

LAW & JUSTICE / LENDING A HELPING HAND

# Aleph Institute provides for more than prisoners' spiritual needs

Jewish library available to prisoners

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October 15, 2019, 9:03 pm | [Edit](#)



Rabbi Moishe Mayir Vogel. (File photo)

For close to three decades, Rabbi Moishe Mayir Vogel has worked to support Jews in local, state and federal prisons throughout the Northeast.

Vogel is the executive director of the Aleph Institute's North East Region, "stretching north from Virginia and East from Ohio." According to Vogel, Pittsburgh has more federal prisons in a four-hour radius than anywhere else in the country.

The Aleph Institute provides for Jewish inmates' spiritual, educational, religious and advocacy needs, regardless of belief or denomination.

Vogel recalls that when he began his tenure as executive director, he used to put up to 60,000 miles on his car each year, traveling from prison to prison throughout the region. Now, the Aleph Institute relies on a team of volunteers, including nine rabbis who have a goal of seeing each Jewish inmate at least once a week.

Allegheny County has five to 10 Jews in prison at any given time. "With approximately 50,000 arrests in Allegheny County a year, and a jail that hold 3,000 inmates, turnover is very high," Vogel said. "The average stay is three months. Because of the fast turnover, we've got to have people there at least once a week. With volunteers, we're covering that. People come, people go, some people stay a little longer. We're able to provide for them."

Providing for prisoners' needs doesn't simply mean arranging for a robust Torah study program or basic religious supplies like tefillin or matzah for Passover. It's also about education.

"One of the things we realized we needed from day one was a library," he said. "The inmates have a lot of time. They want to learn. Unfortunately, the government took out education from the prison system. So, not only is it warehousing those prisoners that simply want to be, it's also warehousing everyone else. They aren't allowing any education."

That library is more important than ever before, as the fentanyl addiction of the last several years has created a unique problem. Visiting rabbis used to be able to bring books to prisoners. Unfortunately, fentanyl was being smeared on paper products and passed through letters and books to inmates who were then ingesting the paper. As a result, the prison system has banned almost all paper from going into prisons.

Because of this, visitors can no longer bring books for prisoners to read. The Aleph Institute has bypassed that challenge by being included as part of the Pennsylvania Interlibrary Exchange. This system allows anyone to check out books from any library affiliated with the program. When a prisoner requests a book in the Aleph Institute's library, it is sent to them via media mail. The inmate reads the book and returns it when finished.

Navigating the ban has provided other opportunities for Vogel to get creative. Because prisoners have limited space, and bringing newspapers and magazines to prisoners is difficult, the Aleph Institute creates a weekly, one-page newsletter that includes the weekly Torah portion. While the Aleph Institute creates the newsletter, it is printed at the various prisons, bypassing the ban on outside paper.

The Aleph Institute's library is housed at its Squirrel Hill location and has about 5,000 books. The titles in the collection have been donated; the library accepts gifts of Jewish books.

"I'm not going to say, 'This book is kosher and this book isn't.' That isn't my job. Our job is to help the inmates use their time wisely. The criteria is that it's a Jewish book, that's it. No one is going to say a book by Alan Dershowitz is religious, but it is Jewish related."

Prayerbooks and Torahs aren't accepted as donations, as prisoners are meant to keep those books and have them with them. The Aleph Institute has developed its own book that includes basic blessings and serves as a crash course in Judaism.

In addition to book donations, the Aleph Institute is always in need of volunteers to assist with visiting prisoners.

"It's very challenging," Vogel said. "I wish we had more people who wanted to go in. I'm lucky if I have five volunteers. We need people to go visit."

To Vogel, such volunteers are serving a unique purpose. "The Talmud tells us the biggest mitzvah we can do is taking care of someone that has passed away because they can do nothing in return. The same thing is true with inmates. They can't repay us, but they need the help. They're our brothers and sisters. Never are we disposable as human beings." **PJC**

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