

# THE ALEPH INSTITUTE

## *North East Region*

Annual Report  
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THE ALEPH INSTITUTE – *North East Region*

2121 Murray Ave. Pittsburgh, PA 15217

412.421.1295 f: 412.521.5948 e: [info@alephne.org](mailto:info@alephne.org)

Also on the web at: [www.alephne.org](http://www.alephne.org)

## PROGRAM AREA: PROGRAMS FOR JEWISH INMATES IN PRISON

### Prison Visitations

*Newly released statistics and figure for the Department of Justice, show a whopping six point eight million people under the care of the prison, parole and probation in the United States. In 1980 these numbers were one point six million people. Religious programming and community support remain singularly the most effective method by far, in the reduction in recidivism. Department of Justice and state prison systems in recognizing these figures, have began working and opening the doors to work with religious and community groups to better facilitate and offer more programs, to inmates being released from prison. Despite the halt in the building of Federal prisons, however we have seen an increase in the number of private prisons, which the Federal Bureau of prisons and the state departments of corrections are hiring bed spaces from.*

### **Program Highlights:**

- **Allegheny County Jail:** Rabbi Yossi Silverman and Dr. Avrohom Huebner, who have been going for a few years now, were pleased to welcome to their group Reuven Hoch, Marty Cohn, Pinchas Naiditch and Mordechai Rosenthal (this is in addition to Mordechais other prison visits – see FCI Elkton). They have made over 678 visits to individuals at the Allegheny County Jail during the past year, each one lasting a minimum of fifteen minutes to well over an hour each. The visits involved religious counseling, giving hope and guidance, and when applicable, discharge plans for the inmates to be able to rebuild their lives. With over 2,700 inmates incarcerated at the county jail, the vast majority of whom are in for minor offenses, support and help with rebuilding lives is essential. The Jewish inmate population remains at 0.5 percent of the overall prison population. Aleph regularly delivers prayer books, Torahs and other religious items to the jail.
  - There were two Jewish inmates incarcerated who only ate kosher food for whom kosher food was supplied.
  - The visiting Rabbis handled a situation where a Jewish inmate became a father while in prison and the mother of the baby was facing prison time for a drug charge. The case worker had began proceedings to have the child removed pending the outcome of the mothers recovery and satisfying the criminal court violations.

The county jail now has a good staff and the inmates are regularly visited, especially important given the high turnover of Jewish inmates at the jail and the acute problems that those inmates face. They are usually straight off the street and face greater challenges than the inmates in other facilities. Rabbi Yosef Silverman oversees the programs and coordinates all activity at the county jail in addition to his visits. For more information about programs at the Allegheny County Jail, please e-mail [ysilverman@alephne.org](mailto:ysilverman@alephne.org).

- **Westmoreland County Jail** has not seen any Jewish inmates (at least none reported) over the last year.
- **Bedford County Jail** had for a few month two Jewish inmates, young Israeli men, who have since been transferred to other institutions. The chaplain at the institution, long time acquaintance of Rabbi Vogel, worked with them and the Aleph Institute to provide the necessary services for their needs.

- Jewish inmates at the **PA State Prison at Cresson** continue to receive regular visits from *Rabbi Alan Tombosky*, who provides religious counseling and guidance. Unfortunately there are a couple of Jewish inmates who have been in the RHU (restrictive housing unit also known as 'solitary confinement') for six months or longer. Alan continues to visit them and provide the necessary services despite the security and confinement concerns. The six Jewish inmates at this high security prison continue to receive Torah classes, individual counseling and religious materials for study. A few of the Jewish inmates at that facility are taking advantage of the correspondence courses provided by Aleph Institute (see later in the report more about the correspondence courses). To contact Rabbi Tombosky please e-mail [atombosky@alephne.org](mailto:atombosky@alephne.org).
- Alan also visits the **Federal Prison in Loretto**, PA, located one and a half hours from Pittsburgh. The Aleph Institute has provided counseling and religious services at this prison for close to fifteen years. Alan provides programs and materials for both English- and Spanish-speaking inmates. Alan is a fighting force for the religious needs of the Jewish inmates and has won the respect of the warden, staff and the inmates alike. This facility currently has eight Jewish inmates in its population.
- The PA state prison at **Chester** continues to be served by one of the Aleph Rabbis, *Rabbi E. D. Strasbourg*. He provides regular religious services to the Jewish inmates residing at that facility and has been overseeing the correspondence course for those inmates taking it. At a Pennsylvania Prison Chaplains Association conference in October, Rev. Douglas Yeboah-Awusi publicly thanked Aleph for providing a Rabbi after having been for so long without one, and acknowledged Rabbi Strasbourg's dedication to the Jewish inmates at the facility. To contact Rabbi Strasbourg, please e-mail [edstrasbourg@alephne.org](mailto:edstrasbourg@alephne.org).
- PA State Correctional Institute at **Houtzdale** is being served by *Rabbi Nosson Meretzky*, whose devotion to this line of work is exemplary; he has been working with Aleph Institute for five years now and has proven a tremendous asset, as stated by the Head Chaplain at the institution Rev. Stover. You may contact Rabbi Meretzky at [nmeretzky@alephne.org](mailto:nmeretzky@alephne.org).
- *Rabbi S. Charitonow* of Buffalo continues to regularly visit the Jewish inmates at the **PA State Hospital in Warren**. There was unfortunately a 200% increase in the Jewish population at that institution. The Rabbi provided them with programs for the holidays. To contact Rabbi Charitonow, please e-mail [scharitonow@alephne.org](mailto:scharitonow@alephne.org).
- *Rabbi Charitonow* also continues to visit the **Federal Prison at McKean** County in Bradford, PA. With a large Jewish community at that prison, those visits are very necessary. Rabbi Charitonow inspects the food service at the institution and provides programs for the continuing Jewish education of inmates seeking continued study. It is now fifteen years that Aleph Institute has been providing services and programs in that facility.
- *Mordechai Rosenthal* continues to visit the **Federal Prison in Elkton**, Ohio, providing Jewish inmates with rabbinical counseling and guidance. The institution is about an hour and a half drive from Pittsburgh. He inspects and watches to ensure that kashrus at the facility common fare room is maintained for the many Jewish inmates who eat kosher food. Rabbi Rosenthal at a ceremony in the institution, has now been given clearance to enter the prison compound and conduct visits without escort, this level of trust is a rarity in the Federal prisons systems PA for non employees. To contact Rabbi Rosenthal please e-mail [mrosenthal@alephne.org](mailto:mrosenthal@alephne.org).
- The **Federal Prison at Morgantown**, West Virginia, a one and a half hour drive from Pittsburgh, continues to be served by *Abby Mendelson*. He visits weekly to encourage, teach, and guide the many Jewish inmates at that facility. The Rabbis dedication and concern for the

- inmates is warming, he spends many hours traveling, despite weather that is sometimes not so hospitable. To contact Abby e-mail [amendelson@alephne.org](mailto:amendelson@alephne.org).
- **Belmont Correctional Institution** in Ohio is now visited by *Rabbi Chaim Davidson*, who has been serving a group of eight Jewish inmates for the past eight months. We welcome him and thank him for his decision to join the Aleph Institute group of volunteers. You may contact Rabbi Davidson at [chaimdavidson@alephne.org](mailto:chaimdavidson@alephne.org).
  - The **Federal Correctional Institution in Gilmore**, West Virginia, a new institution which opened a few years ago, received a visit from Yakov (Jake) Pelled who provides religious services to the institution. For more information write [ypelled@alephne.org](mailto:ypelled@alephne.org).
  - **Cooks Forest**, PA is a new institution near Marionville which has a small Jewish population. Currently the institution does not have a Rabbi, however the Aleph Institute has been providing programs as needed at the institution and we continue to search for a Rabbi for that institution.
  - **Camp Hill Prison** in central PA is the classification center for all PA prisons and was the object of much publicity some fifteen years ago due to riots. *Rabbi Elazar Green* now visits that institution on a regular basis, bringing many necessary programs and providing religious counseling for the Jewish inmates. We thank Rabbi Green for finding the time despite his heavy work load overseeing Chabad outreach offices in York and Lancaster counties. To contact Rabbi Green e-mail [egreen@alephne.org](mailto:egreen@alephne.org).
  - State Corrections Institution **Coal Township** has until recently had no identified Jewish inmates. *Rabbi Shmuel Halpern*, an Aleph Institute Rabbi, now provides religious services and programs for the Jewish inmates there. Contact Rabbi Halpern at [shalpern@alephne.org](mailto:shalpern@alephne.org).
  - **NECCI** is a new private prison in North East Ohio and provides bed space for the Federal Bureau of Prisons. *Rabbi Eytan Rosenthal* has begun providing religious services at the institution and we look forward to working with him. Contact Rabbi Rosenthal at [erosenthal@alephne.org](mailto:erosenthal@alephne.org).
  - **Hazelton Federal Prison** located in Hazelton, West Virginia, is a new facility with Jewish inmates. *Gerard Meyer*, a relative newcomer to the Jewish community in Pittsburgh, will be visiting that institution on a regular basis. We thank him for his dedication and support. Contact Gerard at [gmeyer@alephne.org](mailto:gmeyer@alephne.org).

*Currently Aleph is seeking an individual to visit one prison on a regular basis. This institution is located an hour and a half drive from Pittsburgh and has six Jewish inmates. If you know of someone who would be willing to volunteer please contact Rabbi Vogel at [rabbivogel@alephne.org](mailto:rabbivogel@alephne.org).*

### **Torah Studies Program – Correspondence Course**

*Torah study programs are available to inmates with the help of staff chaplains or the education department at the respective prison. This program is conducted via mail and currently has over four hundred and fifty participants.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- *Devorah Leah Phillips, a staff member at Aleph Institute, has succeeded at the challenge to get this program organized and on track. We welcome her to Aleph Institute and thank her for her dedication and commitment to the programs and services. You may contact Devorah Leah at [dlphillips@alephne.org](mailto:dlphillips@alephne.org).*
- *There are now eight courses offered with over 450 Jewish inmates who benefit from this program. Due to the lack of internet access for inmates – as the internet is considered a security concern – this program operates via the US mail. Participants receive books, making the program all the more effective, though costlier.*
- *This past year, the program saw a doubling of courses available. These courses were written especially for this program by Rabbi Yossi Shulman and his sister Ms. Shprintza Shulman. Their dedication, efforts and commitment to Jewish education is admirable.*
- *Aleph has experienced more than a doubling of the participants in this program. Inmates in isolated prisons are studying and using otherwise dead time productively, absorbing tools and guides toward becoming productive members of society.*

*This program has received letters of approval and support from state correctional agencies, is lauded by the Rabbis that visit institutions across the region, and has proven to be a very popular and needed program. The costs to run this program are substantial, and we at Aleph Institute are always looking for sponsors for this program. If you would like to dedicate a course after a loved one or would like to honor someone, please contact Rabbi Vogel [rabbivogel@alephne.org](mailto:rabbivogel@alephne.org).*

### **Chesed – Mentoring Program**

*Based on programs offered by religious organizations throughout the US, this program matches inmates with individual mentors who work with them to modify attitudes and prepare them for reentering society. The mentors, or sponsors, continue to work with ex-inmates providing moral support and assistance with their transition into society, ensuring they receive and retain employment and become productive members of the community.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- *This program continues to offer one-on-one mentoring, providing solid mentors as sponsors for the inmates. Dedicated volunteers from across the area are currently involved with this program. Training for this program is provided and a support system for the mentor is in place. For more information or to volunteer, please contact Aleph.*

### **Books and Religious Articles**

*This program offers inmates and prisons religious books and ritual items i.e.: Tallis, Tefillin etc., at no cost to the institution or the inmate when no funds exist.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- This program provides religious items at no cost to destitute inmates. For the most part these items are donated by local synagogues and individuals. They are then distributed to the institutions and inmates who in turn are able to pray in a more meaningful way.

*We are always looking for used but useful Tallisim, Tefillin, Siddurim, Chumashim and other Jewish books we can distribute. If you or someone you know has any gently used books or religious articles, please contact Aleph.*

### **Grape Juice and Matzo Program**

*This program ensures that grape juice and matzo are available for Jewish inmates to celebrate Shabbos and Jewish holidays in Prison.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- Volunteers oversee and ensure that the participating prisons receive grape juice and matzo delivered in a timely and organized fashion. The program brings a sense of warmth and connection to the inmates at the many federal, state and local jails participating, especially when the Rabbi cannot be there due to Shabbos or holiday observance.

## **PROGRAM AREA: AFTERCARE**

### **Individual Career Services**

*Volunteers counsel and assist newly released inmates seeking to re-enter the job market. Career counselors offer career assessment and counseling, job search assistance and help with writing and distributing resumes. A job bank with participating local businesses offers individuals jobs to help with re-entrance into society.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- Yaacov Davidson continues to work with individuals attempting to reintegrate into society, starting with the preparation and presentation of their resume, through their job placement.
- Aleph continues to rely on the help of the Appliance Warehouse (Fred Landay), and Crown Antiques (Boruch Hyman). We are pleased to add Consumer Produce (Alan Sieger) and Reinhold Ice Cream (Bob Mandel) to this list, who offer employment opportunities for inmates upon their release from Prison.

*Our “Career Development Department” is always seeking businesses willing to hire individuals who are re-entering society. If you or someone you know is in a position to hire individuals, please contact Yanky in the office or at [ryd@AlephNE.org](mailto:ryd@AlephNE.org).*

### **Community Integration**

*Many inmates leave prison broken and in despair. Their previous family has fallen apart, and they are left with emotional issues to address.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- Isabel Bloom, MSW of the Jewish Children and Family Services works with our ex-inmates, offering them emotional support and assistance in obtaining government support. She works with them upon their release and continues with them as they adjust to their new lives.

- The Jewish Community Center continues to work with us, providing their services at little or no cost to ex-inmates who are rebuilding their lives.
- The Jewish Family Assistance Fund has worked with us providing assistance for newly released inmates so they can buy the minimum of necessities upon re-entry to society.
- The Hebrew Free Loan Association has provided loans for those exiting the prisons, helping them get re-established in society.
- The Hebrew Free Loan Association once again this past Chanukah 5766 sponsored the Chanukah Gelt Program providing gifts for the children of Jewish inmates who are themselves not able to take care of such an important task. We once again thank Rabbi Eli Seidman for his dedication and commitment to making sure this program is organized and runs smoothly. You may contact Rabbi Seidman at [eseidman@alephne.org](mailto:eseidman@alephne.org).

### **Hotline**

*Former inmates in a bind, families with children in trouble, spouses on the edge, all are in a quandary. There is a hotline 24/6.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- The Aleph Institute provides a Hotline for families and individuals in trouble and in need. In the past six months, many emergency calls have been received after office hours. A Rabbi with knowledge of the criminal system monitors this phone line, offering guidance and his extensive knowledge of what is another culture and society, thus being able to help and direct an otherwise bewildered family member.

### **Aleph House**

*Aleph House provides emergency housing for individuals in the community who are homeless, and transitional housing for those leaving prison.*

#### **Program Highlights:**

- Over ninety percent of those leaving prison are homeless. The “Aleph House”, a short-term resource providing housing for up to ninety days, allows the individual to get back on his feet. In the past year we have provided housing for five ex-inmates and one family.
- Currently we are still renting various apartments across the city, with special thanks to the various landlords who rent to us at nominal cost. This service enables the inmate to begin life anew. We have plans to purchase our own property in the near future in order to eliminate the headaches of working with landlords who fear dealing with ex-inmates.

*The Aleph House continues its search to purchase its own facility where it would provide temporary housing for ex-inmates, resource rooms and educational facilities, to assist with rehabilitation. Prior to the war in Europe every town had a “Hekdesh” fund which provided such services. If you or anyone you know would like to provide for such a facility in Pittsburgh, in honor or in memory of a loved one, please contact Rabbi Vogel at [rabbivogel@alephne.org](mailto:rabbivogel@alephne.org).*

### **Shabbos and Holiday Programs**

*This program provides for those reentering society to be “adopted” by a family for Shabbos and holiday celebrations in a warm and friendly family environment. It also*

*ensures that services and support will be available to inmates and their families for Shabbos and holidays.*

**Program Highlights:**

- As the majority of inmates are isolated and without family or loved ones to spend time with, this program offers family-style support. Currently this program hosts three individuals.
- For the High Holidays various prisons which do not receive regular rabbinical visitation, were visited and provided with necessities for the holidays.

**PROGRAM AREA: FAMILY SUPPORT**

*Government statistics report that every inmate incarcerated affects nine additional people. Family members are among the affected. The children are especially hard hit. What do they tell their friends? Their pain and suffering is enormous.*

**Program Highlights:**

- High Holiday needs were distributed to many families of inmates, allowing them the opportunity to observe the holiday despite their hardships and loneliness. The Aleph Institute acknowledges the dire consequences that families of inmates face and works with the spouses and children to help them through their difficult hour.
- Holiday clothes and arrangements for holiday meals were made for the families of inmates.
- Support groups, usually with individual families, are conducted by Aleph Rabbis.
- With the help of a grant from the Ladies Hospital Aid Society of Western PA, we were able to increase our programs for the families by offering a support group for the spouses and extended family members going through crisis. This program makes a world of difference for these individuals in trying times. The program is led by Mr. Paul (Pinny) Herman. For more information and times, please contact [pherman@alephne.org](mailto:pherman@alephne.org).

**PROGRAM AREA: IMMIGRATION PROBLEMS**

*Aleph continues to provide assistance for Jewish inmates of foreign descent who, due to their “stateless” classification, have become “lifers” in the prison system. Prior to 9/11 the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) released “lifers” who were incarcerated for minor non-violent charges to Aleph custody; this is no longer true. Today Aleph works with the INS to seek a solution to this growing problem.*

**Program Highlights:**

- Hundreds Israeli citizens, who were arrested once again in the holiday season (just prior to Chanukah 5766 2005/6) crackdown at malls across the North East, were re-united with their families in Israel as Aleph worked with authorities to rush their deportations.
- Aleph provides religious, emotional and family support to others who are stateless and whose case is awaiting determination.
- Aleph works with the Federal Immigration and Naturalization Services to help expedite the relocation of ex-inmates to Israel, thus enabling them to be reunited with their families. Without Aleph’s efforts, some of these cases would drag on for years.

## **PROGRAM AREA: GUARDIANSHIP**

*With the aging of the prison population there will be an increase of aging Jewish inmates who pose no threat to society and who will be released to the Jewish community. Some of these individuals may be able to function independently, while others may need nursing or other similar care.*

### **Program Highlights:**

- With the current rented “Aleph Houses” provisions are being made to accommodate those individuals who are able to lead a somewhat independent life. This house can accommodate them on a temporary basis until permanent housing is available.
- The Jewish Association of Aging has agreed to work with Aleph to provide services for inmates with terminal illnesses, affording them the respect and care we as a community provide to all our brethren.

## **OTHER NEWS: ADVOCACY**

- The Honorable Dan Frankel and Senator Robert Jubileer continue to work with the Aleph Institute to encourage the Department of Corrections to provide religious rights to Jewish inmates as it does to members of other faiths. The above individuals were recently successful in receiving the assurances from the state that Jewish inmates who wish to don tefillin will be able to do so without needing a lawsuit to accomplish it.
- In response to the increasing number of Jewish inmates and the need for more visits, volunteers and staff have also grown.
- Aleph joined other religious and humanitarian groups at a town hall forum in the capital, asking for more cooperation and collaboration in working with the Justice system to offer more and better alternatives to incarceration.

## **PROGRAM AREA: DOROTHY’S FRIENDS**

*With the discovery of a Jewish woman who had spend over seventy years in a state institution without a visit, a program was launched to offer visitation in every state hospital and nursing home where there are Jewish patients. This program is now being organized by Mrs. Amy Schwartz and we thank her for her time, dedication and commitment to this program.*

### **Program Highlights:**

- After recruiting over 32 dedicated volunteers, this program is off to a wonderful start. Beginning with the holiday of Purim volunteers will be traveling to the local state hospital to bring the warmth of the holiday to these forgotten members of the community. Those visiting will have undergone a training exercise as required by the state.
- Preparations are underway for Passover visitation and supplies to these facilities.

*If you are interested or you know someone who is available to donate time to this important project, please don't hesitate to call the Aleph office or write [aschwartz@alephne.org](mailto:aschwartz@alephne.org).*