

## **Yes, there are Jews in Jail** Chaplain Deborah Schmidt, BCC

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I provide chaplaincy for Jewish inmates in the Los Angeles County jail system. Several times a month, I venture out of my comfort zone and into another reality. In this alternative universe, men and women are locked up in little cells. Sometimes the inmate is alone in a cell that is maybe 9 feet by 3 feet – enough room for a bed, sink and toilet. If the inmate is lucky, they might be housed in a small cell with a “bunkie,” i.e., a roommate. In this type of jail housing there’s a ‘common area’ and the ubiquitous platform where guards watch over the round metal tables and chairs bolted to the floor where a Chaplain or Substance Abuse counselor might sit with an inmate, a few pay phones (really!) and a TV. Sometimes there is programming, such as a Parenting class, a GRE class; or simply watching TV or exchanging dirty laundry for clean laundry. Also, if a request is submitted there is the possibility of leaving one’s cell to visit with a chaplain.

It takes a while to get to where the inmates are housed. First there’s a slider that separates the secure part of the jail from the non-secure part. If the inmates are not on lockdown, and if I’m on the “Non-Escort Guest List” I get a green badge and the guard will open the second of five formidable steel doors (each, a slider) that form a large cage separating the inmates from the outside world. Next, there’s a slider, to exit the ‘sally port’, a small exit point in a fortification for passage into the next corridor; next there’s a slider to get to the elevators, which will take me to the floor where the inmates are housed. In order to be admitted to the next passageway another guard, in a dark foreboding-looking central guard station, must notice that I’m waiting to enter, or I can risk annoying the guards by pressing the intercom and saying, “Slider.” Another slider separates the central hallway from one of four secure areas. The same guards in this central station are responsible to open this next slider, and another slider slithers open. Once outside the housing area, another guard who keeps eyes on the inmates saunters over to the inner door and unlocks it with a large key. Finally I’m admitted to the module.

I wait while this same guard appears to be busy with other work. When it’s evident that guard has finished their conversation or whatever they are doing, I introduce myself as the Jewish Chaplain and ask if I can meet with Amber Goldberg (not her real name). I need permission from the guards to visit with an inmate. Still, this may not be possible if the inmate is in court, away from her cell at the moment, on lockdown, or has been moved to another housing location. If the inmate isn’t available on the particular day of my visit, when I return on another day, I repeat the same time-consuming practice.

The guard then, Privacy is a luxury not available in jail. Thus, if I do have an opportunity to meet with an inmate we meet in a noisy room abuzz with close to 100 other inmates. Our meetings take place in the public space where it’s loud, dirty, and chaotic. Occasionally a guard will shout — “Move that shower line along, ladies you got 2 minutes” or “Quiet down” or “Not now Jones.”

Finally, I meet the inmate – Amber Goldberg. We sit at one of the tables bolted to the floor. The inmate sits on metal bench that has handcuffs hanging off the side. On another day the inmate might have to sit handcuffed to the bench. Yet I do the same thing as at the spick and span hospital that comprises another part of my work as a chaplain; where in lieu of bars, art bedecks the hall. I sit with an inmate; I provide presence and witness to the indescribable pain – physical, emotional and spiritual --these human beings experience day in and day out.

Amber had submitted no less than 25 requests to meet with a Jewish chaplain. But there are a lot of women at this facility who had submitted their own requests, and Amber was housed in an out-of-the-way place where I don't often have a critical mass of inmates to visit. But last week I did get to her module. When the deputy called her name and motioned to where she was sitting I noticed she was visiting with the Jehovah's Witness Chaplain. She looked in my direction and waved frantically mouthing, "Please wait, I need to see you." So I did.

Five minutes later, when we finally met, my first question was cynical, "Are you Jewish?"

"Yes!" she blurted out enthusiastically, "My dad is Jewish."

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to get here but I had other inmates to visit."

Amber was surprised. "There are other Jews here? I haven't met any other Jews."

Well, I thought to myself, more than you realize – many inmates have a Jewish parent, or auntie, or cousin, or boyfriend, or husband, or child.

Amber had something very Jewish that she needed to talk with me about, and it wasn't about wanting a kosher diet, a frequent request of inmates. "I'm trying," she told me, "to connect with God, but I have so many questions."

"Questions," I told her "are a quintessential part of the Jewish faith." I settled in for some spiritual counseling. "Amber," I said eyeing the silver bible that the Jehovah's Witness chaplain had just given her, "hand me that Bible."

Opening to Exodus Chapter 3, I asked Amber to begin to read: "Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law... came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An Angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight". (Exodus 3:1-3) As Amber and I read together, we explored the story of Moses, the burning bush, and what it means to experience God's Presence. Amber's curiosity turned into an encounter with the Holy.

But Amber's questions remained. What does it mean to have a relationship with a "Higher Power"? What does it mean to know that God is with you? How do we know we are in the presence of the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He? Am I allowed to question? Is it okay to be skeptical? But as we continued to read the account, Amber discovered that Moses, too, had questions of God.

As we read more, Amber began to keep count: Moses challenged God no fewer than five times: "I can't" "I don't know your name" "I'm afraid" "The Israelites won't believe me and will laugh at me" "And besides, I'm disabled and stutter." Can you imagine that Moses comes to a Holy Place stands face-to-face with the Sacred and asks so many questions? Amber got it. It's okay to question. Part of experiencing God's Presence in our lives is asking questions and being unsure, and perhaps even a little scared.

Knowing nothing about her crime, and cutting her off when she began to tell me, I said: "Amber, your legal case is for your lawyer. I'm here for you." I realized that I had spent almost an hour with Amber. I provided presence, a visit between two human beings where each acknowledges and witnesses the humanity of the other. Oh, and yes, there was that part when one Jewish Chaplain visited the LA County jail and sat with another Jew to study a little Torah.

*~Deborah*