

INCARCERATION

Holding a Vision of Freedom

By Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari

One of the hardest things about working as a prison chaplain is leaving. Each week, I exit the series of controlled locked doors and reload the contents of my locker back into my pockets - cell phone, keys, wallet, water bottle, and usually random paper with scribbled to-do lists. I walk out of the jail and get into my car (or onto my bike) and re-enter the free world, leaving behind the incarcerated men whom I serve.

My role as a prison chaplain is to be a non-judgmental presence who believes in each of their capacity to make *teshuvah*, to return to their lives, to be free and whole. What I have learned is that this is most possible when I bring a big vision of what freedom means.

I recently received a letter from Mordechai, one of my students in jail. He is an older, cisgender⁴⁹² Jewish man with an Israeli accent, who is currently completing an eight year sentence.

Mordechai wrote:

During my stay in county jails and state prisons, I developed a treatment program based on the quote: "Life is not finding myself. Life is about creating myself." The idea that I lost my freedom is a story; it limits and prevents me from taking effective action. The fact is that I am in prison, and facing facts is always empowering. It is here in the wilderness, in the desert areas of my life, separated from the Tree of Life (my loved ones), that God commanded me to build a sanctuary in my heart, where that God might dwell in it, and I did it. This was the beginning of my transformation.

I wrote him back: "Mordechai, the idea that you lost your freedom *is* your story, but it is not just *your* story. It is *our* story. It is one of the foundational stories of the Jewish people."

The Exodus story gives us the radical notion that oppression can end. Liberation is possible.



Detail from "P.I.C.T.U.R.E.S PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: TYRANNY UNDERMINING RIGHTS, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY," 2014. www.Groundswell.nyc. Acrylic on wall, 18 x 80 ft, Brooklyn, NY. By Esteban del Valle, Jose de Jesus Rodriguez, and 16 youth artists.

Michael Walzer, in his book *Exodus and Revolution*, argues that the Exodus story has served as a "paradigm of revolutionary thought" around the world, from the American Revolution to Latin America to the African-American freedom struggle.

Exodus is not only a political narrative but a central spiritual paradigm. Rabbi Nachman of Braslav said: "The Exodus from *Mitzrayim* occurs in every human being, in every era, in every year and even on everyday."

Mordechai's letter shows how the two, the political and

the personal, are so deeply intertwined in the symbolism of leaving Egypt.

This helped crystallize an insight for me. I have never been incarcerated, but very early in my first week-long meditation retreat, I had this visceral sense that these retreats must be what prison feels like. I have suffered greatly within the confines of a silent retreat, where there is no escape from the realities of my mind and the present moment. And, in those confined moments, I have felt imprisoned and felt the possibility of liberation from the chaos and obsessions of the mind.

⁴⁹² Cisgender describes people whose experiences of their own gender identity agree with the sex they were assigned at birth.

Now, I know, that a voluntary meditation retreat is certainly not prison—but I have witnessed this same truth in the men I serve. I have felt, in a room full of incarcerated men, the pulse of liberation permeate the air as we discuss goals for real self-transformation. I have facilitated name change rituals for former gang leaders as part of their *teshuvah* processes [see Rambam's *Hilchot Teshuvah* 2:4]. I have led Passover Seders where we discuss what freedom might truly mean for them, when they cannot follow me out the controlled, locked door at the end of the day.

I have been teaching Jewish spirituality in prisons nearly every week for the past two years. I often teach a series of classes based on Rabbi Arthur Green's book *Judaism's 10 Best Ideas*. The first three times I taught the book, though, I skipped the first chapter, entitled, "Simchah: Joy as a Religious Precept." I could not muster the courage to talk about joy in prison. It seemed like rubbing salt in the wounds of men longing to see the faces of their young children, literally starved for joy.

In the fall of 2015, I started working at a new facility. The first program that I ran was a Chanukah party. Mordechai—the same fellow who wrote me the letter above—walks in with a handful of other rather beefy older men who had likely never been to a Chanukah party before. I am playing some cheesy songs on an old boombox. The jail cook made some rather decent latkes and bimuelos [fried dough balls, a Sephardi Chanukah treat], and there is a banner that says Happy Chanukah hanging on the wall. We begin by lighting candles and invoking the presence of loved ones, and then we proceed to play the most competitive game of dreidel I have ever been part of. When the game ended, there were a few minutes left and Mordechai looks at me and says, can we dance the *hora*?

I figured, who am I to deny him a hora!?

Mordechai broke out into song, and before we knew it we were all singing Oseh Shalom at the top of our lungs and

swinging each other. The room got sweaty, round and round, in and out, louder and louder. These men, who moments ago would not even share half a chocolate coin with one another, were hugging, and teary - and so was I.

It was the best Chanukah party I had ever been to. And in that moment I understood the words of Khalil Gibran:

A woman said, "Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow."

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

The next time I saw them, all the men told me that party stayed with them all week. For the first time, I had the courage to teach the chapter about joy. I finally understood that joy and suffering are inseparable parts of a spiritual path—the path to freedom.

The Exodus narrative leads us to experience an everlasting and pervasive sense of possibility. This is both the beginning and the purpose of our individual and collective transformation. This is Jewish Liberation Theology.

On a meditation retreat, each sit is dedicated to the liberation of all beings. What I might, in my own language, call our collective liberation. It is the knowing in our bones that our freedom is bound up with the freedom of every other person on this planet. When I walk into a jail or prison, my goal is to support the people I serve on their own path to liberation. And when I step back out, my goal is to help liberate all of us by ending the system of mass incarceration that keeps all of us—incarcerated and incarcerators—in chains.

May all beings be free.