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Yomtov Pleads Guilty

by Wendy J. Madnick

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Mordechai Yomtov

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Teacher Mordechai Yomtov stood sobbing in his orange prison jumpsuit Monday in Los Angeles Superior Court as he pleaded guilty to two counts of committing continuous sexual abuse on a minor and one count of lewd act on a minor.

The Feb. 4 plea follows an agreement worked out between the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office and defense counsel. Yomtov was sentenced to one year in County Jail, followed by five years' probation.

Yomtov, 36, was arrested Dec. 3 and charged with 10 felony counts of committing lewd acts with three of his students, ages 8 to 10, at Cheder Menachem, an all-boys Orthodox yeshiva located in Hollywood and run under the auspices of West Coast Chabad.

Four family members of the three victims in the case were present; one mother even moved closer to force Yomtov to face her as he admitted to the crimes.

Yomtov's attorney, Mitchell W. Egers, said he told his client it was possible to fight the charges but Yomtov declined.

"He told me he did not want to subject the children or their families to a trial or to cross-examination," Egers said, adding that his client is not a rabbi as previously reported (students traditionally call teachers there "rebbe").

The court ordered Yomtov to have no contact with the victims, their families or with any minors without an adult present, with the exception of his own three children. He must also undergo psychiatric treatment through USC for the length of his term (including probation) and register as a sex offender for the rest of his life. Following his jail term, he is prohibited from seeking employment in any position where he would be teaching minors.

The parents said they were satisfied with the agreement.

"Under the circumstances I think he is extremely lucky," said the father of one victim. "If we didn't work with the district attorney, this guy would have got 25 years to life. But we understand that he is ill. He has an addiction that is not treatable."

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The man said his son, one in a family of seven children, was undergoing therapy as a result of the incident.

"Only time will tell. Sometimes he acts like nothing is wrong and other times you can see it is affecting him," he said.

The boy, like the other victims, is still attending Cheder Menachem. Attorneys for two of the families say they have not ruled out a civil suit against the school.

"I'm pleased that the process of holding those accountable for the terrible crimes against these children has begun," said Gary Wittenberg, a civil litigator, adding that any further actions "depend on what develops over the next few days and weeks."

The father of the one victim said he hoped the case brought closure not only for his son, but also for the rest of Yomtov's victims.

"We know there were other victims who have not come forward and my prayer is for their parents to get these kids help," he said. "I also hope this clears up the rumors that the boys were making this up. There were people even last night telling me that. I hope [the plea agreement] will put those rumors to rest for good."

In response to the resolution of the case, Rabbi Chaim Cunin, director of West Coast Chabad, issued the following statement: "Our thoughts and prayers are with the families that make up the Cheder Menachem community. We are very thankful to the various organizations, including Jewish Family Service and Ohel, that continue to support and guide Cheder Menachem through the healing process."

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