

Charges against rabbi and 2 sons thrown out by Cook County judge



Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz speaks regarding ecumenism and liberty at the Reclaiming Religious Liberty Leadership Summit at Halas Hall in Lake Forest on Sunday, Oct. 14, 2012. (José M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

By **Steve Schmadeke**

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Rabbi 'overwhelmed with relief' after he and 2 sons cleared of stealing donations.

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A Cook County judge dismissed felony theft charges Wednesday against the former head of a historic Uptown synagogue and his two sons, saying prosecutors had failed to prove that the three stole more than \$17,000 in donations.

Rabbi Philip Lefkowitz, who led the Agudas Achim North Shore Congregation for 12 years, smiled after Judge Michael McHale acquitted him and sons Moshe and Levi before the defense even put on evidence.

“I cannot tell you how overwhelmed with relief I am,” said Lefkowitz, 70, who wore the black hat and suit of the Ultra-Orthodox. “This has been horrendous, especially at this stage of my life. I’ve been a rabbi 50 years. I gave my life and my voice to that synagogue. We carried that synagogue on our backs.”

“You see this,” said Levi Lefkowitz, 28, who runs the kosher food section of a Jewel-Osco grocery store, pointing to streaks of gray in his hair. “I had brown hair before this started.”

Prosecutors charged the three after the synagogue board voted to remove Lefkowitz as rabbi in 2008 amid allegations of financial misdeeds and a personality conflict with the synagogue president.

Judge Michael McHale said in court Wednesday that he drove past the “beautiful” building on his way home Tuesday and was saddened by the internal struggle that had led to the sanctuary’s closing.

The judge, who presided over the one-day bench trial, said record-keeping at the synagogue was a “total mess” and that prevented prosecutors from proving guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Among other evidence, attorneys on the case discovered a letter from the synagogue’s president, Steven Turk, authorizing the Lefkowitzes to open another bank account even though Turk was unaware he’d sent it.

McHale noted that Lefkowitz was being paid only \$500 a month even though the congregation was contractually obligated to pay the rabbi \$50,000 a year.

“Maybe there were financial improprieties but given the nature of the operation, the state of its record-keeping...I just think that’s impossible to know,” McHale said.

The three denied any wrongdoing and said the funds were spent on synagogue expenses.

Turk, who testified at trial, said in a phone interview Wednesday that the synagogue board was stunned by the judge’s verdict.

“It’s a travesty, an absolute travesty,” he said. “We feel that the state supplied ample, ample evidence of financial improprieties, and we are very, very surprised by this outcome.”

One of the Lefkowitz’s attorneys, Adam Sheppard, argued that the case involved “an inter-synagogue dispute” that never should have been charged criminally.

In his ruling, the judge noted the charges were filed more than four years after the alleged theft.

The elder Lefkowitz, who now plans to retire in New Jersey, said he expects the synagogue building at 5029 N. Kenmore Ave. will be sold and likely turned into a condo development. But Turk said the board wants to reopen the synagogue for services in the next year or two.

sschmadeke@tribune.com

Twitter: [@SteveSchmadeke](https://twitter.com/SteveSchmadeke)

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