

Yitzhak Mordechai guilty of sexual assault

By **Naomi Segal** | March 21, 2001 10:00am

JERUSALEM, March 21 (JTA) – In a ruling that Israeli women’s groups are hailing as a landmark, a former Cabinet minister and candidate for prime minister has been convicted of sexually assaulting and harassing two women.

In its ruling Wednesday, a Jerusalem court cleared Yitzhak Mordechai of similar charges brought by a third woman, citing inconsistencies in her testimony. But the judges stressed this should not be interpreted as a repudiation of the woman’s claim.

The third woman, identified only as S., was a secretary in Mordechai’s office when he served as transportation minister under former Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

It was this woman’s complaint that prompted prosecutors to investigate Mordechai – and which ultimately persuaded the two other women to come forward with their own complaints.

Mordechai, whose wife left him after the allegations surfaced, faces a maximum of seven years in prison. He is expected to be sentenced next month.

Jeered by a group of women as he emerged from court, a haggard- looking Mordechai insisted he was innocent.

“I will fight with all my strength and to my last breath through every legal process to prove my innocence,” Mordechai told reporters after the verdict was read out.

Mordechai had accused the media of a witch-hunt, and his attorney, Dror Arad Ayalon, accused the media and police of “conspiring” against his client.

Supporters said Mordechai had been charged with acts that were a norm in the Israeli army and political circles for decades.

But women’s organizations hailed the ruling as a breakthrough in efforts to combat sexual harassment, saying it would encourage more women to come forward.

“It says the rules of the game have changed,” said Zehava Gal-On, the Meretz legislator whom S. first approached with her complaint.

Mordechai stepped down as transportation minister last year when charges were filed against him. Though he remains a Knesset member, he has been virtually absent from legislative activity in the past year.

Mordechai said Wednesday he would suspend further participation in the Knesset until a decision is made on the appeal he lodged against the verdict, according to the Jerusalem Post.

Mordechai had served as defense minister in the government of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In 1999, after a split with Netanyahu, he left the Likud and ran for prime minister at the head of the newly formed Center Party, becoming the first major Sephardi candidate for prime minister.

In a televised debate during the campaign, his verbal attacks broke the calm of the usually unruffled Netanyahu and were cited as a turning point in the campaign.

Just days before the May 1999 election, Mordechai stepped out of the race, leaving the opposition field open for Barak, who eventually won.

Mordechai went on trial last November for committing forced indecent acts on the three women while serving in the army, as defense minister and as transportation minister.

On Wednesday, Mordechai was found guilty of attacking one of two women, identified only as A., who was a soldier in his office when Mordechai headed the army’s northern command in the 1990s.

In one incident in 1992, Mordechai drove A. to a secluded area near Safed and tried forcibly to kiss her. When she resisted his advances, he made her walk back to the base in the dark.

In another instance, he brought A. to his apartment in Netanya and then forcibly lay on top of her, wearing only a towel.

Mordechai also was found guilty of committing forced indecent acts against the second woman, N., a Likud activist he invited to his home to discuss a job for her when Mordechai was defense minister.

The court said it found no substantiation of Mordechai's claim that the complaint from the third woman, S., was part of an attempt by rivals to "politically assassinate" him.

The judges also said they found inconsistencies in Mordechai's own testimony.

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