NEWS & POLITICS ARCHIVES

Bad Rabbi: Tales of Extortion and Torture Depict a Divorce Broker's Brutal Grip on the Orthodox Community

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This much Abraham Rubin knew: He was lying, blindfolded and handcuffed, in the back of a van. He could feel it winding through the streets. He figured at least three men were in there with him, plus the driver. There was the one who'd stepped out of nowhere and punched him in the face as he walked down 56th Street in Brooklyn's Borough Park neighborhood just a few minutes earlier. And two, maybe three others who'd bull-rushed him and threw him into the van.

"We only want you to be a Jew," one of them said in Yiddish.

The van stopped. Rubin heard a door open and the men getting out. "The rabbi is coming," one said. Then the sound of two or more men climbing in beside him.

One asked Rubin in English to repeat what he was about to say.

"On the fourth day of the week, the 10th day of the month of Heshvan in the year 5757 in the creation of the world . . ."

It was the beginning of an oath, and the 31-year-old Rubin, a rabbi himself, knew the words that would follow.

He told the man that he would not repeat them.

That's when the punching began. A relentless onslaught of fists, pummeling his torso and face. Then came the stun gun, jolting Rubin's entire body, over and over. Rubin felt the men pull down his pants, felt the device applied to his genitals. Again and again.

Eventually, the words flowed from him.

". . . willingly consent, being under no duress, to release, discharge, and divorce you to be on your own, you, my wife . . .

". . . so that you are permitted and have authority over yourself to go and marry any man you desire . . .

". . . This shall be for you from me a bill of dismissal, a letter of release, and a document of absolution, in accordance with the law of Moses and Israel."

Three hours after snatching him off the street, at around 10 o'clock on the night of October 23, 1996, his abductors left Rubin, still blindfolded and handcuffed, at the entrance to a cemetery.

Six days a week, 13th Avenue, Borough Park's central commercial thoroughfare, bustles. The sidewalks are crammed, a steady stream of patrons flowing in and out of the many shops. The storefronts, bearing signs written in Hebrew script, are diverse — from shoes to books to fruits and vegetables. Pedestrian attire, on the other hand, is unvarying. The men wear long black coats and wide-brimmed black felt hats. Many carry a book tucked under an arm. The women, who favor long black skirts and running shoes, push strollers.

On Saturdays, 13th Avenue feels like an empty movie set. Even the Duane Reade is closed. Residents of Borough Park honor the Sabbath. According to a 2011 study by the United Jewish Appeal–Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, more than three-fourths of the neighborhood's population of 170,000 is Jewish. The district's city councilman, David Greenfield, has called Borough Park "the Jewish capital of the United States."

The first local synagogue opened its doors in 1904, about the time Jewish immigrants began building a community in the neighborhood. Waves of new families from Europe arrived following each World War. Through the second half of the 20th century, as Americans of all faiths uprooted for the suburbs, Borough Park's population turned increasingly Orthodox, a trend fueled by an influx of immigrants who practiced the ultra-conservative Haredi strain of Judaism. The UJA–Federation study reported that 80 percent of Borough Park Jews classified themselves as Orthodox. Only 2 percent classified themselves as Reform, the religion's most popular liberal denomination in the U.S. Among the respondents, 94 percent answered that their "closest friends are mostly Jewish."

In Borough Park, faith is deeply embedded into day-to-day life. Present in buildings: Affixed to the right side of nearly every doorframe is a mezuzah. Present in travel: Inside the B110 bus, which offers special express service between Borough Park and Williamsburg but doesn't accept MetroCards, a sign reads, "When boarding a crowded bus with standing passengers in the front, women should board the back door after paying the driver in the front." Present in disagreements: Community members rarely take their legal disputes to civil court, choosing instead to settle them through a Jewish rabbinical court, a *beth din*. An insular legal system governed by Jewish law, the *beth din* perhaps best embodies the community's self-sufficiency.

For the court's proceedings, litigants typically hire an advocate, known as a *to'ein*, to argue the case. In Borough Park, few *to'anim* were as prominent as Mendel Epstein.

Epstein, now 68, was known to many in the Orthodox Jewish community as a devoted feminist. Stout and bald, with a bushy beard and a steely demeanor, he specialized in divorces. Over three decades he built a reputation for effectively representing women. Says one local rabbi, "He presented himself as a champion for the underdog."

The women who came to Epstein often had a singular problem: Their husbands refused to grant them a *get*, a document without which an Orthodox Jewish marriage cannot be dissolved. The rule can be traced to the biblical Book of Deuteronomy, and its sway remains stifling: Without a *get*, a woman who remarries is considered adulterous. Any children fathered by her new husband are illegitimate under Orthodox law and prohibited from marrying within the faith.

The patriarchal nature of Orthodox marriages can lead to particularly contentious divorces. With custody and alimony at stake, a man may be tempted to use his biblically granted leverage in negotiations: No *get* until his terms are met. Though the practice is frowned upon, it is so pervasive that there's a word for a woman whose husband refuses to grant a *get*: an *agunah*, which translates from Hebrew as "chained woman."

"The *get* is often the last vestige of control that an abusive man has over his wife," says Rabbi Jeremy Stern, director of the Organization for the Resolution of Agunot, a nonprofit advocacy group for chained women. "*Agunot* are among the most vulnerable members of the Jewish community."

The New York legislature tried to address the problem, passing a law in 1983 that forbids the state's courts to grant a divorce if the spouse who filed for it has not "taken all steps to remove all barriers to [the other's] remarriage." Another law, passed in 1992, allows courts to consider "barriers to marriage" when setting alimony and dividing property. "There are limitations to both *get* laws that make it so they do not resolve the *agunot* problem in New York state," says Stern, who encourages couples to sign a prenuptial agreement that legally requires a husband to pay his wife a fee for each day he holds out on a *get*. "The solution fundamentally lies in the hands of the rabbis and the Jewish community."

A *beth din* provides a forum for *get* mediation, but it does not guarantee that a woman will find a sympathetic ear. "In many cases the Jewish religious court is on the side of the husband," says Samuel Heilman, a professor of Jewish studies at Queens College. "Both sides don't have equal power. What can she do? She has no wiggle room. She's living in an environment and society where she has no control."

Epstein was an aggressive advocate, versed in scripture, a masterful orator before *beth din* judges. A fellow rabbi likens hashing out cases with Epstein to negotiating with a Wall Street lawyer. Says another, "He was the guy you went to to get the job done."

Larry Gordon, editor of the *5 Towns Jewish Times* newspaper, recalls an evening outside a synagogue several months ago when he spoke with two men about Epstein. One man said he'd hired the rabbi to handle his daughter's divorce. The other man said Epstein had worked for his uncle's ex-wife and pursued a legal action that has barred the uncle from seeing his kids for the past 15 years. "The reason I hate him is the reason you use him for your daughter," Gordon remembers the second man saying.

Epstein publicly advocated for women's empowerment. In 1989 he published a book, *A Woman's Guide to the Get Process*, which advised wives on their religiously sanctioned options when seeking divorce. He wrote columns on the subject for the *Jewish Press*. Earlier this year, he codified his philosophy, unveiling "The Bill of Rights of a Jewish Wife" in the pages of the *5 Towns*. One right states, "A wife must be treated with respect and not be abused. A woman in an abusive relationship has a right to seek a *get*." Another: "A husband is obligated to honor and respect his wife's parents." A third: "She is entitled to be supported by her husband."

He wrote it, the author explains in his introduction, "to clarify and strengthen the rights of the Jewish wife because I am disturbed by the number of women who find themselves in unbearably difficult situations."

The manifesto circulated through the Orthodox blogosphere, drawing praise and sparking long threads of debate. Epstein's position had long been accepted by those at the progressive end of the Orthodox Jewish spectrum. But Epstein himself is a Haredi Jew.

"It was a bold statement, because that's very rare to break ranks and step out of the mold that is the Orthodox Jewish community," says Gordon, who interviewed Epstein in August. "Sometimes the view of the elders is a bit archaic and needs some revision to stay in stride with the times. He presented himself as a man on the cutting edge who was willing to take that bold initiative."

More than one local rabbi says Epstein came across as a "knight in shining armor" to *agunot* in the most desperate situations.

"He says he is the undertaker of failed marriages," says Gordon. "The relationship dies; someone has to bury it."

Adds the newspaper editor: "It's dirty work. It's not pretty."

The women met with Amy Neustein in a synagogue after dark. Neustein's father, Rabbi Abraham Neustein, was a respected educator at the Jewish Center for Brighton Beach and he had a set of keys to the building. Neustein, then 27, had divorced her husband three years earlier, in 1983, and had moved back in with her parents so she could devote more time to the custody battle for her three-year-old daughter. A sociologist by trade, she helped out on her father's off-the-clock project.

Rabbi Neustein ran a sort of Underground Railroad for abused women in the community. It was a delicate matter. "If the women were caught challenging what their husbands had done to them," Amy Neustein says, "they would be subject to such terrible reproach in the Orthodox Jewish community that their chances of marrying again would be nil." So two or three times a week, Neustein's father drove the women to the Jewish Center's *bais medrash*, the prayer room where he taught, and they told her their stories: of domestic violence, of crumbling marriages, of *get* refusals.

One night in the fall of 1986, a woman named Deena talked with Neustein. Soft-spoken, she'd been sheltered all her life. "Naïve," Neustein remembers. Her story began the way many did: abusive husband won't grant *get*.

Deena went on to explain that her friends had referred her to a man who was known to help women in her situation. "He told her that the abuse denial was very much entrenched in the community; that the *beth din* favored men; that women were losing children and not getting divorces and there was nothing she could do; that she would remain a woman in chains for the rest of her life; that she wouldn't get a divorce in any other way than through him," Neustein recalls.

Soon after speaking with the man, Deena had second thoughts. He'd guaranteed he could persuade her husband to grant the *get*, but he was charging her thousands of dollars and was suspiciously secretive about his methods. Eventually Deena learned from others that the man was rumored to use violence to coerce *gets* out of stubborn husbands. So she told the man she'd changed her mind. She hinted that she might report him to authorities. In response, he told her she was about to make a terrible mistake. If she didn't accept his services, he said, she would lose her children, she would never marry again, "no one would ever want her, and the community would align with the husband," Neustein reports.

Neustein wasn't familiar with the man, a *to'ein* named Mendel Epstein. She advised Deena to "stay strong," "keep fighting," and they'd figure out a solution. The two women spoke a few more times over the next couple of months. And then Neustein never heard from Deena again. To this day she doesn't know where Deena went, but she heard the woman may have left the city.

In the years that followed, Epstein became a common thread between many of Neustein's nighttime meetings in the *bais medrash*. Most stories followed a similar arc: a desperate woman turns to Epstein, decides not to follow through with his plan, faces extortion.

There were some exceptions. In 1997, for example, Neustein met with a woman named Libby. She came from a poor family, Libby said, but her husband was a wealthy, well-known member of the Orthodox community. He was also abusive: When she was six months pregnant, Libby told Neustein, he beat her until she miscarried. Desperate, Libby turned to Mendel Epstein. The rabbi offered one solution: He'd have her husband give her $10,000 if she left the country and promised to keep quiet.

Neustein advised her to reject the deal, and to bring the spousal abuse to light.

A few days later, Libby phoned Neustein from the airport and apologized. She had a one-way ticket to Israel. "I'm giving in," she said.

Over a decade and a half, Neustein estimates, two dozen women came to her in fear of Epstein.

Meanwhile, in a one-room office in Crown Heights, a family therapist named Monty Weinstein was hearing stories, too. Weinstein founded Father's Rights Metro, a nonprofit group that assisted men in custody disputes. Weinstein remembers the first time he heard Epstein's name: In the mid-1980s, an Orthodox Jew approached him with a farfetched tale about how he'd been jumped by thugs and beaten until he agreed to recite the *get* oath.

"I was skeptical," Weinstein says. "In fact, I didn't believe it. I knew this guy must be a kook."

Several weeks later, though, another man came in with the same story. Then another. Some told of beatings, others of threatening phone calls: Grant the *get* or you'll be accused of child abuse; grant the *get* or you'll never see your kids again; grant the *get*, or else. By the time Weinstein shuttered the nonprofit in 1995, he says, he'd encountered more than a dozen men who'd been assaulted or intimidated over a *get*.

Such acts of physical coercion go back to ancient times, when a Jewish man could legally be flogged until he relented. In the early 20th century in certain parts of Europe, Queens College professor Heilman says, a woman's father might hire neighborhood toughs to rough up a son-in-law who refused to grant a *get*.

But refusals persist, and so do beatings. If anything, an increasingly mobile society has amplified the temptation to resort to violence. In the past, a community might shun a recalcitrant husband. Nowadays the man can simply relocate. "It's a modern-day problem because now men can start over," says Rabbi Shlomo Weissmann, director of Beth Din of America, a Manhattan-based rabbinical court that handles more cases than any *beth din* outside of Israel. "Before mobilization, he's stuck in his community, where there's a stigma."

Certain forms of coercion are unanimously accepted in divorce disputes. The Organization for the Resolution of Agunot uses a variety of social and economic pressures to persuade a man to grant a *get*. Jeremy Stern says he'll stage protests outside a recalcitrant husband's home or workplace and have lawyers look into civil litigation. He asks the man's synagogue to bar him from entry. In some instances, he has asked a husband's employer to fire him. If the man owns a business, he calls for a boycott.

Sometimes the measures work. Stern recalls one man who gave the *get* after 20 weeks of protest outside his house. Another relented as he faced a third stint in jail for contempt of court. But of the 50 cases Stern sees each year, about half are rolled over from the year prior. Some have dragged on for six, seven, 11 years. (A husband's stubbornness should not be underestimated. In Israel, where *beth din* rulings are legally binding, a husband can be incarcerated for refusing to grant a *get*. One such man, Yehia Abraham, spent 32 years in prison rather than agree to the divorce. Abraham died behind bars in 1994.)

"You can coerce," says Heilman. "The question is: What coercion can you use?"

In the 12th century, in his Jewish law codex *Mishneh Torah*, the scholar Maimonides described the justification for physical coercion: "If the law mandates that a person grant his wife a divorce, and he refuses, a Jewish court, in any time or place, may beat him until he says, 'I am willing' and writes the writ of divorce. . . . It is only that his evil inclination has overpowered him. So if he is beaten so that his evil inclination is weakened, and he says, 'I am willing,' he has willingly divorced."

Most rabbis these days believe it's unacceptable to beat a husband in pursuit of a *get*. Weissmann and Stern say a *get* procedure isn't legitimate under Jewish law if it violates secular penal codes.

"On one side, you are allowed to coerce a recalcitrant husband who refuses to give a *get*," Heilman explains. "On the other side, you are required to abide by the law of the land, and assault is not part of the law."

Amy Neustein often met with law enforcement officials to provide background on investigations that involved the Orthodox community. She first dropped Epstein's name in December 1986, when an investigator from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York visited her house to discuss possible financial fraud among rabbis. Though she had only the anecdotal stories she'd heard from troubled women, she suspected Epstein was a "rogue" running an extortion racket. (The *Voice* contacted spokesmen at the U.S. Attorney's Offices for the Eastern and Southern Districts of New York as well as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, all of whom declined to confirm or deny whether their agencies have any files on Mendel Epstein.)

Monty Weinstein, too, voiced his concerns. Through the late 1980s and early '90s, he says, he described what he had heard about Epstein in letters to the Kings County District Attorney's Office and to various Brooklyn judges. In 1991, he staged a protest outside Epstein's Midwood home. He recalls that about 25 people showed up, some holding "Stop Mendel Epstein" signs.

Most say that by the mid-'90s, Epstein's kidnapping ring had become an open secret. "The whole community knew this," says Stern. "If someone wanted someone beaten up, Epstein would be the guy."

After years of operating with seeming impunity, Epstein himself wasn't exactly secretive about his unconventional methods. In an interview for the 2011 documentary *Women Unchained*, the rabbi told of a desperate wife who came to him after her husband took off with their child. "She heard I have an ability to do things outside the normal parameters, outside normal channels," he said.

By the logic Epstein presented, he was a righteous vigilante, defending helpless women who had nowhere else to turn.

"He took advantage of their vulnerability," says Stern, adding that Epstein's motivation was not about advancing women's rights, but about enlarging his own bank account. "A gun for hire," he says.

The marriage of Abraham Rubin and Chaya Mund didn't last long, but the couple's divorce was protracted and messy. They wed in 1986; in 1990, Mund moved to Montreal with their two children, according to court documents. Two years later, a civil court granted her a divorce. Rubin later claimed in court that he gave Mund a list of 30 rabbis he was willing to work with for the *get* hearing and she countered with her own list. (The *Voice* was unable to locate Mund to seek comment for this story.)

"That is one of the biggest fault lines in any acrimonious Jewish divorce case," says Shlomo Weissmann, speaking generally. "Some Jewish courts might have a reputation for being biased in favor of the men. Some might have a reputation for being biased in favor of the women. So the man and woman might disagree in terms of where to go."

Jewish law states that when the parties can't agree on a court, each side picks a rabbi, those two select a third, and the three form an ad hoc *beth din*. Rubin claimed Mund wouldn't agree to this process, and that he'd refused to grant the *get* until they could present their case to a *beth din* he deemed impartial. For four years, the stalemate persisted.

In April 1996, Rubin told a friend, Rabbi Elya Amsel, that a group of rabbis was convening a *beth din* to mediate his divorce proceedings. Mund had selected the rabbis and Rubin assumed the men would be biased. He refused to attend. According to an affidavit Amsel later filed in court, Amsel offered to go in Rubin's stead.

The *beth din* was held at the Yeshiva Torah Vodaas in Ditmas Park. Among the several men present, according to Amsel, were Rabbi Israel Belsky, who taught a class at the yeshiva; Rabbi Martin Wolmark, a respected educator from upstate; and Mendel Epstein.

Belsky told Amsel that Rubin had already missed a hearing in December. Because Rubin again failed to show up, Amsel recalled Belsky saying, he'd be tried in absentia and the judges would authorize the use of force to secure a *get*. "We'll physically give him beatings," Belsky said in Yiddish, according to Amsel.

The October 1996 assault left Rubin bruised and bloodied. A passing motorist saw him and took him to the police station, where officers removed his handcuffs and transported him to a hospital. As he recuperated, Rubin set out to compile evidence against the men he suspected were behind the attack.

He had an associate make phone calls to some of the men involved, posing as a rabbi claiming that Rubin had contacted him to try to have the *get* reversed. The caller made it clear that he had no qualms with the kidnapping, and that he was simply hoping to confirm that the *get* was valid. Rubin's friend Barry Markowitz later filed an affidavit stating that he set up a voice-recording system and listened in on the calls.

On November 16 and December 10, 1996, a "Rabbi Wieder" made calls to Belsky. In a transcript of the conversations, translated from Yiddish to English and later filed in court, Belsky describes what he knew about Rubin: "We heard this person is such a rotten animal that there is no equal on this earth." Belsky goes on to explain that he and other rabbis held a tribunal and "the verdict was that there should be compulsion." He stresses that he was not present at the beating but says, "I was in agreement, after many weeks and weeks of consideration and discussing the compulsion itself."

"If he deserves the beatings, then he deserves it," the man masquerading as Wieder responds. "You felt that he deserves it, then good."

"Yes, it's very hard on my heart," Belsky replies. "I don't keep a record, but it was the first time which I have agreed to such a thing." (Belsky, who denied in court having participated in the attack, did not respond to interview requests from the *Voice*. Neither did his lawyer, Robert Rimberg.)

On December 28, 1996, and January 1, 1997, "Rabbi Rosen" phoned Yaakov Goldstein, the scribe tasked with transcribing Rubin's *get*. According to the transcript, Rosen asks whether Rubin was "clear of mind the whole time"; otherwise the *get* would be invalid. Goldstein replies in the affirmative. In response to a series of questions about the abduction, Goldstein is more than forthcoming.

"You have to watch the man, what his habits are, where he goes, how and where you can grab him," Goldstein offers. "If you have a plan, then you call the people who do the kidnapping."

Goldstein volunteers that Wolmark was in charge of the *get* proceedings, and that the physical abuse was handled by "two people from Epstein — that's his work." He knew Epstein from previous *get*-related kidnapping attempts, both of them "unsuccessful," Goldstein says. There was a man in Baltimore 10 years back, and a man upstate in Monsey "several months ago."

By Goldstein's reckoning, the Rubin *get* went smoothly. He tells Rosen that he waited outside the van while Wolmark and two others secured the oath.

Rosen asks how the coercion worked.

“There is such a thing called a stun gun,” Goldstein explains. “And they put such a tape or something so that it shouldn’t leave a mark on the surface. They administer electric shocks and it’s not a dangerous thing. It’s not a thing that can damage or kill.”

But from outside the van, Goldstein says, he knew when the men were employing the stun gun. “It makes a noise,” he says. “I heard him screaming.”

Goldstein goes on to tell Rosen that after releasing Rubin, he and his cohorts met with Chaya Mund at the home of a relative of Wolmark in Flatbush. With the *get* in hand, they performed a ceremony to make the divorce official.

“We . . . went into someone’s basement and we said, ‘Don’t ever talk to anyone about this,’” Goldstein says. “I don’t even know whether [Wolmark’s family members] knew what was going on in there.”

On January 4, 1997, Rubin went to the home of a friend, Rabbi Shiah Director, with a box of cassette tapes. As Director would later explain in a statement filed in court, Rubin told him that when he’d given copies to the police department, an officer had advised that he not keep the originals at his own home. Director agreed to store them in his study.

Six days later, a fire broke out in Director’s house. No one was home at the time, and the tapes were not damaged.

When Rubin filed a civil suit seeking to hold Belsky, Epstein, Wolmark, and others responsible for his kidnapping, court documents show that he did not submit any statements from witnesses on his behalf. The defendants filed a motion denying the accusations. “Mr. Rubin cannot state with any personal knowledge or certainty” who was present during his attack, defense attorney Robert Rimberg contended. “Mr. Rubin was blindfolded.” After Rubin countered with a motion simply restating the charges in the complaint, a Kings County Supreme Court judge dismissed the case.

Rubin appealed and this time persuaded five community members to file affidavits or amicus briefs.

“It was public knowledge since about 1990, when it came to my personal attention, that Martin Wolmark together with Mendel Epstein engage underworld thugs to assist them in executing coerced gets,” wrote Rabbi Tzvi Dov Abraman.

Rabbi Abraham Rapaport wrote that Wolmark “wants to make his name in the Jewish community, and was under the erroneous impression that lynching recalcitrant husbands would establish him as a leading rabbi.”

Amsel stated in a sworn affidavit that the fire at Director’s house had made him afraid to testify. (The cause of the blaze remained a mystery, Director told the court.) Amsel asserted he’d heard that potential witnesses were receiving threatening phone calls. “I therefore decided that it was not worth it for me to compromise my life and safety,” he wrote.

Markowitz felt similar fears. “It was my intention to testify but subsequently I refused to cooperate with Rabbi Rubin, particularly after hearing Yaakov Goldstein reveal how ordinary and routine it is for him and his goons to abduct and torture people with stun guns,” he wrote. (Director and Rapaport have since died. Calls to phone numbers listed under Abraman’s and Markowitz’s names went unanswered.)

On the grounds that the appeal targeted the rabbis accused of ordering the beatings, not the men who executed the assault, the Kings County Supreme Court dismissed the case in 2000. “No triable issues of fact exist,” Judge William Garry ruled.

The criminal case seemed more promising. In early 1998, Rubin took his story public, agreeing to an interview with *Newsday*‘s Dan Morrison.

“While no one has ever been prosecuted for a *get*-related attack in New York City, that may soon change,” Morrison wrote. Detective Robert Rodenburg of the NYPD’s 66th Precinct said the police work had gone well. “The investigators spent an awful lot of time doing this case and it was really nitpicked to do it right,” he told Morrison. “It was done as well as any homicide case could be done. Just like not every homicide case gets solved, will this case get solved? That’s up to the D.A.’s Office.”

Assistant District Attorney Michael Vecchione filed an affidavit in Rubin’s civil case, stating, “I have been investigating the case involving Abraham Rubin and his claims concerning criminal activity for several months. . . . I have asked for, and received from Abraham Rubin a number of documents, tape recordings, and other information concerning his allegations. . . . Mr. Rubin has been cooperating with my office."

But Kings County District Attorney Charles Hynes dropped the case.

In response to questions from the *Voice*, Hynes's office declined to comment. Instead, spokeswoman Mia Goldberg emailed a short statement: "One person made allegations against Rabbi Epstein. Because that person was unable to identify any of his assailants, we were unable to bring a case against him."

Hynes, who has held his seat since 1990, failed to win a seventh term in November's election. In recent years he has faced accusations that he went easy on Orthodox Jewish leaders accused of child sexual abuse in order to fortify his political ties with the community.

That wouldn't have come as a shock to Amsel. In July 1997, eight months after Rubin's kidnapping, he wrote a letter to a detective in the 66th Precinct describing what he knew about the crime. "It is not expected that these criminals will ever be brought to justice, since the D.A.'s office is known to be a political movement," he wrote.

In their statements to the court, Amsel, Director, and Markowitz suggested that the criminal investigation didn't appear to worry Epstein. In fact, they alleged, he'd orchestrated two more kidnappings: Tobias Horowitz in August 1997 and Zalmen Livshitz in March 1998. (The *Voice* was unable to locate either man.)

On August 14, 2013, Mendel Epstein met with a woman at his house in Ocean County, New Jersey. She told him she was in need of his services.

She'd contacted Epstein through Wolmark, who'd advised her that "there's another way" to pull a *get* from a recalcitrant husband: "You need special rabbis who are going to take this thing and see it through to the end. . . . Getting a guy like Mendel Epstein who's a hired hand," he said, according to a federal indictment filed in October. Wolmark set up a conference call with Epstein, and the August 14 meeting was scheduled. The woman said she'd bring along her brother.

"This is an expensive thing to do," Epstein said to the two visitors. "Basically what we are going to be doing is kidnapping a guy for a couple of hours and beating him up and torturing him and then getting him to give the *get*."

The woman's brother asked about Epstein's effectiveness.

"Wait a minute here," Epstein said. "I guarantee you that if you're in the van, you'd give a *get* to your wife. You probably love your wife, but you'd give a *get* when they finish with you.

"Hopefully, there won't even be a mark on him," he added.

"You can leave a mark." The brother chuckled.

"No, no, no, no," said Epstein. "We prefer not to leave a mark. Because then when you do, they do go to the police, the police look at the guy. . . . And basically the reaction of the police is, if the guy does not have a mark on him, then, 'Is there some Jewish crazy affair here?' They don't get involved."

Epstein told the woman that he orchestrated a kidnapping about once a year. He explained that it would cost $10,000 to pay for the rabbis to approve the coercion at a *beth din*, plus $60,000 to cover the "tough guys."

"We take an electric cattle prod," Epstein said. "If it can get a bull that weighs five tons to move, you put it in certain parts of the body and in one minute the guy will know."

On October 9, eight men, including Yaakov Goldstein, piled into two minivans and gathered at a warehouse on a secluded road in Middlesex County, New Jersey. They wore "ski masks, Halloween masks, or bandanas," according to the indictment. They brought with them the traditional tools for a *get* ceremony: feather quills, ink bottles, a writing board. They also had rope, plastic bags, a screwdriver, and surgical blades.

As they waited for the woman's brother to bring the husband, a team of federal agents burst in and arrested the would-be kidnappers. Shortly afterward officers arrested Epstein and Wolmark.

The woman and her brother were undercover FBI agents. They had worn wires that recorded the conversations.

The New Jersey U.S. Attorney's Office had been investigating Epstein since October 2010, when a group of men allegedly attacked a man named Yisrael Bryskman in Lakewood, according to spokeswoman Rebekah Carmichael. Prosecutors charged Rabbi David Wax and his wife, Judy, with the kidnapping. Bryskman said the assault took place at Wax's home. (The Waxes have yet to enter a plea. Mitchell Ansell, their attorney, says there are "still discussions ongoing" between the sides.)

At Epstein's bail hearing, Assistant U.S. Attorney Joseph Gribko, the lead prosecutor for the case, cited several victims he knew of: Rubin, Bryskman, a New Jersey man in 2006, a Brooklyn man in 2011, a Pennsylvania man in 2012. At the time of the sting, he "had reason to believe" there were at least 20 other victims. The number rose quickly once Epstein's arrest made headlines, he added. "My phone has not stopped ringing with calls from potential victims," Gribko told the court.

Epstein's wife and four daughters put up five properties worth a combined $4 million as bond. A judge ordered that the 68-year-old rabbi wear an electronic monitor and leave his house only for meetings with his attorney, medical appointments, and religious worship. (Neither Susan Necheles, Epstein's attorney, nor Robert Rimberg, who is representing Wolmark, responded to the *Voice*'s interview requests for this story.)

While Epstein surely has allies in his community, publicly he has become a pariah. The Rabbinical Alliance of America was one of Epstein's preferred *beth dins*. Its director, Rabbi Hershel Kurzrock, was friendly with Epstein. Kurzrock's wife tells the *Voice* that he's "been getting a lot of calls" from the press and that he won't comment on Epstein. Several *beth din* rabbis who didn't know Epstein declined to discuss him on the record, saying they don't want their names associated with his in any fashion.

Other community members and victims requested anonymity out of fear.

"Zachary" remains terrified of Epstein. In 1991, his wife sought a divorce and hired Epstein as her *to'ein*. He's looked over his shoulder ever since.

"I've lived like a fugitive for 20 years," he says.

Zachary refused to grant a *get* until they finished negotiating custody for their two children and alimony. He claims she wanted full custody and the *get* was the only chip with which he might sway her. Even then, the mediation couldn't move forward because they disagreed on a *beth din* and Zachary would not accept an ad hoc hearing. In January 1995, two weeks after Epstein entered the picture, Zachary's wife accused him of child abuse and a family court judge issued an order of protection barring him from his home. (The order expired after one year.)

Zachary began hearing stories about Epstein's ways of pulling a *get* out of a man. "Watch yourself," friends told him. Certain "the goon squad" was after him, he moved to New Jersey to stay under the radar. He reveals his address to no one, not even the city he lives in. His phone number is unlisted. He wiped the Internet clean of nearly every piece of information that may point to his location. He believes that men working for Epstein may still be looking for him.

"I was elusive," he says. "I was lucky."

He hasn't signed the *get*.