

SLICE OF LIFE

JEWES IN JAIL

by Yehudis Cohen

With a wry smile, Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer discusses one of the reasons why the students in his class are so dedicated. "They're a captive audience, so to speak," he says. Rabbi Spritzer's 'audience' is a group of Jewish men in the Anna Kross prison on Rikers Island.

Each week, Rabbi Spritzer goes to Rikers Island to meet with the 35 or so Jewish inmates and help them along the road to rehabilitation. "Judaism is rehabilitating," espouses Rabbi Spritzer, "because it teaches them how to deal with life."

Through their weekly classes on Judaism and Chasidic philosophy, many of the men begin to regret their past actions and acknowledge their guilt. "They don't have to announce what they did wrong to a rabbi or a class, but to themselves," says Rabbi Spritzer. "And that is the first step to *tshuva* [repentance, return] and rehabilitation."

Rabbi Spritzer is just one of a group of volunteers under the auspices of the Lubavitch Youth Organization who visit Jewish prisoners on a weekly basis. They're not official chaplains nor are they paid or compensated for their time or expenses. According to Rabbi Spritzer, they go because every Jew is always a Jew.

Another volunteer, Rabbi Shmuel Leiblich, acts as the unofficial secretary of the group. An engineer by profession, he answers the majority of the thirty letters received weekly from the prisoners. Rabbi Leiblich's self-imposed sentence is weekly visits to the Brooklyn House of Detention.

Rabbi Spritzer recounts about the time Rabbi Leiblich "dropped everything to visit one of his 'students' whom he had been informed tried to commit suicide." Adds Rabbi Leiblich, "This guy had spent eight of

the last ten years in jail. He thought his life was finished." Through Rabbi Leiblich, though, his life has turned around. A few months after Rabbi Leiblich met him, he wanted to start keeping kosher in prison. The man went on a hunger strike and didn't eat for six days. "We got him transferred to Greenhaven so he could get kosher food. Now, we're working on getting him into a yeshiva when he gets out," say Rabbi Leiblich with a smile.

In addition to studying with the prisoners, the volunteers bring along sealed packages of refreshments -- "so the men can make a blessing" -- and money for the prisoners to put in the charity box. They also bring along the L'CHAIM publication which, says Rabbi Spritzer, "I tell them to read as their 'homework' for the week."

Success stories, people whose lives were positively affected by their acquaintance with the Lubavitcher volunteers, abound. One involves a young man in prison who had converted to Christianity. He had expressed an interest to the prison chaplain to attend Rabbi Spritzer's class. "He can come as long as he doesn't wear his cross or ask Bible or faith questions at first," Rabbi Spritzer told the chaplain. When his new student arrived, Rabbi Spritzer asked him to sit with an open mind.

Rabbi Spritzer pulls out a thick file full of letters. He points to the first one from this young man which states: "When I come out, I want to go to yeshiva." In the second letter, the young man relates that while in transit to a different prison, he took off his crucifix and threw it into the Hudson River.

For over ten years, the Lubavitch Youth Organization has sent volunteers to prisons for most of the Jewish holidays. They also send educational reading material, Chanuka menorot, food for the Passover seder and Purim packets to thousands of prisoners. The weekly classes, however, began two years ago. And, says Rabbi Kasriel Kastel, Program Director for Lubavitch Youth, "Not just has this project grown, but it has grown beyond all of our expectations."

The impetus for the program, according to Rabbi Spritzer, came two and a half years ago when a woman inmate at Rikers Island wrote a letter to the Lubavitcher Rebbe. She had asked her prison chaplain for a class for Jewish women but he declined. The Rebbe forwarded the letter to the Lubavitch Women's Organization. Two women went that very week to study with the letter-writer and women have been going to the prisons every week since then.

Taking their lead from the women, the men decided to make a similar commitment. "One of the men we studied with is now in yeshiva," relates Rabbi Leiblich, "and another is a successful businessman living a totally observant lifestyle."

As a parting comment, Rabbi Spritzer quotes a Lubavitcher rabbi involved in similar work: "In Russia, Jews went to prison because they put on tefilin. Here they go to prison and then they put on tefilin." ■



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770 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, NY 11213
(718) 953-1000, 778-6000

Rabbi Dovid Raskin--Chairman
Rabbi Shmuel Butman--Director
Rabbi Kasriel Kastel--Program Director
Rabbi Shlomo Friedman--Administrator
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Leah Lederman--Copy Editor
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