

TAKE ACTION

How Clergy Can Help Inside Prisons and Jails

Every prison and jail is different, with its own set of rules and procedures; federal, state, and local regulations are different, and individual wardens have a fair amount of discretion.

When trying to get access as a volunteer, learning the system's ins and outs and showing it the deference it expects can grease the skids.

One common entry point is through offering to consult on kosher food. According to Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, who works in two prisons in the Boston area, almost every prison needs this kind of help, because all too often “there’s a Catholic minister trying to oversee the kosher meal plan.” (He adds that, for all the ways the show *Orange is the New Black* gets prison wrong, the kosher meal plan scenes in season three were uncannily similar to his experiences.) This may include advocating for inmates, observing the kitchen, talking with staff about what meals are being provided, and creating standards for people enrolling in the kosher meal plan. “Overseeing (or helping to coordinate) the kosher meal plan is a great way to establish a connection with a facility.”

Another potential entry point is to offer to lead services, especially on holidays. Most prison chaplains across the country are Catholic and will often value the support of a rabbi or cantor for the Jews in their care. Where there is a Jewish chaplain, most are Orthodox, meaning they can’t travel on *yom tov*, even if a chaplain does drive on the holidays, s/he may work at three or four facilities, making it impossible to visit all of them in a single day. Rabbi Joanna Katz, a chaplain in New York State, suggests that a rabbi or cantor whose observance does include traveling could fill in, which might be attractive to wardens given their desire to forestall complaints from the people in their charge. In the Bay Area, Rabbi Lezak is coordinating a group of volunteers, including musicians, who will volunteer to lead Shabbat services in San Quentin State Prison from time to time. Rabbi Andrew Scheer, a chaplain in New York City, cites an example of a Christian colleague who is also the minister of a local church. This chaplain once brought some of his parishioners into the jail with him to participate in a prayer service with incarcerated people, which benefited both groups.

IT HAPPENED IN IOWA

Rabbi Tamar Grimm was surprised to get a call from one of the wardens at a prison in Iowa, across the border from her congregation in Rock Island, IL. It seemed he had simply called the synagogue closest to his facility. Could she answer a few questions about what it means to keep kosher? After a few phone conversations, the warden explained that they had a Jewish prisoner who was requesting kosher meals, but the pre-packaged meals that were available for order were cost-prohibitive. The prison was trying to find a way to meet its legal obligation to provide kosher food while staying within its budget, and they were wondering if there was such a thing as “levels of kosher.” She eventually was invited to tour the kitchen and offer her feedback on the accommodations they were making—which she did, though not without some conflicted feelings (and while making clear to the warden that she could not officially certify his kitchen as kosher). The relationship lasted about three months, until the warden decided, between what Rabbi Grimm and the incarcerated Jew in question were telling him, that he had done enough.

Teaching classes in a jail or prison is another opportunity that prison staff may welcome. Rabbi Fornari frequently teaches a Jewish spirituality group and says he always starts with some meditation. “There is so little mindfulness and connection in prisons,” he says, “that I spend half my time just working with them on being present.” He has found Rabbi Arthur Green’s book *Judaism’s Ten Best Ideas* an ideal curriculum for a ten-week class, because it serves as an accessible primer for his students, many of whom aren’t Jewish by birth. Rabbi Fornari notes that he always reads aloud, not assuming basic literacy—even in English.

Rabbi Fornari also adds that he has found teaching incarcerated people how to study in *chavruta* to be impactful and effective.⁵²⁶ “It’s something people can do in prison” on their own, without a lot of materials or training, he says. “Many incarcerated people have no relationships anymore,” so being able to build a connection within the framework of studying the Tanach can be transformative.

Rabbi Scheer injects a note of caution about understanding how prisons operate. Unless the facility allows incarcerated people to move around unescorted, any program is going to add to the workload of the corrections officers, who are

already often overworked. They have to bring the participants into the room, be present during the class, and then bring them back, all of which takes them away from other duties. What seems like obstruction deserves some understanding, he says. And it’s always best to plan an event far in advance; prisons and jails are no place for surprises.

The idea of teaching classes or promoting *chavruta* learning raises the question of book donations, which looks different to chaplains in different facilities. Rabbi Katz, in Westchester, says, “I have a full library—people always want to donate old books. I need new books! My inmates are serious students. They want new prayerbooks. I want to be able to have a variety of contemporary *siddurim* from the whole spectrum.” Rabbi Scheer, in New York City, has a different experience: “The more elementary, the more they loved it. The vast majority of guys say, ‘I don’t know anything about the faith.’ One guy read [a book I brought him] cover to cover. It was dated, from the eighties, but he loved it.” He says that the most effective way to donate books is to contact the chaplain so s/he can bring them into the jail a few at a time. Of the red tape involved in sending a box of books straight to the prison, “God help you,” he says.

THE ALEPH INSTITUTE

The Aleph Institute, run by Chabad, is the best-known—in many places, the only—national Jewish organization providing services for incarcerated Jews. It will often be familiar to prison officials and to incarcerated people themselves; any clergy wanting to work in prisons should become familiar with what Aleph provides. Among their offerings are holiday materials—including Passover food—which they are happy to send free of charge. Aleph will also advocate on behalf of the religious needs of Jews, and they also publish a newsletter, which many incarcerated Jews are happy to receive. For more information, visit <http://aleph-institute.org/>.

⁵²⁶ Notwithstanding the North Carolina case where the prison refused to allow Torah study in groups of less than ten, citing their understanding of *halacha* - see: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2016/02/29/justice-alito-on-discrimination-against-jewish-prison-inmates/>