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Kestenbaum Raps Silence Of Colleagues

08/15/03

by Stewart Ain

Staff Writer

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One day after pleading guilty to attempted child endangerment charges after being caught in a police Internet sex sting operation, Rabbi Israel Kestenbaum said he is "incredibly thankful" that there were no victims and that he "did not in fact engage in any inappropriate things with minors." In a phone interview Wednesday morning, Rabbi Kestenbaum, 54, of Highland Park, N.J., said he had experienced a "personal lapse on the computer for which I do not excuse myself." Authorities said he had struck up a conversation with a police detective posing as a 13-year-old girl named Katie after entering an on-line chat room called "I Love Older Men." They said he gave her his cell phone number, which was registered to the New York Board of Rabbis, where he worked as director of its Jewish Center for Spiritual Care. The rabbi, who was arrested in February and is now in therapy, pleaded guilty as part of a plea deal to avoid up to four years in prison. He is slated to be sentenced in October to five years probation with treatment and registration as a sex offender. Rabbi Kestenbaum expressed "disappointment" with his rabbinic colleagues for turning their backs on him after his arrest at a time when he was professing his innocence. "I was a member of the Rabbinical Council of America for 30 years and not one member of

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the board or any representative of the board ever called me to ask how I was doing or to express any personal support," he said. "All they did was to ask my lawyer for me to tender a resignation so they would not have to deal with it. And the New York Board of Rabbis did similarly. I'm very disappointed in the Jewish community: in a community I worked for." Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, president of the Board of Rabbis, said of Rabbi Kestenbaum's plea: "This is a closed matter as far as the board is concerned. ... It is a very difficult time for him and his family and I would hope he is able to rehabilitate himself." The president of the Rabbinical Council of America, Rabbi Kenneth Auman, said he did not know Rabbi Kestenbaum personally or what interaction the organization's late executive director had with him following his arrest. Rabbi Kestenbaum said he would encourage the Jewish community to establish resources "for rabbis who are good people but who have difficulties." The rabbi stressed that he was "arrested for committing a crime in my personal life, not in my professional life. What I did was to lose my sense of boundaries. But professionally I have always been very careful." He said he will appear next month before a competency review panel of the American Association for Clinical Pastoral Education in an attempt to have his certification to practice renewed. "I will not return to the New York Board of Rabbis," he said. "Hopefully, I will work where it makes sense. Hopefully, there will be some sensitive people who will understand the nature of the circumstances and realize that [my] capacity to do good is still there."

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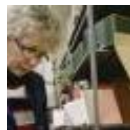
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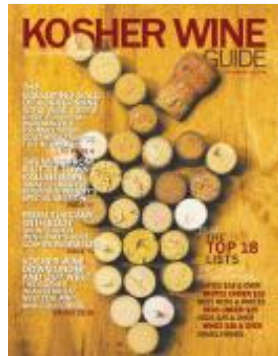
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