

"Reaching Out" To Jews In Prison Celebrates 100th Issue

By CHAVA SHULMAN

There are approximately 8,000 Jewish inmates in prisons throughout the U.S. today out of a total of 1.2 million convicts in federal and county prisons. As a minority, Jewish prisoners often suffer physically and spiritually. They feel isolated, alienated and vulnerable to attacks by white supremacist groups, hostility by guards, indifference by wardens, and proselytizing by Christian missionaries and Moslem groups. In New York State, Orthodox Jews must cut their beards to one inch. In Florida, many prisons have regulations requiring that the hard covers of *siddurim* are removed, thus defacing them. There is no kosher food available in California, while in Arizona, there have been a number of instances of Jews being violently attacked and nearly killed by neo-Nazi Aryan gangs. The situation can easily get worse, unless more Jewish organizations get involved. During the past ten years, the Jewish inmate population has risen an alarming 300%.

One organization reaching out to this forgotten segment is the **Lubavitch Youth Organization Prison Program**, under the direction of Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer. This month marks the celebration of the publication of their 100th issue of *Reaching Out*, an educational monthly bulletin mailed to any Jewish prisoner requesting one in all the 50 states, Canada, England, Holland and Australia. *Reaching Out* offers a Torah thought, a story, an explanation about a specific mitzvah, and has a Letters to the Editor section. Rabbi Spritzer answers all letters, addressing the many concerns unique to Jewish inmates. In addition, Lubavitch also supplies Jewish *sefarim*, *taleisim*, *tzitzit*, tapes and other everyday Jewish articles.

"What with the scarcity nowadays in Jewish chaplains in prisons," says Queens businessman Chaim Cole, a volunteer on the editorial staff of *Reaching Out*, "our publication, inspired by the directives of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, acts not only as a monthly Jewish educational bulletin, but is often the only "rabbi" many inmates will ever see in prison."

One of Rabbi Spritzer's major accomplishments on behalf of Jewish prisoners was his concerted effort, together with leaders from a broad spectrum of the Jewish community, to achieve legislation mandating that every Jewish prisoner in New York state obtains kosher food on request. Originally, Rabbi Meir Kahane had fought in court for the right of Jews to have kosher food, and as a result, the Department of Corrections, working in cooperation with the New York Board of Rabbis established that one prison, the Greenhaven Correctional Facility maximum prison, provide kosher food. But as a result, prisoners serving in minimum or medium facilities wishing to keep kosher were sent to a maximum prison with murderers and hardened criminals. There was no kosher facility for women. Rabbi Spritzer formed a committee of people representing the entire Jewish community including the American Jewish Congress, the Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Community Relations Council, noted attorneys, rabbis, legislators, senators and corrections officers. Following a three year struggle, a kosher food law was enacted mandating that kosher food be available in every facility in New York State. At least 32 states followed suit. California is one of the few states left that does not offer kosher food.

"*Reaching Out*," said Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer, "is highly effective in isolating specific Jewish problems in jail because countless Jews write and share their problems, knowing we always respond positively. After receiving a letter from one inmate from the state of Michigan, for example, we sent him all the literature he needed and had someone visit him. One day, we received a moving letter ending with the words: "If it wasn't for the Lubavitcher Rebbe and *Reaching Out*, I would have been one of those forgotten Jews. It is because of people like the Rebbe and Rabbi Spritzer that life now seems to me worth living. I will continue to try and better myself as a Jew."

Recently, *Reaching Out* received another heartening letter: "Since leaving prison, I am living in Israel and, may I add, a totally observant lifestyle. I'll never forget the years I was incarcerated, nor will I ever forget you, dear rabbi, for being there in my darkest moment in life."

Although Rabbi Spritzer concedes that not all prisoners continue an observant Jewish lifestyle following release, this does not deter him from his efforts. "Even if a person does not adhere to doing *mitzvot* once he gets out of jail, the efforts to reach out and touch him are still worth it, because we brought a ray of light into that person's life in his time of greatest darkness, and that moment, where this person's soul was uplifted, is of immense value in itself." Rabbi Spritzer continues, "We see it as a good sign that 10-15% of those released from jail continue to keep in touch. These, we put in contact with local rabbis who help them grow in their Judaism."

Rabbi Spritzer lauds Rabbi Klass and **THE JEWISH PRESS** for their kindness in offering free subscriptions to Jewish prisoners. "The **JEWISH PRESS** is filled with *diurei Torah*. They are doing a tremendous act of *chesed* by providing people who are isolated from contact with Jewish ideas and environment with a lifeline to the Jewish world."

Anyone who knows a Jewish inmate — man or woman — can get the monthly bulletin sent to that person. Please send the name and all other pertinent information to Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer, Lubavitch Youth Organization, 770 Eastern Parkway, Bklyn., NY 11213. ■