

**“AMERICAN PRISON: THE FORGOTTEN JEWS”**  
**A Documentary Film-in-Progress**

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*“I’ve met a lot of people who have done the wrong thing or who have deviated from the straight line, but I’ve yet to meet an evil person.”*      **Rabbi Charles Rudansky,**  
**former Jewish chaplain in Sing Sing, as quoted in a New York Times article by**  
**Marek Fuchs, “There Are No Miracles Here”**

*“You haven’t been here long enough Rabbi!”*      **A Jewish prisoner in reply**

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*Notes on the making of the film from the director...*

Nothing in my life has prepared me for the extraordinary journey I have been on for the past few years, exploring the hearts, minds and souls of Jews who are incarcerated in our country’s maximum security prisons. Before I ventured forth on this path, I had never set foot in a prison or met a Jewish prisoner. I had never studied the criminal justice system or even filmmaking. The reasons why I have been dedicating my life to bringing to light the powerful stories of the most hated, hidden and ostracized segment of our nation’s Jewish population still remain a mystery to me. What I do know is that when the stories of these complicated individuals are revealed to the public, Jews will have a better understanding of themselves as people, and also a new perspective on what it means to be Jewish.

All people live in societies, but over the centuries the sense of society has taken on added meaning for Jews. They have tended to band together wherever they are, developing a sense of community that struggles to protect and preserve them in times of trouble. Nowhere have I seen this phenomenon more clearly than in the two maximum security prisons I have filmed in so far: Sing Sing, one of the world’s most well-known and infamous prisons, located 45 minutes from Manhattan; and Tomoka Correctional Institution, a Christian-based prison in Daytona Beach, Florida. In each prison there is a small group of Jews who are convicted of terrible crimes, and who gather together in an extraordinary way.

There have been notorious Jews in the past: ideologues such as Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, gangsters such as Arnold Rothstein and “Dutch” Schultz, gangs such as Murder Incorporated. But in a culture and religion that teaches giving back to society rather than taking away, these flamboyant cases have been exceptional rather than normative. As a segment of the American population, Jews are better known for their accomplishments in the arts and letters, in science and technology, than for their roles as criminals.

The Jewish prisoners I have filmed and will be filming defy stereotype. They are convicted of having committed heinous crimes and are serving long sentences. Some are incarcerated for life. One is on death row. (Many people feel the prisoner on death row is innocent, including the Innocence Network.) These are Jews who do not fit the stereotype of white collar criminals. They did not commit, in the words of Sing Sing's Jewish warden, Superintendent Brian Fischer, "*crimes of the pencil and paper variety.*"

I have discovered that merely learning about the idea of the film pushes buttons in many Jews, and has at times elicited negative reactions. Apparently, I was somewhat naïve, as I was unprepared for this. Many people in our society, including many Jews, would rather not acknowledge the existence of these prisoners who are convicted of violent crimes, or think about them as human beings. However, keeping this disenfranchised segment of our nation's Jewish population hidden is not in the best interest of the rest of America's Jews, much in the same way that it is not in the best interest of society at-large to keep hidden mental illness, domestic violence or substance abuse. It is my hope, that by bringing to light this heretofore unexplored subject of modern-day Jewish prisoners, feelings of shame and guilt will be alleviated. It is a difficult subject to face, but Jews cannot continue to be ostrich-like.

There are questions that have been gnawing at me... What is our responsibility as Jews for these prisoners and their shunned families? Do we have a responsibility to reach out? Are Jewish prisoners our brothers? If so, are we our brothers' keeper?

**AMERICAN PRISON: THE FORGOTTEN JEWS** is the first feature documentary to explore Judaism behind bars. What does being Jewish mean to the prisoners? How do they experience their Jewish identity? What is it like to be a small ethnic minority living in such a harsh environment? Are the prisoners influenced by Jewish faith and teachings? If so, how? If so, which Jewish teachings? How do they view their crimes through a Jewish lens? Can Judaism help them to change, to undergo a transformation? Can they experience Teshuvah? What role does forgiveness play?

During the course of the incredible journey of making this film, so many things I've learned about people have been turned upside down and inside out. I no longer define people by their worst moments. I've learned not to be a harsh judge of people I've never even met. People are more complicated than I've ever imagined. No one is all "good" or all "bad." People are mixed and there are many, many shades of gray.

**AMERICAN PRISON: THE FORGOTTEN JEWS** is a character-based film that will humanize these Jews who have gone astray, and show their connection to their religion. It is also a study of isolation. We learn most about ourselves by familiarizing ourselves with the lives of others. Viewers may be surprised to discover that some of the film's subjects are more like themselves than they realize.

If you would like to learn more about the film, please visit the film's web site: [www.shininglightproductions.com](http://www.shininglightproductions.com). You may also contact Rhonda Moskowitz.