

## Hearing the Groan

By Rabbi Joe Hample 1/15/10

As a four-year veteran of BCC, and a 15-year veteran of lavender synagogues, I'm ambivalent in heading off to the farthest corner of California for a prison chaplaincy. There's probably no one at Pelican Bay correctional facility who's anxious to learn the philosophy of Maimonides or the lyrics to Dreidel Dreidel Dreidel, let alone the gay Jewish narrative from Gertrude Stein to Harvey Milk. What can I offer them, my brothers behind bars? How can I possibly be of use to them?

Moses faces a similar problem in this week's Torah portion. God has sent Moses back to Egypt to redeem his brothers and sisters in bondage. I'm no Moses – *l'havdil* – but I feel his pain, especially when he pleads, *Ani aral s'fatayim*, I am clumsy of speech (Ex. 6:12, 6:30). Is Joe Hample eloquent enough to be heard at a maximum security prison with 3500 inmates?

Am I going to tell the warden, Let my people go? Somehow I don't think that's the most constructive approach. But actually the Torah quote is, *Shallach et ammi va-ya'avduni*, let my people go *and worship* (Ex. 7:16, etc.). That, I can say to the warden. Let my people go and worship. There are not many Jews at Pelican Bay, but there are a few: and I'll be leading them in services, in the spiritual quest, in religious self-discovery.

Many Jewish observances will be unavailable to my flock. They aren't going to hang a m'zuzah, or drown a havdalah candle in wine, or throw bread in the sea for Tashlich. Their access to fellowship will be constrained; their opportunities to chair committees will be limited. But they can pray: and prayer is a mitzvah; and every mitzvah helps to repair the world, to realign the cosmic energies that have been in disarray since the primordial breaking of the vessels.

Prisoners can serve God and humanity by praying. Non-Jewish prisoners too, if they meet *me* rather than the other chaplains. They can say healing prayers or the psalms. They can say the V'ahavta: tattooed convicts might enjoy the commandment to *display the word* on your arm and head (Deut. 6:8). And prisoners can study Torah. They may see themselves in Bible stories of incarceration: Joseph in Pharaoh's guardhouse (Gen. 39:20), Jeremiah in a muddy dungeon (Jer. 38:6), Daniel in the lions' den (Dan. 6:17). Holiness can be pursued in even the grimmest surroundings.

The other day I had lunch with Rabbi Yossi Carron, Jewish chaplain at L.A. county jail. Some of you may know him as *Jeff Carron*, his maiden name. Rabbi Carron's message to inmates is: You shall be a blessing (Gen. 12:2), God's assignment for Abraham. The typical prisoner is taken aback: How can *I* be a blessing? But Rabbi Carron says, Don't you know you're a blessing to *me*, you're part of my community, you're a member of my family. Sometimes you're difficult: that's the way it is with family; but we're still glad to have them.

Recently a friend wrote me: "I am very interested in how folks behind bars are able to maintain faith... it's hard enough for those of us with *privileged* lives." But my friend had it backwards: faith is stronger for those in distress; it's their lifeline. There are no atheists in foxholes, or penitentiaries. God belongs to everyone, of course, but especially to those who need God most.

This week we read, *Shamati et na'akat b'nei Yisra'el asher Mitzrayim ma'avidim otam*, I have heard the groan of those in bondage (Ex. 6:5). That may be the essence of prison chaplaincy. More than walking inmates through a ritual or teaching them a benediction, I can help by hearing their groan, by listening to their story, by acknowledging their emotions. By praying with them, perhaps, telling God what the inmate has just told me. That's a powerful gift to detainees of every denomination.

When I interviewed for the prison gig in November, I told the panel I wanted to work with the underserved. You know, Rabbi Lisa has shown me how to be a rabbi for *queer* society, certainly an underserved group. In San Francisco I ministered to immigrants, in New York to hospital patients: those are underserved congregations. Through BCC's Project Caring I've worshiped with the elderly, another underserved population.

Oy gevalt, am I going to miss BCC. But the skills I've polished here will inform my mission to the most underserved constituency of all. I approach this job with trepidation, but as Woody Allen said, 80% of success is showing up. Let the annals record that I appeared at Pelican Bay. That's the name of our Torah portion: *Va-era*, I appeared. What happens next is in God's hands.