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Six held for 'misusing tens of millions' in charity funds

Probe exposed scheme working out of Mea She'arim office

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Five men from the ultra-Orthodox community in Jerusalem and a bank clerk were arrested early Sunday morning, on suspicion of embezzling millions of shekels in charitable funds, along with other financial crimes.

The arrests follow an undercover investigation led by Jerusalem Police and the Tax Authority, which lasted for several months, police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said.

Those arrested included Rabbi Amram Shapira, the top aide to the head of the Eda Haredit organization, Rabbi Yitzhak Tuviah Weiss, and Rabbi Shmuel Yerushalmi-Lovtzki, the director of the main charity under investigation, the National Committee to Save Needy Families. Shapira was released late on Sunday night. The judge said that there was no shred of evidence against him regarding financial crimes.

Weiss is president of the National Committee.

Yerushalmi-Lovtzki's remand was extended until Thursday by Jerusalem District Court Judge Dov Pollock. During the hearing on Sunday, Pollock said the extension was necessary because he was convinced by the investigation report that a reasonable suspicion exists that the suspect committed the crimes for which he is accused.

Following the arrests, protests and violence broke out in the ultra-Orthodox Mea She'arim neighborhood on Sunday afternoon.

According to the police, a team of fund-raisers working out of a Mea She'arim office since 2000 collected funds from donors in Israel and abroad, claiming that the money would be used to help elderly people, widows, orphans and others in need.

The suspects allegedly ran an extensive charity appeal network, and deposited the cash they raised into an account at a branch of Mercantile Bank in Mea She'arim, before transferring it to several accounts that were not declared to charitable



AMRAM SHAPIRA
(Courtesy failedmessiah.com)

regulators.

From there, the money was allegedly funneled to "sections of the [haredi] community," Rosenfeld said. Some of the cash was used to buy apartments for yeshiva students, police suspect. The suspects also allegedly withdrew funds for their personal use and to pay staff members.

Suspects used the names of leading haredi rabbis to raise funds, distributed leaflets and set up automatic bank transfers from donors, the Tax Authority said. They were allegedly aided by a clerk at Mercantile Bank.

Undercover officers scoped out the Mea She'arim office that housed 10 employees of the

"charity," while Tax Authority officials covertly monitored bank account activities during the probe.

On Sunday, officers raided several homes and offices, arrested the suspects, and seized computers and documents.

Last year, authorities received an intelligence tip, leading them to open the investigation, Rosenfeld said.

Attorney Uri Goldman, who represents some of the suspects, told the Hadrei Haredim website on Sunday, "The facts will become apparent, and the sums [in question] will probably be lower [than what police allege]."

He added, "The suspicions are similar to other affairs that erupted to much fanfare in the haredi community, but which vanished after a month or two."

The other suspects arrested on Sunday morning were Refael Eliyahu Bar-Azar and Haim Mitzenberg, whose remands were also extended until Thursday, Eyal Golan, who will be released on Monday, and Ben-Zion Sobol, who will be released to house arrest on Monday.