

COERCION CITED IN ARSON CASE

BY PETE DONOHUE

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A Brooklyn man charged with an arson spree at Rockaway synagogues was coerced into making a confession, his attorney charged this week.

Lawyer Robert DiDio said the coercion came in the form of food, coffee and attention.

"He wanted the attention. He was signing things just to make people happy, to satisfy them," the lawyer said of his client, Brian James Bebeck.

DiDio also said Bebeck "seems to have some sort of emotional or learning disability" and may not be competent to stand trial.

Bebeck was indicted this week on charges he set seven fires at Rockaway synagogues and a kosher market during the past year.

According to police, Bebeck confessed to setting seven fires and attempting to set an eighth in the Rockaways dating back to last July 12. All told, he targeted six locations, hitting Congregation Derech Emunoh on Beach 67th St. twice, police said. An April fire at Derech Emunoh severely damaged the roof, causing an estimated \$100,000 in damage.

Police described Bebeck as a disgruntled panhandler and part-time waiter who set fires after his demands for money were denied. He also set fires after fighting with his mother, police said. They have ruled out bias as a motive.

A spokeswoman for District Attorney Richard Brown said, "All the defendant's legal rights, and the proper procedures to safeguard those rights, were followed. And we believe he gave the statements voluntarily."

Bebeck will be evaluated by two court-appointed psychiatrists, who will report to the presiding judge. The judge will determine if he is competent, the spokeswoman said.

In addition to seven counts of arson, the Queens grand jury also indicted Bebeck on burglary, attempted arson and other charges. He faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted.

Bebeck will plead not guilty at his arraignment, DiDio said.