



Rescuing Imprisoned Jewish Souls

Unfortunately, thousands of Jews are incarcerated in the United States, scattered throughout prisons in all 50 states. Most of these Jews are desperately waiting to be linked to their Jewish heritage. The Aleph Institute provides a full range of family services to inmates and their loved ones. Concurrently, they provide similar services which are tailor-made for our country's Jewish servicemen in every branch of the military, wherever they may be deployed. In fact, Aleph's motto is, "We take care, no matter where."

Recently, Zman was invited to attend an exclusive Aleph Shabbaton designed to give information, instruction and chizuk to Jewish chaplains in the armed forces. Top military brass, even non-Jewish ones, was also in attendance to give recognition and support to this vital organization. We used the opportunity to speak to many people involved in the organization, and here share our discoveries with our readers.



Crew members participate in a Passover celebration aboard the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower.

“Joe” opened his eyes one morning to face, for the 751st day in a row, a bleak and discolored cement ceiling above his head. As he turned on the thin mattress, he could view the tiny stainless steel sink in the corner of the cell at the Federal Penitentiary where he was imprisoned. The only splash of color in the 6-by-8 foot room was his bed sheet. Yesterday, the laundry service had provided him with a green one. Another monotonous day in prison begins.

Joe considered that so far he had served 20.6% of his 10-year sentence. It wasn't hard for him to do the math; he had always been good at figures. So good, in fact, that he had very little trouble coming up with ingenious methods of embezzlement and tax fraud. He hadn't thought he was doing much harm—after all, what did it matter if he was skimming a tiny percentage off the top of the trust funds of his ultra-wealthy clients? He was working overtime for them every day. All of his rationalizations, which had provided him with a comfortable lifestyle until recently, had gotten him nowhere—except into a grand mess when he was caught. Now, he had over seven more years of a quite uncomfortable existence to look forward to.

Somehow, after he had been on the “inside” for a very short time, most of his friends and community members had moved on with their lives. He wasn't anticipating any visits or even letters from anyone except from his elderly mother. He felt abandoned. He watched as other inmates could at least look forward to visits by various clergy members or chaplains, but Joe didn't feel connected to any of them. Joe was Jewish.

At least he was in a cell alone—for now—and he wouldn't have to deal with a roommate who might be influenced by the anti-Semitism that was rampant in prison. One day, a few months earlier, he thought he had caught sight of a shamrock tattoo on one inmate's back. Prisoners recognized that as one of the secret symbols of the notorious white supremacist prison gang, the Aryan Brotherhood. Yes, Joe would be happy to stay alone in a cell for as long as possible.

As he was let out for his morning exercise, he was handed a piece of mail. Unbelievable! Who had mailed *him* recently? He opened up a newsletter called *The National Liberator*, from an organization called the Aleph Institute. Now he remembered that a few weeks ago he had filled out an application to receive educational materials from Aleph. Perhaps it would relieve some of the boredom of daily life behind bars. Besides, he'd had plenty of time to contemplate existential questions, and he wanted to know more about what Judaism had to teach about the meaning of life.

He flipped through the 48 pages of news relevant to prisoners, including new laws that might affect him, and articles and essays about Jewish topics. The magazine reminded him that Passover was fast approaching, and included an order form and instructions about how to request permission from the wardens for *matzah* and kosher grape juice for a *seder*. Joe put the magazine back in his cell and went to exercise. He would have plenty of time to read every word. All he had was time.

The Aleph Institute

In 1969, Rabbi Sholom Lipskar moved to Miami, Florida. He was a man with vision—a man who had been selected to spearhead Chabad's initiatives in Jewish education in that city. His mission was to infuse a community of largely assimilated Jews with knowledge of and participation in Jewish traditions and observances.

After spending over a decade fulfilling this task with dedication, Rabbi Lipskar was called upon to focus on a new project. In 1981, the Lubavitcher Rebbe began increasing his emphasis on providing support for incarcerated Jews. Without whitewashing wrongdoings or excusing anyone guilty of a crime, he wanted to see the establishment of organizations that would be able to lend spiritual and emotional strength to such inmates.

Rabbi Lipskar was charged with creating an organization that supported those whom



High-ranking American military brass, officers and veterans of the Jewish faith took part in the shabbaton.

he calls, “Jews in limited environments.” This included not only those behind bars, but also the chronically ill, hospitalized patients, the elderly and Jews serving in the military.

Moving to an assimilated neighborhood of Miami and establishing the area's first synagogue—a grand, beautiful structure known simply as “The Shul”—was one of the new projects Rabbi Lipskar was assigned at the time, and one he felt was right in step with the others.

“When I moved to Bal Harbour [a neighborhood of Miami], this was also a limited environment,” Rabbi Lipskar told **Zman**. “Jews were not welcome there. One neighboring community, Bal Harbour Village, even had a clause excluding people with 25% Jewish ancestry or more from owning property, until a successful lawsuit in 1984 stopped that practice.”

When Rabbi Lipskar moved in, front page headlines in the local newspaper declared: “Rabbi Moves to Bal Harbour.” Eggs were thrown at his front door. A dock master told his son Zalman, who was on a stroll, that Jews were not allowed at the docks where residents kept their yachts.



Different uniforms, same faith. Jews in the military arriving in time for the Aleph Shabbaton.



Then-Captain Herman Shelanski, commander of the USS *Harry S. Truman* aircraft carrier, presides over a *Pesach Seder* supplied by the Aleph Institute in the captain's mess hall in 2009.