

A Rabbi Writes From Prison

(NOTE TO THE EDITOR: I write this while a prisoner in the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Va. It expresses my deep personal feelings as to why my colleagues and I have chosen the unprecedented action to go to jail on behalf of Soviet Jews. - Rabbi David Oler.)

By Rabbi David Oler

(Editor's Note: Rabbi David Oler serves the Galtersburg Hebrew Congregation in Maryland, and is the chairman of the Soviet Jewry Committee of the Washington Board of Rabbis.)

"Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is being spilled" (Leviticus 19).

This biblical injunction has inspired protests on behalf of human rights individually and collectively since ancient times. The Midrash (rabbinic exposition of the Bible) interprets this verse as the responsibility not to withhold testimony that could save someone's life. Thus, the protesters against apartheid and the persecution of Soviet Jewry share a common, moral imperative.

The U.S. Attorney and the Justice Department have removed the blindfold traditionally worn by the symbol of justice in choosing to prosecute rabbis and others demonstrating within 500 feet of the Soviet Embassy, while not pressing charges against those detained for demonstrating within the same proximity of other embassies. The Bible has also taught us what has become a primary principle in American tradition: "Proclaim Liberty throughout the Land to all the inhabitants thereof" (Leviticus 25).

Five rabbis out of 44 already found guilty in the District of Columbia Superior Court have therefore chosen to go to Federal Prison rather than accept an unjustly imposed sentence. My

colleagues and I protest not just the selective prosecution, but the priority given by the court to the Letter of the Law over intent and moral imperative. The court did not even permit testimony regarding the necessity to prevent a greater evil, the basis for our defense.

Our government is supposed to be the champion of human rights, and yet concern for what the Soviets will say has influenced the equal and just implementation of our Laws. Our nation must not be intimidated in its pursuit of human rights. The Roman emperor Caligula once sought to install an idol of his own image in the Holy Temple in ancient Judea. The historian Josephus records how 10,000 people stood in the way of his officer Petronius and said they would have to be killed before permitting such an outrage. This act of civil disobedience, in keeping with the Talmudic Law to accept death rather than idolatry, even under duress, so moved Petronius that he risked his life and refused to implement the Roman emperor's order.

The Soviet Union seeks to impose the idolatry of the state. Is our nation willing to act with the courage of Petronius?

Rabbi Moses Cordovera, the 16th-century mystic, taught that the souls of all human beings are intertwined as one. We are morally bound to act with uncompromising courage until every single human being can live free from persecution.

By going to jail, we have identified with the plight of the Prisoners of Conscience in the Soviet Union, many of whom are Hebrew teachers whose only crime was to teach Jewish culture. These educators are the only spiritual leaders of the over 2-1/2 million Jews in the USSR. Their government seeks to suppress all vestiges of Jewish life.

Our jail term in the Federal Correctional Institution in Petersburg, Va. is but a mild taste of the interminable suffering of Soviet Jews and of the Hebrew teachers, who have been singled out together with other Prisoners of Conscience. Our symbolic act parallels the eating of bitter herbs at the Passover Seder, as a reminiscence of the ancient enslavement of the Hebrews in Egypt. Such customs have shaped the identity and values of those who practice them and inspire to passion and concern for the oppressed. The involvement of so many Jews in the civil rights movement is but one example.

Anatoly Shcharansky is my age, 37, yet I will soon return to my day-to-day life as a rabbi in my

congregation. Shcharansky has languished in Soviet prisons on trumped-up charges for over eight years. Joseph Berenstein was blinded in a Soviet prison, where he was sent for the crime of not stopping his daughter from teaching Hebrew. Yull Edelstein is being persecuted in the Gulag because of his Jewish identity. Zachar Zunsheln was raped in his labor camp, his only crime being the wish to leave Russia. Dr. Joseph Begun has now been sentenced for the third time for teaching Hebrew, this time for 12 years. Dr. Leonid Volvovsky was recently imprisoned for teaching about Judaism and distributing copies of the novel Exodus.

During World War II, our entire country became aware of the ongoing annihilation of European Jewry. Yet our government refused to bomb the tracks to Auschwitz. All humanitarians at that time should have conducted acts of civil disobedience to influence our government's policies. The victims suffered greatly from the silence of the world. We cannot and will not remain silent while the Kremlin continues a "final solution" for the Jews of Eastern Europe. Soviet Jews have learned of our willingness to stand by them. We pray that this gives them hope and strength to persevere in the face of the cruel oppression which they endure.

They need to know of the support and concern of our government and our citizenry, as do all unjustly oppressed peoples throughout the world.

Front Office Administrator Named At Fremont Medical Center



Linda Pearce has been named front office administrator for the newly-opened Fremont Medical Center located at 520 East Fremont at Sixth Street. The announcement was made by Drs. J. Corey Brown and Neil W. Goodsell, center physicians.

A 10-year resident of Las Vegas, Pearce was previously employed for five years in the pre-admitting department of Valley Hospital. Responsibilities of her new position include management of the front office, coordination of group medical contracts, Nevada Insurance Commission injuries and a variety of public relations duties.

Fremont Medical Center is the city's newest medical facility, offering 24-hour comprehensive care for residents, visitors and downtown employees. The staff of qualified professionals have been trained in family practice and emergency medicine, and the center is equipped with private examination rooms, minor trauma, orthopedic, and acute care emergency rooms; stress test, pulmonary function testing, physical therapy and x-ray facilities; a full laboratory; and a 24-hour pharmacy. In addition, the center will serve as a downtown operation base for Mercy Ambulance.

Appointments are not necessary, but they can be made by calling the Fremont Medical Center at 382-5200.

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