

Noted rabbi gets community service for molesting minor

Mordechai Elon says trial has been a source of 'growth' for him; disgraced mentor ordered to compensate his victim

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The Jerusalem Magistrate's Court on Wednesday sentenced Rabbi Mordechai Elon to six months of community service, as well as a 15-month suspended jail term, rejecting the prosecution's demand that he be sent to prison for fondling a minor. Elon, once a celebrated mentor of Israel's religious Zionist movement, was also ordered to pay the victim NIS 10,000 (\$2,850) in compensation.

The court explained its decision to forgo a prison term, saying that the trial and conviction had themselves caused the rabbi to "fall from grace" and constituted a "severe" punishment for him and his family.

After the sentencing, Elon said that he "happily accepted" the community service, wryly noting that has already been serving the community for years and "will be happy to engage in public service until I'm 120 years old." As for the conviction, he said, "The entire process is based on a mistake. The charges are false. The whole process was flawed. I'm in a good place, and I've only grown from this." Elon's attorney, Asher Ohayon, said he and his client would mull an appeal.

The sentencing came four months after the court convicted Elon of committing an indecent act against the minor, known as A., on two separate occasions, but acquitted him of two other charges of sexual assault and harassment.

On Tuesday, the court partially lifted a gag order on the case to reveal more damning information about Elon, including the testimony of a woman who said she saw the rabbi kissing and hugging a 15-year-old boy in a car. While the alleged incident preceded the cases for which Elon was tried, and was not stipulated in the indictment, the court allowed the testimony.

According to the witness, in 2001, while Elon was head of the Horev yeshiva high school, she was on her way to a house near the rabbi's Jerusalem home when she saw Elon standing outside a car in which a boy was seated. On her way out of the house, she said, she saw two people in

the car kissing, and initially thought it was the rabbi with a woman, but then the two got emerged and she realized he was with the boy she had seen earlier.

“She saw [hugging] and caresses... their heads meeting, one head resting on the other,” court records said. The witness said she recounted the incident to her therapist, who later called Elon and his wife for a meeting, during which the rabbi claimed that he was just comforting the boy.

The state prosecution asked the Jerusalem Magistrate’s Court in October to sentence Elon to nine to 12 months in prison, saying that the punishment in similar cases ranged from six to 18 months, and suggesting that the rabbi be sentenced to a term in the middle of that range. The prosecution also demanded that the rabbi be forced to pay compensation to the minor.

Elon’s defense attorney, on the other hand, requested that he receive only community service and a suspended jail sentence.

Before the allegations against him surfaced, Elon was one of the most prominent Zionist Orthodox leaders of his generation in Israel.

He was indicted in November 2011 on two counts of indecent and sexual assault against two 17-year-old male students between 2003 and 2005, when he was head of Yeshivat Hakotel in Jerusalem’s Old City.

Both of the students claimed that they turned to Elon during a time of personal crisis. The first student, known as A. in court documents, was not a student of Elon, but was rather experiencing an emotional crisis when a friend suggested that he consult with the rabbi. A. claimed that, on two separate occasions, Elon hugged him, had him lie down on his stomach, and then kissed and caressed him. Elon claimed that he did not recall meeting A. and that if they did meet, it was conceivable that he had kissed A. to console him, but not for sexual gratification.

The second student, known as B., claimed that Elon had placed his foot between his legs, had him sit on Elon’s knees, hugged him, patted him on the stomach and knees, and kissed him on the face.

Both A. and B. said that Elon recited the “priestly blessing” after his acts.

In February, B. refused to take the stand and testify against his former teacher, leaving only the acts against A., of which the rabbi was later convicted.

Elon was charged following claims by Forum Takana, a religious group founded in 2003 that has attempted to police educators in the Zionist Orthodox community on matters relating to sexual misconduct. Although the 30-member forum, consisting of leading rabbis and several female religious leaders, has received hundreds of phone calls over the past decade and dealt with dozens of cases, the most prominent by far has been the case of Elon — the son of a Supreme

Court justice who rose to the position of yeshiva head at 28 and gathered around him an ever-widening circle of followers on account of his singular charisma and the insight of his learning.

In July 2005, the forum, originally founded in order to address claims from women who said they had been sexually assaulted and “found themselves maligned,” summoned Elon and confronted him with the charges.

According to the Takana website, Elon, when apprised of the charges, “declared that he had completely overcome his problem, that the complaint referred to an old incident and that there were no other additional cases.”

But one year later, the committee heard a second complaint, “more serious than the first.” Elon was forced from his post as head of Yeshivat Hakotel and made to leave Jerusalem and relinquish much of his influence. However, the forum later made the accusations public, because, the group wrote, “we fear we have no other way to protect the public from possible further injury.”

Rabbi Yaakov Ariel, a member of the forum, said that Elon had admitted to committing a series of indecent acts with young students. “The bottom line is that he admitted to the facts,” he said.

Adiv Sterman, Aaron Kalman and Mitch Ginsburg contributed to this report.