

Photographs by Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Members of the Lubavitch community dancing with Jewish inmates last week at Sing Sing during a pre-Rosh ha-Shanah visit. The Lubavitchers brought religious articles and kosher food for the visit. Kosher meals will be available regularly starting Sept. 16, the Jewish New Year.

Sing Sing Inmates Hail Plan to Offer Kosher Meals

By ARI L. GOLDMAN

Special to The New York Times

OSSINING, N.Y., Sept. 2 — If all goes according to plan, Sing Sing prison will offer kosher meals for Jewish inmates who want them beginning with the Jewish New Year on Sept. 16.

About a dozen Jewish prisoners celebrated the news this week with a prayer service, singing and dancing led by visiting Hasidim, and kosher salami sandwiches brought in for the occasion.

"Got tsu danken," said Charles Friedgood, a 75-year-old former surgeon and convicted murderer, who used the Yiddish words meaning "Thank God." "We're able to be Yiddin here."

In Time for Passover

Kosher food is being made available in the state's 69 prisons in a program that began last February; Sing Sing is the 30th prison to offer the meals. By next April, in time for Passover, the food will be available in every prison, officials say.

New York, which has more Jews than any other state, will be the first to offer a kosher diet in all its state prisons. Kosher meals have been available in New York City prisons for several years.

The kosher meal plan comes as Muslim inmates have been appealing to the state for food that meets their dietary requirements, known as halal. Mr. Friedgood said that Muslims have been coming up to him "a little jealously" and asking, "How did you maneuver this?" But the Muslim chaplain at the prison said in an interview that he was confident that halal meals would follow.

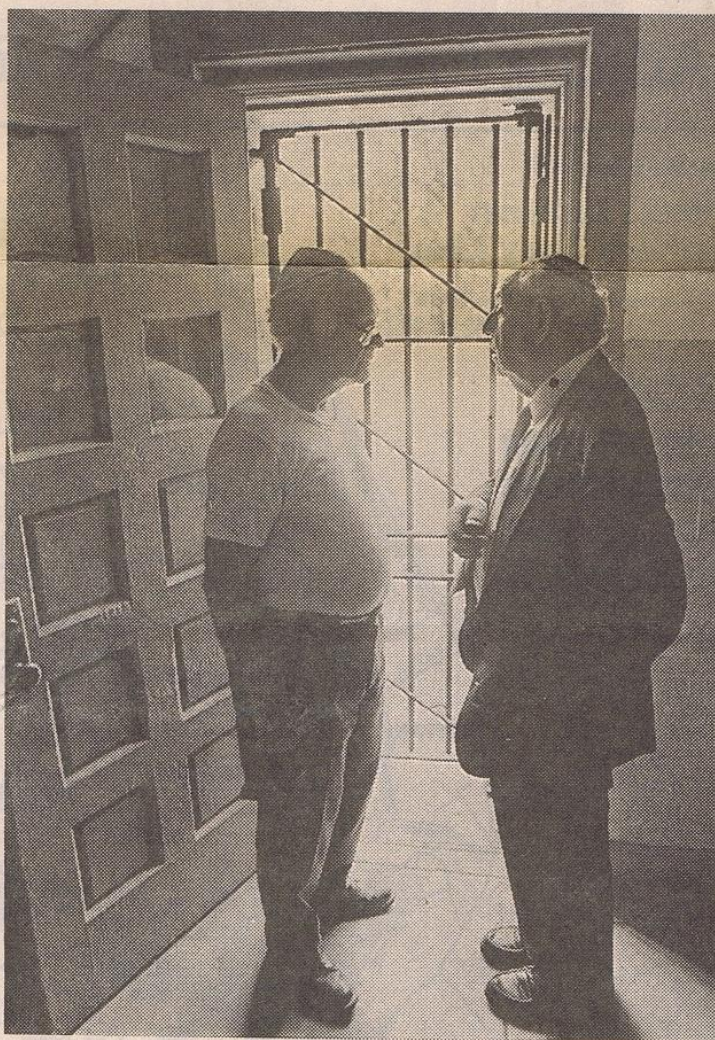
"I was told that halal meals are on their way," said the chaplain, Imam Talib Abdur Rashid. "They're starting with the Jewish inmates because they are fewer." Officials agreed, but gave no date for the Muslim meals.

According to the Department of Correction, 1.5 percent of the 65,000 inmates in state prisons are Jewish and 17 percent are Muslim. The department tried to determine whether one diet would serve both groups, but found that enough differences existed that two were necessary.

The food will be a far cry from Delancey Street on the Lower East Side or Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. There will be no hot pastrami or shish kebab.

All the religious meals will be cold and will include sandwich meat, cheese, sardines, tuna and raw vegetables. Of the 907 Jewish inmates statewide, fewer than 100 are expected to participate.

The history of kosher food in prison goes back to 1975, when Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Jewish Defense League, successfully sued for kosher food while in Federal prison in connection with a firearms conspiracy case. The State Department of Correction, anticipating similar lawsuits, responded by offering food at one prison, Green Haven. From



"We're able to be Yiddin here," said Charles Friedgood, left, a 75-year-old former surgeon and convicted murderer. He talked with Rabbi Irving Koslowe, the Jewish chaplain, for whom Mr. Friedgood is a clerk.

Prison officials seek to encourage Jews to worship.

then on, all Jewish inmates who insisted on kosher food were sent to Green Haven, a maximum-security prison.

Advocates for Jewish prisoners argued for more alternatives. "Transfer to Green Haven is clearly unconstitutional," said Bennett M. Epstein, the counsel to the Committee for Kosher Food in New York State Correctional Facilities. "It is a more repressive and dangerous environment and is like a double punishment for wanting to keep kosher."

The committee is made up of a broad coalition of national and local Jewish groups, chaplains, rabbis and state legislators and includes the Lubavitch Hasidim, who regularly visit prisoners before Jewish holidays.

Officials of the committee said that the group was intent on focusing attention on what Rabbi Herbert W. Bomzer, the chairman, called "the forgotten Jew" in prison, whom most Jews do not like to talk about.

Correction officials try to encourage religious involvement, seeing it as an aid to rehabilitation. "In a state of incarceration, especially when you're doing heavy time, you don't have many hope pegs to hang your being on," said the Rev. Earl B. Moore, a Baptist minister and assistant state commissioner of correction. "Religion is one of those hope pegs."

Jailhouse conversions are legendary, from Malcolm X to Charles Col-

son, and Jews are no exception. Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer, head of the Lubavitch Youth Organization's prison program, has a stack of letters from Jewish inmates asking for Jewish books, tapes and religious articles.

At Sing Sing, Mr. Friedgood serves as the clerk to the longtime Jewish chaplain, Rabbi Irving Koslowe. Mr. Friedgood, who grew up with a strong Jewish education, opens the small prison chapel every morning and prepares it for the service, unlocking the ark that holds the Torah and handing out prayer books and yarmulkes. On Saturday and often during the week, he manages to get a minyan, or quorum of 10 needed for prayer. There are 44 Jewish inmates in a population of 23,000 at Sing Sing.

One regular worshiper is Joel Kalish, a 38-year-old inmate convicted of drug possession. He said that he has become more observant since being imprisoned six years ago. He has stopped eating pork, attends daily religious services and has signed up for kosher food.

"Knowing that it's kosher makes me feel better," he said. "For me, it has both spiritual and physical benefits."

Another worshiper is Iznaga Ricardo, 50, a Jew from Cuba who is three years into a 10-year sentence for a crime that he did not want to discuss. "I was never very observant or knowledgeable before I came here," he said. But in prison, he has studied Hebrew and Jewish tradition and culture with Rabbi Koslowe.

"Everything I know, I learned here," he said. "I have discovered great knowledge and inspiration. I finally found myself. I was lost in the world."

Mr. Ricardo stopped eating meat at Sing Sing two years ago because no kosher meat was available. He said that he was looking forward to the kosher meals. "It's a mitzvah that we all have to observe if we want to be good believers," he said.

A Lubavitch Visit

Four young Lubavitch men — a rabbi and three rabbinical students — visited Sing Sing today in a pre-Rosh ha-Shanah visit, carrying a box with prayer books, phylacteries, prayer shawls and sliced kosher salami. They carried the box past seven locked checkpoints and past the Protestant, Catholic and Muslim chapels.

The Hasidic visitors joined Rabbi Koslowe in leading a prayer service and Torah reading in the Jewish chapel. Rabbi Velvel Butman, the Lubavitch rabbi, blew the shofar, or ram's horn, as is done every morning in the month before Rosh ha-Shanah.

Rabbi Koslowe then used words similar to those intoned by rabbis throughout the world in the days before the Jewish High Holy Days. But the words took on extra meaning in this small chapel with three-foot-thick walls and just a ray of light coming through the small windows covered with bars. "The sound of the shofar represents redemption and forgiveness for our past misdeeds," he said. "This is our season of hope for the future."