

Religion Is Food for Soul In Sing Sing

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They have been convicted of the most foul and revolting crimes imaginable — murder, rape, robbery and arson among them — but to the Rev. Dr. Earl B. Moore, the 64,000 inmates of the state's sprawling prison system are simply members of his parish.

Moore is a 63-year-old Baptist preacher with a ministry at St. Paul's Baptist Church on West 132nd Street in Harlem. After the Attica riots in the fall of 1971, he was appointed assistant commissioner for ministerial and family services in the state Department of Correction.

Moore spoke to us on the eve of the season of Jewish holidays, which include Rosh Hashanah (literally, the head of the year), Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), Succoth (eight days of rejoicing) and finally Simchath Torah in October. He says that religion is thriving as never before behind bars.

"I think one reason is that one of the few 'hope pegs' these convicts have is religion," said Moore, whose deep baritone voice could easily double for that of actor James Earl Jones.

Religion sets its roots deep in the most barren soil, and in places of the world where hope is almost always a runner-up. A prisoner facing life behind bars is fertile material for prison chaplains.

"I agree with the Rev. Moore," said Sing Sing warden John Keane yesterday, adding that the recidivism rate among religious prisoners is far lower than that of non-believers.

Keane says a new concession to religious practice — the serving of kosher meals — will begin at the end of this month, possibly on Sept. 27. It would make Sing Sing (an Indian phrase meaning rock on rock) the 30th of the state's prisons to go kosher in a program begun earlier this year.

"Religion is a positive experience for those who are sincere," says Keane, head of the famed prison since 1988. "Some of our inmates have gone on to become ministers, and one is the head of the Salvation Army in Philadelphia."

Moore's "parish" is as ecumenical as they come. He says that his congregants include Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and Jews — and, he adds, "wiccans and lunists." Wiccans practice witchcraft while lunists are moon worshippers.

"We try to accommodate the various religious practices as much as possible," he said. "but you have to draw a line somewhere. Serving kosher food to the small Jewish population in Sing Sing requires using a special mess hall — and extra preparation and handling of dishes.

Sing Sing's rabbi is Irving Koslowe. He works at the prison one day a week. He is also rabbi for the Westchester Jewish Center. His assistant in prison is Charles Friedgood, a 75-year-old former

doctor convicted of killing his wife. He was the subject of a book called "The Healer" by New York Newsday reporter Len Levitt.

"I hope I get you on my operating table one day," Friedgood told Levitt.

Rabbi Koslowe has been with Sing Sing for 43 years, and he counseled Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were put to death for spying in the electric chair in 1953. "I have been there for 17 executions," he says.

The idea of providing kosher meals to Jewish felons — there are about 500 in New York state — was a result of lobbying by the New York Board of Rabbis and by people like Rabbi Shmuel Spritzer of Crown Heights.

Spritzer is also responsible for a monthly newsletter sent to Jewish inmates throughout the country, called "Reaching Out." The current issue carries a column written by Michael (last names are not used), an Oklahoma State penitentiary inmate. The letter thanks Spritzer and the Lubavitch Youth Organization for help in "guiding

me back to G-d after a full lifetime of wandering down the wrong paths in life."

A letter from Menachem in the Virginia Beach city jail complains that the Virginia Department of Correction "is once again denying Jewish inmates kosher diets. . . ."

Rabbi Koslowe says the state has loosened some security regulations to allow prisoners to practice their religion behind bars. "It gives them what we Jews call *Yash Tikvah*

[There is hope]," says Koslowe.

Spritzer acknowledges that the idea of Jews in jail is a near-anomaly, but he says that with the explosion of drugs, there have been many Jews — a large number of them Russian — sent to jail.

"Some are murderers, too," he says. "I asked one man why he was in jail, and he told me he was there for stealing a VCR. Then he said, 'Well, Rabbi, I had to kill someone to get it.'"

Cynics say that religious conversions behind bars smack a little of those deathbed conversions that Catholics often mock. They note that the practice of religion is one of the few avenues of free expression in a place where you are told when to wake up, when to eat and when to sleep.

Still, the kosher meals are mostly cold meals, and are called alternative menus. For breakfast, they include fruit, juice, cold cereal, milk, coffee and bread — and for lunch and dinner, tuna fish, cold cuts, sardines and cucumbers.

"This is just a step in the right direction," says Spritzer. "Next we will try to get the inmates hot kosher meals."

He closes with a New Year's wish: "Have a *gut* and *zeesa yor*." (Have a good and sweet year.)

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