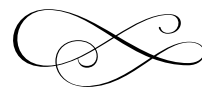


Mistaken for a Mob Boss

It was a routine stop. Minutes later, Yosh Marell was surrounded by armed officers was thrust into a nightmare



AS TOLD TO CHAYA SILBER

It was the day after Yom Kippur 2023, and the weather was glorious in the Greater Miami area. Yosh (Joshua) Markell, then 40, was driving his young daughter to school when he suddenly saw the flashing lights of a police car coming up behind him. He immediately pulled over, thinking it was a routine traffic stop.

What happened next still makes him break out into a cold sweat. Here is the story in his own words.

When I saw the flashing lights, I thought, *Oh, they're after someone else*. I knew I hadn't broken

any laws. My friends call me the straightest guy you could ever meet, so I wasn't too worried about being pulled over. I knew I had nothing to hide. I stopped the car and waited for the cops to ask for my license and registration

A cop walked up to the car and knocked on the window. "Get out of the car immediately and give me everything in your pockets!"

I was a bit shaken up, but my 11-year-old daughter was terrified and began to sob. I got out of the car, but before I could take another step I was surrounded by five or six armed officers who ordered me to stand still. "Don't move or say a word!" they shouted.

I remained standing there for some time while the cops searched my car. I had no idea what they were



looking for. During this time, many of my friends drove by and stopped to ask what was happening, but I didn’t dare respond; I just shrugged and looked away. Every moment felt like an eternity. Each time I flinched or even coughed the police yelled at me.

Meanwhile, my daughter continued to cry and the cops realized they needed to remove her from the scene.

“Where’s your wife?” they asked.
“She’s at the gym,” I replied.
“Well, we need her to take your daughter. You’re going to get back into the car and follow us straight to your house. Don’t try to make any sudden moves or go anywhere else.”

I drove home carefully, my heart pounding in terror and my mind racing. Why had I been pulled over? Whatever it was, I was no longer so sure it was simply a technicality. I tried to calm my daughter down but it was impossible; she was very distraught. It’s hard to see your father, whom you idolize, treated like a common criminal.

When we pulled into my driveway a few minutes later, I saw an armored truck and a SWAT team standing nearby. That’s when I knew that this was serious business.

I staggered into the house and nearly bumped into six heavily armed cops who were rifling through my private possessions. They rampaged through the kitchen and living room and barged into my office, confiscating my computer and mountains of paperwork. They even forced me to open my safe so they could remove its contents. It was a bona fide raid with a terrifying show of force.

A few minutes later, my wife walked in and gasped in alarm. The raid lasted an agonizing few hours, during which I was forced to sit at the kitchen table with a cop watching me the entire time, gauging my reaction to this invasion. I had no clue

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what was happening and why I had been targeted. Before long, a detective came to the house and started asking me questions about my employment and past history.

Where had I grown up? Where had I gone to school? What did I do for a living? What was my employment history? I tried to respond honestly and answer all their questions, but I saw that they were getting frustrated. The cops were obviously looking for something, but I couldn’t give it to them because I had no idea what it was.

Soon the stress got to me. I began to have a panic attack and found it hard to breathe, and I was allowed to lie down. My wife was terrified that I would pass out.

I felt weak and dizzy as I hadn’t eaten a thing that day. The cops were also hungry, so they ordered Domino’s pizza and ate the *treife* meal at my kitchen table. I begged them for a cup of water and for my *tefillin*—as I hadn’t *davened* yet that morning—and they gave them to me. when I opened my *tefillin* bag I saw a note my daughter had written to me a few days earlier, which made me very emotional. To think that my daughter had to witness my arrest caused me a lot of pain.

I *davened* slowly, focusing on every word, begging Hashem for the strength to endure what was to come.

At some point the detectives told me that the raid was business-related; my Amazon business had been shut down and my bank accounts frozen. They advised me to get a good lawyer and said that I wasn’t going to jail that day.

I immediately thought, *Does that mean that I’ll be going there another day? And how will I build my sukkah?* My second thought was that my life was over.

The SWAT team left sometime in the afternoon, leaving behind what looked like a war zone. As soon as they were gone

the phone started ringing. Family and friends had heard what was happening and were frantic about my welfare. Why had I been targeted? What was I being accused of?

The next few days were surreal. I hired an attorney a friend recommended and he soon discovered the charges being leveled against me, which were incredible. I was accused of being a RICO crime boss, stealing goods from big-box retailers and reselling them on Amazon via my online store, which I had named Hollywood-seller. I had been operating this business for ten years and everything was completely legitimate. I had no idea why I was being accused of a crime.

In order to explain how this all began, let me go back a decade.

I was a young husband and the father of an infant daughter. My wife and I were both teachers who worked hard and earned modest salaries. We were living in an apartment building in Hollywood, Florida, that abutted another apartment building. Every night before I went to sleep I noticed a young man around my age sitting on the porch next to mine, glued to his computer. He sat on the balcony night after night from around midnight to 5:00 a.m., when he would finally go inside.

We waved to each other politely every now and then but mostly ignored each other. At some point, however, my curiosity got the better of me. I asked him what he was doing and why he was awake all night.

“I have an Amazon business,” he explained. “I need to work through the night, which is when retailers post their surplus merchandise. I buy it for pennies on the dollar and then sell the stuff on Amazon.”

I was intrigued and asked more ques-

tions. The idea of earning easy money appealed to me, especially since my wife was very reluctant to leave our newborn daughter in daycare when she went off to her teaching job. If I learned how to buy and sell on Amazon, I reasoned, maybe I could be a stay-at-home dad and take care of her.

My neighbor, who was a nice man, offered to teach me the ropes. He advised me to start small by going to Radio Shack, buying a couple of surplus cameras and trying to sell them online for a small mark-up. He told me not to waste any time, but to jump into it right away.

I remember that it rained the next day, but I drove to Radio Shack anyway and asked the salesman for ten cameras. “What do you need ten cameras for?” he asked.

I mumbled that it was for my business. My hand quavered a bit as I swiped my credit card, hoping I wasn’t making a mistake, but it was too late to back out. I went home, listed the cameras online and waited. To my surprise, the entire lot was purchased that very day, earning me a grand profit of \$60. Even though it wasn’t a lot, I was grateful for every penny.

Buoyed by my success, I tried again the next day and the day after that. My neighbor coached me patiently, encouraging me to buy more stock and diversify my merchandise. Within a few months I had quit my job because I was earning more money selling on Amazon. Plus, I was able to take care of our baby daughter at the same time.

A year after I sold those first few cameras, my online business had grown by leaps and bounds. My mentor, who had helped me get it off the ground, advised me to never spend money on the business if I didn’t have to, so I decided not to rent a warehouse because we had recently moved to a private house. Together with one of my brothers, I ran the business

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from the basement.

The UPS trucks kept coming to deliver merchandise at all hours, the hallway was cluttered with boxes, and my friends thought I had some kind of store. But the arrangement worked for us because it kept my expenses low.

I was still doing most of the work myself, often until late at night. Even though it was hard, I was grateful to be working from home so I could be available for our children, as we now had two boys in addition to our daughter.

During this time, my wife’s grandmother, who was in her 90s and on dialysis, moved in with us. I turned our spare bedroom into a hospital room and drove her to and from her sessions three times a week since my schedule was fairly flexible. My kids had the privilege of living with their great-grandmother for four years until she passed away at the age of 94.

A decade passed. My business, which I had named Hollywoodseller, was going strong. I no longer went to stores in person, relying on middlemen to get me closeout deals. Although Amazon charged a significant mark-up for each item, I tried to keep operating costs down by doing most of the work myself. I didn’t earn money on every pallet; sometimes it cost me more to sell the merchandise than I’d paid for it, but on the whole it was lucrative.

Then came the winter of 2023, when I was introduced by someone I trusted to a new wholesaler named Arland Cata. Arland was a single father with three children, and he offered me below-wholesale deals on pallets of merchandise. I had no idea where it came from or how he was able to give me such a great price. But it wasn’t acceptable to ask suppliers where they had gotten their merchandise, as they would suspect the purchaser of trying to undercut the middleman and go

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straight to the source themselves.

I continued to buy merchandise from Arland Cata for about six months until everything imploded that September, when he was found dead in an Airbnb. In the course of the homicide investigation, the feds learned that Cata was associated with the Mob, and that he might have been targeted because he was peddling stolen goods. Suspicion immediately fell on those who were doing business with him—which explained the raid.

The detectives had shone the spotlight on me because they were looking for a scapegoat. Without a shred of evidence they threw the book at me, charging me with racketeering, conspiracy to commit racketeering, money laundering and dealing in stolen property. They threatened to put me behind bars for up to 20

years for a crime I hadn’t committed.

The feds kept combing through my accounts but found nothing. The most they could come up with was that I “should have known” that the prices were too good to be true and that the goods were stolen.

However, their argument didn’t hold water because they didn’t understand how the business worked. I was buying merchandise in such large quantities that I was getting similarly great deals from all of my suppliers. With the mark-up that Amazon charged for each sale, it was a miracle that I had been making a profit at all.

The next few days were a living nightmare. The media had a field day, putting me on the front cover of the papers and calling me an “everyday Mob boss,” the nice guy next door who turned out to be a swindler. I quickly learned that even a sterling reputation can be immediately tarnished with enough innuendo.

Despite my attorney’s best efforts, I was ordered to report to jail for several days until the matter was sorted out. Fortunately, the cops didn’t come to arrest me with a show of force and I was able to turn myself in.

My first day behind bars was bizarre. I had never seen the inside of a jail and had no idea what to expect. I was booked, fingerprinted and handed a uniform before being led down a narrow corridor. There were about 30 inmates in my unit, two to a cell.

Like me, my fellow inmates were accused of white-collar crimes, which meant that they were nonviolent. I was given kosher meals and allowed to *daven*, which gave me tremendous comfort. A rabbi from the Aleph Institute came to visit several times during my stay, which kept me sane. Still, being behind bars, especially when you know you’re innocent, is very traumatic.

I recall being alone in my cell on Friday

night and singing *Lecha Dodi*. Throughout this time, my wife was my biggest source of strength, keeping our children calm and encouraging me to believe that I would be vindicated.

After 12 days in jail, the judge set my bond at \$1.35 million. I put up my house as collateral and my close friend put his up as well. I was summoned by the warden and informed that I was going home, where I would be under house arrest. Needless to say, I could no longer work or even access any of my bank accounts.

In hindsight, the 12 days I spent in jail, although very painful, was a time of tremendous growth. Up until then I’d been stuck in the rat race, constantly trying to earn another dollar. Now I was forced to sit still without any distractions and connect to Hashem. I *davened* with great passion and recited the entire *Sefer Tehillim* every day.

When I arrived home, my children excitedly ran into my arms and my wife’s eyes lit up. Hugging my precious children felt surreal, as if I were reliving the day they’d been born all over again. The house was filled with family and friends who had never stopped believing in my innocence and had come to celebrate with me.

But the ordeal was not yet over—not by a long shot. Despite the lack of evidence, the authorities refused to apologize. The case, which had more holes than Swiss cheese, dragged on for nearly three years. Unfortunately, I was also taken advantage of by an unscrupulous attorney, which cost me a quarter of a million dollars and left us deeply in debt.

I was confined to the house for most of this time. I also had to wear an ankle monitor and be near a phone, even on Shabbos, in case the authorities called. The mental strain was truly terrible. And yet, I never stopped seeing the rays of light that Hashem sent in our direction.

One of these rays was my new attorney, a gift from Hashem. By then my wife had gone back to her teaching job so we could afford to buy groceries. The principal of her school, who was very sympathetic to our plight, recommended a very sought-after attorney, but I hesitated to call because I couldn’t afford his retainer. Nonetheless, the principal encouraged me to at least try, and after hearing my story the lawyer agreed to represent me for a reasonable fee, understanding that I had been accused falsely.

After many months of legal back-and-forth and depositions putting the spotlight on the real thieves, the feds offered me a plea deal that included six years of probation. They admitted that they had made a mistake, but it was beneath their dignity to completely admit wrongdoing.

Even though I could have continued fighting to vindicate myself for years, my attorney recommended that I accept the plea deal so I could resume my life. As part of the deal, I was forced to shut down my Amazon business, and I had to accept an office job at a local nursing home.

Two and a half years later, we are still trying to pick up the pieces of our lives. Most of our assets are gone and we live from paycheck to paycheck, scrambling to pay the bills.

I could have become bitter and disillusioned. But instead, being dragged through the mud has only strengthened my faith and brought me closer to my family and to Hashem. In fact, I’ve been invited to speak publicly before numerous groups and schools in South Florida, where I share my story of being unjustly accused and how it changed me. I am also in the process of writing a book about my experiences and what I learned from it.

I can be reached through *Ami Magazine*. ●

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