

Rabbi, Ethics Overseer, Denies Child Pornography Charges

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Rabbi Israel Kestenbaum, an ethics watchdog for a national pastors association and a chaplain of the year for his work at ground zero, assumed a different role yesterday, that of defendant in a child pornography case.

The rabbi pleaded not guilty in State Supreme Court in Manhattan to five felony counts of attempted dissemination of indecent material to a minor and 10 misdemeanor counts of attempted endangering the welfare of a minor.

He was arrested at his office at the New York Board of Rabbis on Thursday after being taken to the 17th Precinct station house on East 51st Street for questioning. The police said he had engaged in erotic electronic conversation with someone presented to him as a 13-year-old girl named Katie and had arranged a tryst with her at a Starbucks in Manhattan. In fact, he was talking with an undercover police officer.

Yesterday, an assistant district attorney, Jennifer Steiner, said that computers at the rabbi's home in Highland Park, N.J., had been searched and that the police had found at least one image of child pornography and messages to another under-age girl.

Rabbi Kestenbaum, 54, was expected to be released yesterday on \$5,000 bail, pending the surrender of his passport. He faces four years in prison if convicted.

The rabbi's lawyer, Raymond Granger, said, "My client has pled not guilty and will fight these charges." He noted that the rabbi was a member of the ethics panel of the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, a professional group.

The rabbi has a reputation as an expert in chaplain affairs. He founded and directed the Jewish Center for Spiritual Care, which was set up to provide pastoral services to the homebound and infirm. The center is part of the New York Board of Rabbis, which immediately placed him on administrative leave.

"We are extremely troubled by the seriousness of the allegations, and we will cooperate with the authorities to the fullest extent possible," the board said in a statement. "Our prayers are with Rabbi Kestenbaum and his family during this difficult time." Rabbi Kestenbaum is married and has six children.

The board, an association of 700 rabbis in the metropolitan area, named him chaplain of the year last February for his ministerial work at ground zero. Rabbi Kestenbaum also contributed to a handbook called Jewish Pastoral Care and has appeared as a featured speaker at chaplain gatherings, including a symposium last year sponsored by the UJA-Federation of New York.

Before joining the New York Board of Rabbis, Rabbi Kestenbaum was director of the Jewish Institute for Pastoral Care of the HealthCare Chaplaincy, a chaplain training institute.

New details of the charges emerged in court yesterday. According to Ms. Steiner, Rabbi Kestenbaum entered a chat room called "I Love Older Men" and held instant-message conversations with "Katie." Katie was actually Detective Mike Smith of the New York Police

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Department's computer investigation unit, Ms. Steiner said. The rabbi asked Katie whether she had ever been with an older man, and asked her for a physical description of herself, including her bra size.

"He repeatedly invited Katie to meet him and participate in various sex acts with him or for his benefit, including kissing, touching each other's intimate body parts and masturbation," Ms. Steiner said.

He gave his cellphone number, which is registered to the New York Board of Rabbis, and a female undercover officer called him, the prosecutor said. They arranged to meet at the Starbucks on Jan. 16, and the police observed the rabbi there, apparently looking for someone who never arrived.

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