

Former Petaluma rabbi gets 3 years for molesting a child

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Sidney Isaac Goldenberg, former rabbi of Petaluma's Congregation B'nai Israel, was sentenced to three years in state prison Tuesday for sexually molesting a 12-year-old student during private bat mitzvah tutoring sessions.

Judge Mark Tansil of the Santa Rosa Superior Court issued the sentence following an emotional hearing, during which the victim and her family called for a stiff sentence and Goldenberg asked for leniency.

A superior court probation department report recommended Goldenberg be sentenced to probation and one year in the Sonoma County Jail.

"I was very vulnerable," the girl told the court. "He took advantage of me. I'm going through some very difficult changes. He ruined a lot of people's lives. My friends are suffering."

The girl also told the court she delayed telling anyone about the molestation for fear no one would believe her. She cried as she spoke, as did many of her friends and relatives who filled the courtroom.

Goldenberg, 58, was hired in August by the 100-family Conservative Petaluma congregation. He was arrested in December and charged with lewd and lascivious conduct with a minor under the age of 14, a felony.

The misconduct, which occurred over several months, involved making lewd remarks to the girl, touching her breasts and asking her to put her hands in his pocket.

Goldenberg pled no contest to the charges in February. A plea of no contest is equivalent to a guilty plea, said Gary Medvigy, Santa Rosa deputy district attorney .

The girl's mother lauded her child's courage in speaking out. "My daughter is a hero," she said. "She became the voice for [Goldenberg's] prior victims."

Several women from New York, who learned of the Petaluma case through news reports, told the Santa Rose district attorney's office and the Petaluma Police Department that Goldenberg had made inappropriate sexual advances toward them when they were adolescents.

According to Medvigy, the earliest complaint dates back 27 years.

Although Goldenberg was charged in connection with one of these incidents, in 1976, Medvigy does not know if Goldenberg was convicted because the record has been sealed.

"We tell our kids there are consequences for everything," the girl's mother said. "I want [Goldsenberg] to be punished for what he's been doing for the past 27 years."

Before moving to Petaluma, Goldenberg was a public school teacher and then a cantor, lay educator and rabbi at various synagogues in New York.

Goldenberg's attorney, Stephen Gallenson asked the judge to follow the recommendation of the probation department.

"He is essentially a good man who has a problem," Gallenson said.

The defense has submitted many letters praising Goldenberg as a teacher and rabbi. "He has taught hundreds and hundreds of kids and has had positive experiences with most of them," Gallenson added.

Gallenson argued that Goldenberg is not a danger to society since he will no longer be able to get a position as a rabbi or cantor and therefore will not have access to adolescent girls.

He also said Goldenberg needs psychiatric treatment, which he will not receive in prison.

"[Goldenberg] is in his own private hell," said Gallenson, pointing out that Goldenberg, his wife and children have suffered since the arrest. "Sending him to prison will not do any good."

Yet Medvigy argued that this case is particularly heinous because as a teacher and rabbi, Goldenberg violated a sacred trust.

He also said the psychiatric examination, done at the request of the probation department, indicates Goldenberg neither accepts full responsibility nor understands the seriousness of his acts, and may commit the same crime again.

"If he walks out of this courtroom and if there's one more victim, then the criminal justice system has failed," said Medvigy.

"This is a difficult case to sentence, but this man needs to go to prison to protect our children and to satisfy our community."

Perhaps the most compelling statement for a more severe penalty came from Goldenberg himself.

Goldenberg acknowledged the past complaints of sexual misconduct against him but said they only arose when he was in a one-to-one situation with an extroverted adolescent girl.

He said stress triggers the conduct, echoing the findings of the psychiatric report. Although Goldenberg sounded slightly nervous, he spoke dispassionately.

"I apologize if I caused any harm," he said. "I'm starting to understand what the problem is and I can handle it."

Goldenberg described his problem as delayed adolescence. He also said prison would be detrimental to his health.

Judge Tansil acknowledged the case was particularly difficult because Goldenberg is not a typical defendant and has no prior record.

But the judge imposed the three-year state prison term, based on several factors, including: the defendant's breach of trust, his apparent failure to understand the seriousness of his crime, the belief that Goldenberg is not a good candidate for rehabilitation and the desire to send a message that this kind of conduct will not be tolerated.

The maximum term possible is nine years. Medvigy said Goldenberg will be eligible for parole in 18 months. When he gets out of prison, he must register as a sex offender wherever he lives.

Goldenberg was taken into custody immediately after sentencing.

After the hearing, the girl, who had appeared nervous and upset throughout the day, smiled.

<http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/5471/former-petaluma-rabbi-gets-3-years-for-molesting-a-child/>