

In their voices

I had the opportunity not long ago to give a dvar-torah (sermon) at my synagogue. It was a special Shabbat, Not only was it the beginning of the new month, Rosh Hodesh, it was also the Shabbat known as Shabbat Hachodesh. The second name refers to the fact that the beginning of Nissan on the Hebrew calendar is seen as the first of all of the months. I chose to focus on the word 'Hadash' which is the basis of both of those special references. The word means 'new', referring to a new month and a new year. It is also the root for the word 'renewal:' to re-energize and choose a new direction.

Rather than just talk about it, I decided to share some writings of inmates who have been going through the renewal process in a very intense way. Here is some of what I shared.

One man wrote about how he got to prison. He wrote about losses in his life that put him in a downward spiral. Then he wrote

*"Like tsunamis in the night, those rogue waves hit me and battered me and threw me up upon the rough rocks near the shore. I had drowned three times over, died thrice in one lifetime, and cried enough tears to refloat Noah's Ark. The pain was so great in those moments, and lacking any skills to reduce that pain, I lashed out at innocent people. Instead of cutting myself, or punching a door or talking to a professional - the latter being the most appropriate option - I externalized my pain. Why did it happen that way? Why didn't I drown my pain in booze, or none with oxycodone, pot or heroin?..."*

*I awoke, alone and cold in the dark cinder block jail cell full of crud along the walls, and fruit flies flying up from the drain in the latrine. I was in the segregation cell, alone. Or I thought I was alone. Then something happened.*

*'I don't want to be here anymore. The pain is too great,' I told myself, over and over again. I was thinking of ways to end it all. I was not expecting anyone to respond to me as I was crouched on the floor by the door in that cold barren cage. And then, He answered. 'Not yet', He said, not in words, but in light 'your time is not now.'...*

*... like a thousand Rubik cubes solving themselves simultaneously in the air, thousands of seemingly random thoughts all clicked in then, after hovering beat, they all came crashing down into my gut. It made sense, but now too late as my life was over.*

*But God would not hear it. With no distractions in segregation, He knew that He had my full attention. He knew, before I did, that my life was not over: only that my secular life had ended and my spiritual life was just beginning. "*

*He goes on to speak about a chaplain who gave him a book on Buddhism and suggested that he read the biblical Psalms. He concludes by writing:*

*“Today, I am a proud JUBU (Jewish Buddhist). My footing is that of the Four Noble Truths, my roots a mix of Asian and European descent - all of this giving rise to a structure above that is a mix of spiritual and cultural complexity that cannot be defined by one culture or religion alone.” I.H.*

I created a course on basic Judaism for the inmates which involve them researching on their own and submitting reports. One question was ‘how does Judaism define God?’

Here is part of one reply:

*“I'm lost without God. He's my breath, my food, my water. I live because of him. His mercy for me is great. He gives me good health as well as illness to teach me compassion for others. He fills my plate with food that overflows so that I may share with others.” I.R.*

At one of the institutions, there was a tradition of a newsletter for the Jewish inmates. Here is part of what was written about Passover one year:

*“We had a wonderful Passover here ... I had a great time assembling with our group in the Chapel and on unit one as we worshipped, celebrated and laughed, and laughed a lot. I am so lucky to have been able to be part of our Jewish Community this year, as many of you brought your own gifts and love to the Seder. It was truly a joyous year to remember, not just because of remembering how we, the Jewish people, are no longer slaves in Egypt, but that we can assemble together as brothers, sons of Israel.” J.B.*

Once I suggested as a topic for the newsletter the biblical question “Am I My Brother's Keeper?” The editor that month went and asked people how they would answer the question. I suggested that they give three elements to their answer, as frequently occurs in Pirkei Avot. This is one of my favourite replies:

- *When there is a need, give generously.*
- *When threatened, stand firm.*
- *Be your best self.*

Pirkei Avot is a section of the Mishnah, a Jewish commentary from early in the Common Era. Another inmate has compiled various commentaries on Pirkei Avot and added some of his own commentary, as well.

I concluded my dvar-torah by sharing about a letter that one of the inmates sent to Jewish Family Services expressing thanks for a Holiday parcel that he had received. He wrote the letter in Hebrew, which he had learned from a purchased set of CDs.

I was so tickled and proud that he could write a letter in proper Hebrew! Never mind that not everybody at Jewish Family Services is fluent in Hebrew.

I realize that this article may not seem cohesive. That is because each of the individuals quoted is on his own spiritual journey. Like all of us, inmates experience hardship and joy, humor and despair. We all fall down and have to struggle to our feet again.

This is from a letter written just prior to the inmate's release.

*“So as I begin this journey to take back my life I pray, not for God to save me, but for God to give me the strength and will to be vulnerable and accept help. The help I need is to put false truths in the grave where they belong and to recognize that I am loved, gifted and so much more than I've allowed myself to know, experience or enjoy in this gift of life I have been given.” R.P.*