



FILE: Rabbi Barry Freundel at Keshet Israel Congregation in Georgetown. (Michael Lutzky/The Washington Post)

By [Keith L. Alexander](#) and [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) May 15 at 11:26 PM



[Barry Freundel](#), the once-influential Orthodox rabbi who pleaded guilty to secretly videotaping dozens of women as they prepared for a ritual bath, was sentenced Friday to 6 ¹/₂ years in prison.

His punishment came at the conclusion of an hours-long hearing in D.C. Superior Court, where some of the victims described for Senior Judge Geoffrey Alprin the impact Freundel's crimes have had on their lives.

"You repeatedly and secretly violated the trust your victims had in you, and you abused your power," Alprin said in handing down the sentence.

Alprin also ordered Freundel, 63, to pay more than \$13,000 in fines.

Freundel was arrested in October on charges that he videotaped six nude women at Keshet Israel synagogue in Georgetown. Prosecutors said a review of his computer equipment revealed that many more women had been recorded by Freundel as they prepared for the bath known as a mikvah, used as part of a purification ritual.

Rabbi gets 6 1/2 years for secretly videotaping women(2:16)

D.C. rabbi Barry Freundel was sentenced to 6 1/2 years in prison after pleading guilty to secretly filming women as they prepared for ritual baths. (WUSA9)

Freundel ultimately pleaded guilty to videotaping 52 women, and the punishment translates to about six weeks per victim. Sentencing guidelines require that he serve 85 percent of his term.

The longtime rabbi had recorded about 100 additional women, prosecutors have said, but those alleged crimes occurred outside the three-year statute of limitations. The videotaping occurred between 2009 and 2014.

The sentencing brings to a close a criminal case that has reverberated throughout the global Orthodox community, where Freundel had been revered for his intellectual prowess and his status as one of the most authoritative and powerful Orthodox American rabbis in the area of conversion.

The case has prompted debate regionally, nationally and internationally — Freundel was a leader in key Jewish organizations at all levels — about the treatment of converts and about women's leadership in Orthodox Judaism. In Orthodox Judaism, rabbis must be men.

[\[For those who revered him, D.C. rabbi's sentencing for voyeurism will not bring closure.\]](#)

Before he was sentenced, Freundel apologized to his victims and said he was seeing a psychiatrist to understand the "source" of his behavior.

"I was wrong. I am sorry. I did terrible things. I make no bones about it. I was in a terrible place," Freundel said, reading from prepared remarks.



Rabbi Barry Freundel. (Photo by Lloyd Wolf)

Prosecutors asked the judge to sentence Freundel to [17 years in prison](#). Freundel's attorney, Jeffrey Harris, [urged against prison](#) and instead asked the judge for probation and to sentence Freundel to community service while his client continues his psychological treatment and work with Jewish

students.

Harris petitioned the judge to sentence Freundel for the isolated charge of voyeurism, which would have resulted in a maximum sentence of one year, instead of basing the punishment on 52 separate acts.

“He has fallen as far as anyone can fall. He lost his job, he lost his family and he lives alone in a rental apartment,” Harris said.

But Assistant U.S. Attorney Amy Zubrensky argued that sentencing Freundel for the one charge would be the equivalent to a serial rapist being charged with one sexual assault, not multiple assaults against each victim.

Freundel served as a leader in the Rabbinical Council of America, the world’s biggest group of Modern Orthodox leaders, which has created an investigative committee aimed at improving the system for converts.

Two lawsuits have been filed against Keshet Israel, the Rabbinical Council of America and the National Capital Mikvah.

Some prominent Modern Orthodox rabbis have issued opinions about the ritual of conversion, suggesting that perhaps a woman could be a monitor or that the rabbis could simply listen for, but not watch, a woman submerging herself in the mikvah.

The anguish Freundel caused was in clear evidence during the three-hour hearing. More than 70 victims and family members crowded into the main courtroom, and an additional 30 or so people were in an overflow courtroom. Several of the women wore orange blouses, scarves and other items to signal their solidarity in advocating prison time for Freundel.

Before Freundel spoke, he sat next to his attorney, listening and watching as the women walked to the podium, some standing only feet from him while they angrily demanded answers and an apology. Freundel showed little emotion throughout the hearing. At times, he pulled out a handkerchief, wiping his face and blowing his nose.

Each victim who spoke was allotted five minutes. To ensure anonymity, the women were identified by letters or numbers.

Some victims broke down in tears, describing how they felt “betrayed” and “humiliated” by the man whom they trusted to lead them through one of the biggest and most spiritual decisions of their lives. The women spoke of how their faith — in their religion, their leaders and even in strangers — was destroyed. Many said they are now fearful of using public restrooms or locker rooms.

“We thought he was a knight in shining armor, but he was also an abusive rabbi,” one of the victims said.

One woman spoke of how she was unable to be intimate with her husband for months after learning that she was videotaped. Others talked of a sense of public shame.

“I could not bear my friends knowing my rabbi had seen me naked,” one victim said.

One African American woman who said she at times already felt like an outsider before converting described how becoming a victim made her feel even more isolated. “I kept wondering, maybe I should have stayed a Christian,” she said.

Karin Bleeg, 32, a victim who permitted her name to be used, told the judge that Freundel encouraged her to use the mikvah when her grandmother died and then recorded her. “I’m relieved,” she said after hearing his sentence. “I think we were worried he would get off [with a lesser sentence], and we’re grateful it’s not just a year.”

Kate Bailey, 28, who also allowed her name to be used, told the judge that she had converted in 2008 but that in 2009, Freundel called her to say she needed to go in the mikvah again because there was a problem, one he couldn't share and she shouldn't tell anyone about it. She later found out that she had been recorded.

"I am happy, but I don't think this is over," she said after his sentencing. "I'm having a crisis of faith. Now I question how Orthodox I want to be."