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Rabbi Eliezer Y. Levy; founder of Chabad center

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WARWICK — One of the state's best-known Orthodox rabbis was found dead Wednesday in the garage of the local religious center that he helped establish.



The body of Rabbi Eliezer Y. Levy, 31, of 29 Arrowhead Way, was discovered in his Toyota Camry inside a locked garage at the Chabad of West Bay CHAI Center, on Centerville Road. The engine had been left running. His wife had reported him missing two days earlier.

After a brief examination by the state medical examiner's office, his body was taken overnight to Brooklyn, N.Y., for a funeral and burial yesterday. Jewish tradition requires that bodies be buried within 24 hours.

No autopsy was performed because there was no evidence of foul play and out of respect for Rabbi Levy's Orthodox beliefs, which hold that an autopsy destroys the sacredness of the body.

Rabbi Levy's death sent shockwaves through the Jewish community, which considered him a good-natured promoter of a special brand of intense, Orthodox Judaism. Yet Jewish law dictates that someone who willfully commits suicide should neither be mourned nor attended to. But the stigma is not absolute. It fades, for example, if the suicide is a result of mental illness, in which case the death is regarded as the tragic outcome of an illness.

"The family is in mourning in the religious community in Brooklyn, N.Y., and plans are going ahead for memorial gatherings in his memory in the state of Rhode Island," said Rabbi Yehoshua Laufer, director of the Lubavitch community in Providence, to which Rabbi Levy belonged.

Investigators, who found cigarette butts indicating that Levy had been sitting in the car for some time, estimated that he had been dead at least 24 hours before his body was found by members of the center Wednesday around 3:45 p.m.

No suicide note was found. Phone records show a call from the center to Levy's home on Sunday night. His wife, Chana, told police he called to say he was working at the center.

Maj. Thomas Carmody said Warwick police were advised by the medical examiner's officer yesterday morning that the death was a suicide. However, Dr. Michael Sikirica, deputy chief medical examiner, would not confirm that, saying a final ruling won't come until toxicology tests are completed, which could take several months.

"We're all in shock over this, obviously," said Marc Jagolinzer, president of the Rhode Island Board of Rabbis. "He embraced the entire Jewish community without regard to personal affiliation or practice."

Levy was a member of the Chabad Lubavitch, an Orthodox congregation of Hasidic Jews who strictly follow Jewish law. The congregation eats only kosher foods and uses separate dishes for meat and milk products. They strictly follow the command to rest on the Sabbath by refusing to answer the telephone or turn on anything that uses electricity. Men and women sit apart during religious services. They pray three times a day. At home, the Levys spoke only Yiddish to their children, according to a profile of him in 1993, when the Rabbi helped establish the Warwick Chabad Center.

The group achieved notoriety when some members pronounced their spiritual leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, as the long-predicted Messiah. Schneerson died in 1994, and there has since been passionate debate among Lubavitchers about whether he will rise from the dead.

Rabbi Levy had said that Schneerson sent him to Rhode Island to establish a Chabad Center, which he started in a red-clapboard Greene Memorial House near Apponaug Four Corners. From that base, Levy lived his passion for Judaism and demonstrated his enthusiasm for encouraging Jews to be true to their heritage.

He also had a fine sense of public relations. He conducted programs to make ceremonial horns, called shofars, from curled rams' horns. Nearly three years ago, he presided over the lighting of a giant menorah at Warwick Mall to celebrate the first night of Hanukkah — the Jewish Festival of Lights.

"He was very much the rabbi teacher/preacher," Jagolinzer said. "He taught through words and actions; he was of religion, not politics. Many mainstream people would come to his congregation because they liked him. He had a charisma where he attracted people by his humility, and by his being such a sincere and giving person."

"He was a mensch — a fine human being, a gentleman," Jagolinzer said. "He's going to be deeply missed and greatly mourned."

Besides his wife, he leaves five children. Details were not known because the family was unavailable

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Rabbi reported missing is found dead

WARWICK

WARWICK — A rabbi who had been reported missing for a few days was found dead yesterday afternoon on the premises of the Chabad of West Bay Chai Center, at 15 Centerville Rd., according to police.

Police identified the man as Eliezer Y. Levy, 31, of 29 Arrowhead Way, Lt. Matthew Costello said late last night. Costello could not say where on the center's property Levy's body was found.

Costello referred further questions about the incident to the detectives handling the case, and said they would not be available for comment until today.