

A Letter to the Community from Jonathan Robinson

To help appreciate the letter below by Jonathan Robinson, Rabbi Shisler has written the following introduction:

The accompanying piece is written by a member of our community, Jonathan Robinson, who has, unfortunately found himself spending time at Her Majesty's pleasure. It's a very brave article for someone who has been a popular and regular member of our community to write, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, that Jonathan has written altogether is, I believe, a mark of his true calibre. He got himself into trouble with the law and, far from trying to deny what he's done, (for those who really need to know, it's to do with financial matters), he has openly admitted it. Our Rabbis tell us that this is the first step towards genuine repentance, since, without an honest acknowledgement that one has done wrong, it's impossible to move forward.

I've visited Jonathan and he's also expressed deep regret for his actions. Not merely because of where they've landed him, but because he accepts fully that he shouldn't have done them. This, the Rabbis tell us, is the second important step in making amends, owning up fully to the unacceptability of our deeds.

And the third step is an expression of sincere intention to try as hard as possible, when faced with a similar temptation, not to repeat the action, and this Jonathan has also said, and indicated by his article.

It's very easy for us to stand in judgement on someone else, but we must never forget that it says in the Ethic of the Fathers, 'Do not judge your fellow man until you find yourself in his situation.'

I've spent much of my working life as a prison chaplain. When I was once visiting Parkhurst, the seasoned Anglican chaplain and I were chatting and he told me something to me that I've not forgotten. He said that, after completing his rounds in the prison, he frequently thinks to himself, 'There but for the grace of Gd go I.'

We must remember that the majority of people in prison are very ordinary, just like you and me. They're often people who've done something silly, something that's out of character. They've committed a crime, undoubtedly, and they know that they deserve punishment for it, and most of them accept their punishment with good grace. There are wicked people in prison, but most people serving time aren't wicked, they've just done something stupid.

I do hope that Jonathan will come back to the New West End and that we shall welcome him as Gd welcomes us back after Yom Kippur. He will have served his time and it will be incumbent upon all of us to help him regain his place in our community as soon as possible, where we hope he will once again play a full part in promoting the aims and aspirations of our Shul.

To the New West End Community:

This article is probably as far removed as is possible from the only previous article I have written for the magazine – the first one was my reporting on the success that the NWEYP had had in their first couple of events and the hopes we had for its future success and growth and this article comes from HMP Wandsworth!!

So I would like to start with an apology to all those that I have let down by my actions. The good thing about being Jewish and in prison is that there are very few of us; out of a population of roughly 1400, I gather there are about 8 Jews. I have discovered that most of the old prisons in London at one time all had synagogues but thankfully they are no longer in use.

The one thing you have a lot of once you are here is time. You might not get any space or privacy but you do have a lot of time. Time to think, time to reflect, time to pray - one lesson I have definitely learnt is how valuable the time we have is to us. For those of you that didn't know I attended the morning Minyan every weekday morning and struggled to keep up with the service. However now I have plenty of time to say my prayers and get some meaning from them.

Time on the whole passes by quickly enough; once the initial shock and "novelty" wears off you get use to the routine and the boredom. I am fortunate to have been given "trusted job" that keeps me out, about and busy most of the day.

I have also been very fortunate to be getting to see on a weekly basis an excellent counselor, a lot of what we talk about is very difficult for me but I am sure that it will help me over this difficult patch in my life and help me lead a stronger, better and more confident life. I am doing my best to make the best use of the facilities and opportunities available and to make this as positive an experience as I possibly can.

I remember listening to a sermon Rabbi Shisler gave late last year, in which he talked about Jews in prison and whether they deserved Kosher meals or not, what he was asking was did a Jew who had sinned deserve the honour, as it were, of being able to keep Kosher? The authorities (in this case the Prison Service chaplaincy) allow you one kosher meal a day - unless the visiting Rabbi thinks you are worthy of two meals.

As much of our religion is based round Teshuvah - repentance – our Rabbis teach us that before we can be forgiven in a religious way we must pay a civil penalty, and I hope that when I return home in the early summer, the community will accept that I have paid this civil price and welcome me back into the community and allow me to positively contribute to the NWES and the wider community in many ways.

I would like to end by wishing you all a Kosher Pesach, to thank those of you that have either written to me or asked after me, it has kept me going, and that I look forward to my next article being from a better place in more ways than one.

Jonathan Robinson