

Jews in Jail

No one can begin to fathom what it must be like to be in jail. The truth is, we don't even want to think about it. Given that, there are Jews incarcerated and sadly, spend many holidays behind bars. Thanks to Rabbi Zushe Silberstein, these people have a lifeline to Judaism and a connection to someone once they get out of jail. No Shabbat or holiday goes by without his attention to these individuals and to their many needs, physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Rabbi Silberstein has been a chaplain since he came to Montreal as an emissary of the Lubavitcher Rebbe in 1976. He started this part of his career visiting inmates in Plattsburgh New York. Shortly after that, he moved his attention to those in jail here in Montreal and other parts of Quebec, where he may find out a Jew is in jail.

He does what is termed a 'contact visit', which means he is in the same room with the people he meets. He is then able to put on tefillin with them, perhaps daven (pray) with them and speak to them face to face.

For Rosh Hashana he provides the required foods so they have a semblance of a Yom Tov meal. Passover however, there is a full seder run by two Yeshiva students. There are usually between three and ten men present. Rabbi Silberstein recounted that every one of his sons has spent at least one seder in jail. Before we explain the food situation, it must be noted that the walk to these seders is two hours each way, often in inclement weather.

The seder is conducted exactly as one would in their own home. The food is also the same: grape juice, shmurah matzah, all the parts of the Seder plate and a festive meal. The seder is held in a private room, giving some dignity to those attending. In addition to holidays, those requiring kosher food are provided with their needs year round.

Maison Belfield

Rabbi Silberstein goes far beyond supplying the dietary needs of Jewish prisoners. He runs Maison Belfield, a Jewish integration center for those who have paid their dues or are living on the margin of society. They are given a place to live, counselling, help with finding jobs and anything else they may need at this delicate time in their lives. He gives them a sense of community and keeps them on the right track so they won't find themselves back in jail. He also instills in them the knowledge that no matter where they find themselves, they will always and forever remain Jews.

The success rate of former prisoners is excellent, with more that 50% reintegrating into society. Fathers have gone back to their families and former inmates have turned their lives around. Rabbi Silberstein told of one such success story, a young man who spent time in jail, moved to Israel when he got out and is now the owner of a highly prosperous car dealership.

We will end this article with the poignant words of Martin, a former inmate who lives, for now, in Maison Belfield: "I spent forty years in prison and now that I'm out, I have something that no one else like me has. My four best friends in the world are all Rabbis. Rabbi Zushe's family is my family."