

Out There

A captive audience

By Robby Berman

Spending Pessah – the holiday of freedom – inside a maximum-security prison smacks of more than a little irony.

Exactly 10 years ago, just weeks before I made aliya, Riker's Island Prison – a place that makes Alcatraz look like a playpen – was looking for a rabbinical student to lead Pessah services. Not being a rabbinical student but, rather, a thrill-seeker, I applied for the job. When I found out they were paying \$2,000 for the two-day stint I reconsidered the rabbinate as a serious career option.

Unfortunately, an authentic Yeshiva University rabbinical student – let us call him Yoram – got the gig. But as Pessah approached, he also got the shakes. He offered to split the fee with me if I'd come with him, and I agreed.

While Jews around the world were boiling *knaidlach* and taping up drawers, black-hatted, white-knuckled Yoram and I were driving along the Van Wyck Expressway in dead silence. We turned right after LaGuardia Airport and came to a bridge. As we passed over the hump, we had a clear view of what New Yorkers call "The Rock." During my 10 years of serving in the IDF, I have never seen more barbed wire, rifles, and watchtowers than that view afforded me.

The female chaplain met us at the front gate and thankfully succeeded in getting us through security without being strip-searched. Our arms were laden with kosher food, wine, bitter herbs, matza and the other necessary accoutrements needed to celebrate the Exodus in incarceration.

The religious ceremony was to take place in the prison gym, between the basketball hoop and the barbells. Thirty guards, forbidden to carry firearms inside the prison walls for fear of having them stolen during a riot, stood around the perimeter of the gym, carrying large sticks.

Night came. Yoram and I prayed the evening service. Yoram's obsessive-compulsive genuflections were a source of great entertainment for the guards.

We waited for the prisoners. Suddenly, the gym doors burst open and 45 men and women, Italian, Chinese and Rastafarian, took up seats. I shot a quizzical look at the chaplain; she explained that prisoners have a legal right to declare they are a member of any religion they want.

There were, in fact, a few authentic Jews. Even some Israelis. The infamous Joel Steinberg was present, as well as preppy murderer Robert Chambers, who was not Jewish himself but had killed a Jew and apparently felt some kind of affinity.

Yoram unwisely opened the evening by painstakingly describing the act of slaughtering a lamb and sprinkling its blood. I noticed one of the prisoners begin to salivate and his nostrils flare. He began to slowly finger his plastic knife.

I saw where this was heading so I jumped up, cut Yoram off, and began to talk about how freedom isn't really about



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physical freedom but about freeing oneself from impulses and uncontrollable desires.

"Freedom of the spirit is what Passover is all about. Not freedom of the body," I preached, thinking I had touched their hearts with my Torah homily.

Suddenly, the salivating prisoner jumped up and yelled: "F— freedom of the spirit! We want freedom of the body."

He hopped onto the table and started to scream: "What do we want?"

The crowd yelled back: "Freedom!"

"When do we want it?"

"Now!"

He was pretty captivating and pretty soon I found myself screaming in unison with the prisoners. The guards indelicately removed the rebel, I regained my senses, and Yoram came out from underneath the table.

THE PRISONERS, who were not allowed to have wine, were given grape juice and matza donated by Habad. Yoram and I laid

out our matza, wine, haroset and maror on the table in front of our seats.

We then went to the bathroom to perform the traditional washing of the hands, both of us apprehensive about going into a prison bathroom with another guy.

When we returned, we noticed that every last ounce of the food and drink that we had brought was gone. It was at this point that I realized that whoever stole the *afikoman* was not going to give it back. The chaplain graciously ran to an all-night supermarket and bought us some kosher food.

The first Seder over, we returned to the chaplain's office and slept on cots directly underneath a large wooden cross.

During the day, not one to pass up a possible *shidduch*, I went to visit a female prisoner I had met during the Seder the night before. While inside the women's facility, a riot broke out, unrelated to my presence there, and the female guards tried to push me into a closet for my own security.

I wanted to tell them I didn't mind, that this was every man's ultimate fantasy coming true, but I refrained, fearing it might blow my cover as a supposed rabbinical student.

By the second night, word spread around the prison that "the rabbis" were giving out free wine at the Seder. So in spring 1989, the general population of Riker's Island underwent a Jewish religious awakening, and 200 prisoners, swearing they were Jewish, tried to fight their way into the gym for the second Seder.

For most immigrants, memories of their last Seder at home makes them homesick. Fortunately, I don't have that problem.