if the walls of silence have been broken and the Haredi media is more ready to serve as a space for such discourse.