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Karate master & chaplain
Rabbi Fishel Jacobs found spiritual gifts in Israel's prison wards

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RABBI BEHIND BARRS

BY *Rachel Ginsberg*
PHOTOS *Ouriah Tadmor, Berale Shainer*

Karate champion, Talmudic scholar, prolific author, and prison chaplain are just some of Rabbi Fishel Jacobs' qualifications. Whether it's breaking 15 inches of solid brick with his fist, or sitting on the bunk bed of a murderer talking about repentance, Rabbi Jacobs sticks to his motto: "When you run out of places to find strength, look deeper within yourself"



Rabbi Behind Bars



Karate experts are intriguing. Everyone wants to know how they can break 15 inches of solid brick with their bare fists, seeming to transcend natural physical limitations. Is it magic, or some sort of supernatural power they've accessed?

Karate master Rabbi Fishel Jacobs says the true martial artist does indeed possess extraordinary latent power. But it's not magic. And it's that very power that enabled him to transform himself from an advanced-level black-belt training for the Olympics to an ordained rabbi, prolific Torah author and halachic authority, and the first American chaplain in the Israeli prison system.

Even Hollywood caught up with this multifaceted karate champ-turned-prison rabbi; a screenplay of his life is currently being negotiated by producers in California.

That scrawny kid named Flip (Philip) Jacobs living in South Royalton, Vermont, certainly never imagined such a life when he was busy just trying to defend himself against the local anti-Semites over four decades ago. Today Rabbi Jacobs, 55 and father of seven, says he still sees himself as a Vermont kid. He looks back on the who-would-have-thought odyssey of 11-year-old Flip — learning karate for self-defense and then becoming a master, eventually finding Judaism at the University of Vermont, enrolling in yeshivah in Israel, getting *smichah* from the Chief Rabbinate, becoming the spiritual mentor of the entire Ramle prison complex dealing daily with thieves and murderers, and authoring popular books on *taharas hamishpachah* and *hilchos Shabbos* — and sums it up in three words:

“It's been intense.”

It's All About Repetition Harold Jacobs — Jewish in his heart but not yet in practice — bought a poultry processing factory in Vermont and moved his family out to South Royalton (population 1,100) from Brooklyn when Flip/Philip/Fishel was ten. “Dad's philosophy was, let the kids grow up in the country and they'll be healthy. It would have been a good plan if I didn't almost get myself killed in the process,” Rabbi Jacobs reminisces from his well-appointed study in Kfar Chabad, surrounded by an extensive library and piles of his own titles.

“It's a classic hick town and we were the first Jews there. The parents didn't mind that



their children were beating up the new Jewish kid. It's not a sophisticated Al Sharpton-like anti-Semitism over there, more like the Sunday preacher style. So I was getting beat up all the time — in the locker room, on the soccer field.”

One day during a visit from his New York relatives, Flip came home roughed up and bleeding. “Harold, Flippy's gotta learn to take a bat to school,” said his uncle, offering a solution.

A few days later, a South Korean karate master named Tae Yun Kim advertised that she and her brother were opening up a karate school. Today she's a tenth-degree karate grandmaster, a multimillionaire living in California, and CEO of numerous successful businesses. But then she was a destitute immigrant fresh out of the mystical South Korean mountains. And Flip Jacobs was her first student.

For the next 13 years, Flip trained for hours every day. Karate became his life.

“I was her first student. Hours every night of pure Korean karate. They ran it like in the Orient, where every move is broken down into tiny increments that need to be perfected. It's all based on repetition — punch, punch, punch, punch — ten thousand times the same move, each time trying to create more power, to bring up more power from your stomach, until you become super-focused.”

The goal, says Rabbi Jacobs today, was the dissemination of the Far East's generations-old wisdom through grueling training and total discipline. At the time he thought he was just perfecting his technique. Today he knows that the intense discipline of micro-repetition is what made him into the scholar he is today.

“The masters constantly preached to us that this isn't about self-defense or physical fitness, but about overall personal development. If you can translate the sincerity, humility, and discipline gained through this training into everything you do, our goal will have been achieved. The essence of karate is succeeding in everything you do in life,” the masters would tell us. At the time,

It's not magic, but what's the secret of this focused power?

I didn't have an inkling to what degree those very powers would be necessary in the innumerable, unexpected twists and turns the future held for me.”

By the time Philip/Flip was 15, he began to move up belt levels and win competitions. At 18 he was awarded his black belt (“at the time it was the greatest day of my life”), which he describes as

First, I free myself from all extraneous matters, creating an inner quiet. This requires anywhere from two minutes to a hundredth of a second

“a bloody mess” that involved smashing eight to twelve inches of pine with his hands, feet, and head, executing perfected moves and defending himself against five armed “assailants” who came after him with boards and clubs. He emerged with a broken nose and bleeding skull, but knew he had the inner power to pass the test.

“They brought in masters from Korea who couldn't even speak English. These guys used to train their students by sending them off to the mountains for six months and letting them back once they'd mastered the techniques. That's their religion: becoming elevated, confident, focused, synchronizing all their internal systems — respiratory, muscular, nervous, and mental.

“There's really no trick involved.” Rabbi Jacobs explains how even today, he can still break bricks and fight off assailants. “First, I free myself from all extraneous matters, creating an inner quiet. This requires anywhere from two minutes to a hundredth of a second. Then, and only then, I direct my total concentration to the act at hand. These two steps, creating an inner still and concentrated attention, are totally interdependent. Without

the former, the latter is impossible. With total mental and spiritual focus, I allow my deepest inner powers to emerge, emanating simultaneously from the brain and around the diaphragm. It is evoking this energy, which they call *chi*, for which the martial artists of the Orient are most famous. As soon as I sense this intangible, primal awakening of power flow, I instinctively know I'll succeed. In fact, most people have no idea what their capabilities really are."

Imagine you're 18, you've earned your black belt, you've perfected your moves. Everything is perfect. So where does an 18-year-old champion go from there?

Flip decided to take his endurance to the next level — a level that borders on the telepathic, a heightened sensory achievement most people wouldn't even want to attempt.

"If you are sure you want advanced training, I will give it to you," the master warned him. "But you must be sure, because it is very painful, and you'll need to undergo things that until now you couldn't have imagined."

"Sounds good," Flip answered. Six years of four-hour daily training had left him feeling as if he were on a kind of plateau. There was an excitement in knowing there were deeper dimensions. He was summoned to the gym late one night, and handed a blindfold.

"You see this bamboo training staff?" Flip was asked. "Put on this blindfold. Now you are going to learn to defend yourself without using your eyes. You will learn to develop senses you've never used before. We'll start slowly," the master continued. "You advance step by step toward me, and I'll hit you with the staff in different parts of the body; once to the head, once to the legs, once to the ribs. Each time, you try to sense where to block."

One foot forward, and then, *Whap!* A stinging pain shoots through his face. Another step, *Whap!* This time to the arm. Soon his whole body is bruised and bleeding.

But Kim was encouraging: "After you suffer enough, you'll have no choice. You will either give up or force yourself to

learn how to block.... You will only learn through pain. Only then will your body force itself to sense. Only then will you develop an extra perception. Now listen carefully, not only with your ears. Listen with your entire being. Relax. If you listen for the staff, you won't have time to respond. Now, relax; on my command take a step forward. Remember, just 'feel.' Don't try to 'hear.' By the time you've 'heard,' the staff will already have hit you, before you can react. Just relax, free yourself from worry, and defend yourself. You know how to block, you're a black belt! Just sense it coming."

With the extrasensory training that went on nightly for three years, Flip had taken his skill to a whole new level. Still, why would anyone willingly subject himself to all that pain?

"There is the simple answer and the deeper answer," says Rabbi Jacobs. "The simple answer is that at that point I was training four hours a day. When you're that perfect, you look for a higher vein of energy, and the most subliminal part of the training is overcoming suffering. But on a deeper level, it's really your *neshamah* calling out because it's starving. At that point you think karate is your ultimate fulfillment; you don't know that you'd quench that yearning by sitting and learning Mishnayos, or going out and connecting to other Yidden and lighting up the *galus*."

Flip then volunteered for another torture that tested the breaking point of his endurance, a 36-hour marathon at Dartmouth College that started out with 70 participants and ended with 15. For the first two hours, the trainees stood, knees bent, while someone stood on their shoulders.

"You had to hold that position for two hours," Rabbi Jacobs remembers. "At the beginning, your legs become like jelly, you start shaking, and they start yelling at you in their Japanese accents, 'What, you baby? You can't do it?' and they start hitting you in the stomach. We worked through the night, slept two hours, and then they woke us and made us run

outside for hours bare-foot on the frozen December ice and snow. After another 12 hours of torture, one guy — a black belt — couldn't take it anymore, and ran into the bathroom crying. The master ran after him, screaming and hitting him, 'You baby! You baby! You can be man! Come back and fight!' Your adrenaline is pumping for 36 hours, but it took me a week to be able to move after



that."

When you're that perfect, you look for a higher vein of energy

Coming Over? By the time he entered the University of Vermont, Flip was "perfect." "My breathing was perfect, my moves were perfect. Where do you go from there? It's not cognitive, but on a very subliminal level, you start questioning yourself." And then from left field, he was "attacked" by a totally new force — Rabbi Shmuel Hecht z"l, the campus Chabad rabbi.

"Rabbi Hecht somehow caught up with me in the dorms, and boy, was he persistent. It was a one-sided relationship, but he didn't give up. Friday he'd call my dorm and say, 'Fishesl, are you coming over? My wife made food for you.' Rabbi Hecht was a deep man and a scholar, but I wasn't into it. I would sit through the meal out of courtesy, but to me it was just taking time away from training and fighting. Occasionally he'd shlep me to shul on Shabbos morning. Then I'd go to Connecticut or Massachusetts to fight. Once in a while I'd put on tefillin, but then it was off to McDonald's. Today I know he was cultivating my Jewish soul."

Meanwhile, it was more training, more tournaments, more awards. One day Flip approached his instructors with his next dream — to represent the US in the Olympics. Kim was held in high esteem by the international organization based in Korea, so they said, "Okay, start training him."

"They put me on an eight-year program," says Rabbi Jacobs. "They are very absolute about these things. In the Orient, if you lose an international competition, they'll never allow you to represent that country again internationally. They knew about me because the head of the organization had sent his son to test me for my black belt, so they decided to invest in me and start me out. They pick a few moves they want you to win with, and you perfect those for years. With me they chose a jumping side kick and some spinning back kicks. It was all about perfection."

But Rabbi Hecht was always there on the sidelines, fanning the spark of the spirit, gently massaging the G-dly soul that was yet to be revealed. At the same time, Flip Jacobs was also feeling cracks in his veneer of perfection. There was a breaking point, a flash of light that left as fleetingly as it came, yet it illuminated a corner of his spiritual side.

It happened at a tournament where the entire team's victory was at stake.

"It was an all-day exhibition, a competition between the Korean and Japanese schools," Rabbi Jacobs says. "The individual competition in the morning was really rough. My nose got broken and I had lost a lot of blood all day. ["I broke my nose three times," he

adds parenthetically, although you can't really tell. "They have this system of fixing it up, stuffing cotton into it and straightening it out."] I was feeling horrible but I was team captain, and the night competition would be in a packed auditorium with our entire reputation at stake. I had to fight the other team captain. So they fixed up my nose, bandaged my face, put me on the grass and made me rest and eat kimchi and rice, and propped me up for the final fight. It went into overtime and they were yelling at me, 'Don't worry about your nose!' At that moment I felt like a pawn. I could have been killed, but my life was worth as much as the honor of the team. We went into maximum overtime tied, so the judges huddled and then came over and raised my hand in victory — for fighting spirit. Suddenly I had a flash, lasting not more than a microsecond, but the flash had embedded itself in my soul: Rabbi Hecht sitting at his table learning Torah."

Flip Jacobs was about halfway through the Olympic training program when he graduated college.

Newly-minted black belt Flip Jacobs (top); Rabbi Jacobs in Kfar Chabad: "I wasn't sure there was a scholar inside"

Rabbi Behind Bars

“By then, I guess Rabbi Hecht had succeeded in massaging my soul enough that I approached him and said, ‘I really don’t know anything about my Judaism. Maybe I should go to yeshivah?’ I had a degree in history and political science, nothing very marketable anyway. But although I killed a lot of time in college, the good news was that those of us who were in sports bypassed all the garbage — the drinking and the drugs. It was the total opposite of our philosophy. At least we had a focus.”

Rabbi Hecht sent Fishel/Flip to the Lubavitcher Rebbe in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. The Rebbe, in turn, told him to go study in Israel.

What about the Olympics? Was he disappointed that his dream would never come true?

“To be honest, I wasn’t really thinking. I just wanted to do what I knew was right inside. Also, at that point the Olympics were just another competition. I’d won enough — I had a room full of trophies, so it wasn’t really a big deal.” He points to a shelf of awards from those years. “I have hundreds of these. Most I didn’t even bring to Israel.”

The masters had already invested four years in Flip’s Olympics training regimen. He was halfway there. But Kim’s reaction took him by surprise. “I told Kim I was thinking about going to yeshivah, that I met these Lubavitchers who took me to the Rebbe. She said, ‘Good, I want you to do that.’ I was shocked. She’d invested 12 years in me! ‘Why?’ I asked. She said, ‘I see you’ve been changing, and these are your people. When I was in Korea the nuns taught us the Bible, and I know these are the Hebrew people of the Bible that G-d loves and who have a special path in life. Go with them.’”

But Kim, who became a multimillionaire with several international companies, never forgot her prized student. Years later, after having no contact for 25 years, she eventually located him in Kfar Chabad and invited him and his wife, Miriam, to Los Angeles for a lavish 60th birthday bash. The glitz and opulence were overwhelming, the walls bearing testimony to Dr. Tae Yum Kim’s incredible success — Dr. Kim with



“You have to get past the crime and look into the nefesh.” Rabbi Jacobs in Nitzan prison

bless you.”

At the ceremony, Rabbi Jacobs was promoted to eighth-degree master.

The Worst Year Rabbi Jacobs describes that first year in Kfar Chabad yeshivah as “the worst year of my life.” Thrust into an intellectual environment with *baalei teshuvah* from Ivy League universities, having to deal with two new languages (Hebrew and Aramaic) and entirely new thought patterns that just weren’t going in, Rabbi Jacobs was about ready to throw in the towel — but some inner determination kept him glued to the study bench.

“I was an athlete — I never bothered studying too much. And this wasn’t a Discovery seminar. It was the real thing;

they plunge you in from day one. I sweated it out, but I wasn’t a vessel to absorb the material. I wanted to succeed, but I didn’t think there was a scholar hidden inside the athlete.

“I was miserable, but I didn’t want to give up. Then one day, one of the *mashpiim* saved me. ‘Have you started learning Tanya by heart?’ I didn’t know what he was talking about. I was breaking my head on *alef-beis* and trying to understand the Gemara at the same time. Plus, I had no gym, no physical outlet, and I was used to working out four hours a day. I was having withdrawal symptoms and was in physical pain, lying in bed at night tossing and turning with nowhere to burn off the energy. But he persisted. ‘*Bochurim* are supposed to learn Tanya by heart. The letters are holy and it’s a big mitzvah to put them into your head, even if you don’t understand.’

“In fighting, we have a rule: ‘Go with what you know.’ In other words, when you’re faced with danger, you don’t try new, fancy moves. Well, I knew how to repeat, so maybe this would work after all. But I only knew how to repeat in small steps. That was my training for years. So I took it letter by letter. I broke up every letter into its parts and engraved them onto my brain. I took the first letter, imagined it, drew it in my *kishkes* — that first letter took two days. It took me months to learn the first chapter. I didn’t see that the scholar within had yet emerged, but on an inner level it was transformative.”

Yet the Rebbe must have seen it.

Soon after, he was back in Crown Heights in a private audience with the Rebbe, together with his mother. (At the time she was not religious, yet eventually Rabbi Jacobs turned his entire family around. His father passed away several years ago, with a long beard and tzitzis hanging out. His sister, Dr. Elka

I wanted to succeed, but I didn’t think there was a scholar hidden inside the athlete

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Pinson, is a clinical psychologist in Crown Heights, active in international *shidduch* networking, and owner of the Center for Kosher Culinary Arts.)

“Have you started *smichah* yet?” the Rebbe asked.

“*Smichah*? I hadn’t even moved out of the beginners level at Kfar Chabad! But the Rebbe was insistent. He told me two things: where to find a wife, and to study for *smichah* and get ordained through the Rabbanut — a grueling program for even the best of scholars. So I went back, started the *smichah* program right away, and was introduced to my future wife a few weeks later.”

At the time Miriam Rosenfeld, a *frum*-from-birth Israeli and accomplished Tanach scholar, was teaching at Chabad’s Beis Chana high school in Jerusalem.

And she agreed to marry him.

“Women are like that. They can see the *pnimiyus*.”

Focused on the Goal The Rebbe kept Fishel Jacobs in kollel for eleven more years. Eleven years in which he *shvitzed* and *shteiged* — until the scholar within emerged.

“I don’t think I would have ever had the nerve to go for the Rabbanut *smichah*, but the Rebbe empowered me. So I used the same, safe system I knew. The karate keeps you goal-oriented, so I set my goal: I memorized the entire *Shulchan Aruch*. Then it was time for the exams. But I failed — twice. I had so much material in my head I wasn’t able to write it coherently. But they were nice — they agreed to test me orally. Over the next three years I did oral exams with Rav Dov Lior from Chevron. When the *smichah* notification finally came, I was shocked, Miriam was delighted, her family was amazed, and my teachers just smiled knowingly.

“I called home, back to Vermont. ‘Mom, Dad — we did it!’ ‘Great,’ said Dad. Then Mom said, ‘Mazel tov! Does that mean you’re going to stop studying, come home and get a position?’ Dad, knowing differently, quipped, ‘No,



Rita. I don’t think he’s done.”

And he wasn’t. Rabbi Jacobs continued his studies, earning the equivalent of a PhD in Talmudic theory through the Ministry of Education and becoming a certified rabbinic attorney, and began his publishing career. (To date he has published seven books, including the popular halachic works *The Blech Book* and *Family Purity*.)

But Israel is a small country, and it wasn’t long before word got out that there was a black belt learning in the yeshiva in Kfar Chabad. So over the years Rabbi Jacobs has continued to give demonstrations and teach combat techniques — for kids, for the army, for the security services.

What happened during his week of *sheva brachos* was a sign of things to come. It was 11 at night, and he and Miriam were sitting in the living room

Handcuffs don’t have to prevent the mitzvah of Chanukah lights



“I had no choice. I memorized the whole *Shulchan Aruch*.” The Lubavitcher Rebbe kept Fishel Jacobs in yeshiva for fourteen years

of their little house in Kfar Chabad when five big guys from Tel Aviv knocked on the door.

“We’re karate guys and we want to study with you,” they practically demanded.

“Hey, I just got married two days ago,” Rabbi Jacobs answered. But they had no intention of leaving.

“So I said to them, ‘Okay, I’ll teach you, but the way I learned it, no shortcuts.’ So I told them to take all the furniture out of the living room and take their shoes off. Meanwhile my new wife is looking on — I’m not sure if she was amused or horrified, but I think she realized it was a foreshadowing of what life would be like. They came by a few times a week for several years, and as part of our exercise meditation I had them learn the first twelve chapters of *Tanya* by heart. One of these guys was Moshe Rokach, who became head of the Israel Karate Association. Years later I officiated at his wedding.”

Go To Jail And then came the offer that was to change his life. A friend who was a medic at Ayalon Prison was looking for a volunteer to give some informal classes to the inmates. It wasn’t long after that Rabbi Jacobs was offered the chaplaincy for the entire Ramle prison complex, including Ayalon, Nitzan, Neve Tirzah women’s prison, and the IPS medical center.

“I’ll never forget the first time I entered the prison, and although I served for 13 years, I felt that chill every single day. It was those unnerving doors, the ice cold iron-against-iron smashing, the *slam!* And bolt. Now you’re locked on the inside. The inside of a prison is a different world.”

For 13 years, Rabbi Jacobs served as the spiritual link to hundreds of prisoners, some petty thieves, some incarcerated for heinous crimes, and some of them women.

“Neve Tirzah was one of the most horrifying places I’ve witnessed, lives desolated by drugs, crime, illiteracy,

and often, by husbands who dragged them into a life of crime. Sometimes at night you could hear the women yelling back and forth from their own cells to their husbands incarcerated 50 yards away in the men’s prison.”

But prison *kiruv* is not a job that can last forever. The noise, the banging, the intensity, the loudspeakers, the Middle Eastern music, the yelling, the smoking, the jangling keys, the cooking — eventually it all takes its toll.

“I began working in prison in 1992 at age 36. I was vibrant and full of zest. Exactly 13 years later, I was 49, retired, and completely worn out,” Rabbi Jacob admits. “When I entered, it had been on the tail end of a 14-year period of exhilarating academic achievements. By the time I returned to the free world, I was so exhausted it took me a year to recover.”

Rabbi Jacobs, who now dedicates his time to writing, teaching, traveling, and speaking, chronicled his prison experiences in *Israel Behind Bars*, an inspiring window into the day-to-day challenges, victories, and setbacks of both his prisoners and himself.

“I was in charge of seven cell blocks, about 700 people. Each cell block has its own identity — one is hardened criminals, one is drug addicts, one is closed because they’re too dangerous, one is guys in rehab. It’s like an entire country.”

Rabbi Jacobs says that as much as he was able to give the prisoners, the greatest rewards were his own.

“You’re serving the simplest Jews in the world and you’re their shepherd. You give them your *neshamah*. These people are broken; they need your humanity, so any conversation could be life-saving.

“I had five Jewish wards, and I wanted them to have Shabbos together, so Thursday nights the shuls were active. That’s when I’d bring in extra food for them — vegetables, tomatoes, onions, tuna fish. And they’d be waiting for me — one guy with a tattoo, one in shorts, one in slippers. Talk about simple,

Rabbi Behind Bars



these are simple Jews, Baal Shem Tov *neshamos*. I'd walk in there, and they wouldn't care if I was sweaty, smelly, or depressed. They have one demand: you're the rabbi and we need you to connect to us.

"So I learned to look at the *neshamah*, otherwise there would be too many barriers of condemnation. It's a *brachah* if you can get to that level of unconditional love for every Jew, just see his pure *neshamah*. This was my reward — it made me more simple."

Rabbi Jacobs graciously calls them "simple", but some of them are real lowlifes, and dangerous. "Right," he says, "But you have to be blind to the crime. You have to get past the actions and look at the *nefesh*. Because if you don't have empathy, you might as well pack up."

Rabbi Jacobs says one of the most difficult scenarios he faced was when Jewish prisoners, faced with heartrending, pitiful life situations, committed horrifying crimes but still wanted to know if they were worthy of G-d's forgiveness. He recounts the story of Joel, an unfortunate, broken soul who was abandoned by his mother at birth and had to survive as a child by rummaging

through garbage cans after his father was bedridden. Joel eventually got steady work, got married and had a child. But then his wife was in a car accident and became paralyzed. Because of their poor financial state, the social welfare department put the daughter in a foster home.

"The only thing I have in life are my disabled wife and daughter, who the social worker decided to take away from us," Joel told Rabbi Jacobs.

"Okay, so what did you do? I mean, why are you here?" Rabbi Jacobs prodded.

"Well, when I saw that I was being sent aimlessly from one government office to the next because of that social worker — I killed her."

"What? What did you gain? I mean, doing something like that wasn't going to get your daughter back."

"I don't know. I heard from other people that the old buzzard took a lot of kids from their parents. Everyone told me it was a good thing I got rid of her. All I have in the world is my wife and daughter ... but if I get a life sentence, my wife says she'll divorce me. Now, rabbi, you've heard my story ... so tell me, what can I do to get G-d to forgive me?"

Two of the blocks were Arab, so Rabbi Jacobs was clergyman to about 200 political prisoners (terrorists) as well. But Rabbi Jacobs was more than a clergy chaplain. He was also a prison staff instructor in Krav Maga, an Israeli version of hand-to-hand combat that uses martial arts and other lethal techniques. And they knew it.

"These prisoners are actually the most disciplined of all the groups," says Rabbi Jacobs. "In prison they don't behave like criminals because they don't see themselves as criminals. They see themselves as martyrs. They don't yell or scream, but are an organized solidarity group, a united front. They have a representative who meets with the warden and presents their requests. They want lentils for their meals; they want more TV rights. The warden decides what to give and what to refuse. And he makes sure they stay separate from the rest of the prisoners. Because Israeli prisoners, no matter what they've done, are proud Israelis and proud Jews, so these terrorists would be dead if they were in an open ward."

Every morning when Rabbi Jacobs heard those banging, clanging doors shut behind him, he knew it would be another

day of classes, of making prisoners feel good in shul, of numerous one-on-one conversations, of connecting humanity to humanity. Did he think it was possible for these inmates to redefine themselves as Jews, instead of just as criminals?

"Some of my people actually found their higher selves in prison," says Rabbi Jacobs. "One fellow, a rich man in for tax evasion, would spend the whole day in the prison shul. One day we were sitting on his bed talking, and I asked him what he thought about his sentencing. He said, 'You know, in the end I'm really happy I'm here. On the outside I was so busy with my business dealings, I never had a chance to refocus. Now I spend my days learning Chumash and Mishnayos and I've found my Yiddishkeit.'"

In Israeli prisons, religious rehabilitation is recognized by parole boards and judges, but critics say that prisoners take on religious practices for the perks: better food, Shabbos programs, time out for prayers and study. Is having a "religious awakening" in prison a good way to get a sentence reduced or evoke compassion from the judges? A few years back, a teenager accused of killing attorney Anat Pliner entered court wearing a yarmulke.

"All of a sudden he puts on a yarmulke!" the murdered woman's mother started screaming in the courtroom. "All of a sudden he's religious? Murderer! Take off the yarmulke! Don't disgrace the religion!"

Rabbi Jacobs admits that religious observance is a factor considered by sentencing judges and parole boards, and that inmates are often attracted to the shuls and learning programs for the advantages they offer. But often, he says, interest in religion becomes genuine, and the prisoner really does become the person he's projecting to be. And that, studies show, is the best form of rehabilitation. According to one study, 70 percent of Israeli prisoners return to prison within five years, while among prisoners in religious wards the return rate is only 10 percent.

Finding the Nefesh One of the most famous criminal episodes in Israeli history revolved around Ramle prison, when arch-criminal and triple murderer Herzl Avitan took revenge on prison warden Roni Nitzan — the visionary who dedicated his life to rehabilitating prisoners. Avitan, who had been in and out of prison and was then serving a 15-year sentence, was awarded a compassion visit — shackled and guarded — to his critically ill father, when he escaped through a bathroom window, shimmied down a rope that had been prepared by his cronies, and made a getaway. Soon after, he ambushed his nemesis Roni Nitzan, riddling him with bullets. The connection between Avitan — who was serving multiple life sentences when he died in prison in 2001 — and his chaplain, karate rabbi Fishel Jacobs, was not lost on a group of Hollywood movie producers who wanted the rights to his biography.

After tens of thousands of e-mails, thousands of hours of phone conversations and several trips to New York and California, a screenplay and script have been developed weaving together the parallel lives of Herzl Avitan and Fishel Jacobs and their eventual intersection.

It could be dangerous to leave a script in the hands of Hollywood producers, who have their own agenda of what sells, but Rabbi Jacobs is happy with the deal being chiseled out. "The way the deal is being worked out, I'm a writer and consultant," he says, qualifying that the script will be kept clean, except for cursing and violence — after all, it's prison.

Rabbi Jacobs' contact with Herzl Avitan in prison was pretty much limited to an occasional hello, and he would get *sufganiyot* on Chanukah like everyone else.

"Now, he was a mass murderer. People ask me if I could find compassion in my heart for him," says Rabbi Jacobs, "and that's a good question. When it comes down to it, what was the difference between him and other criminals? Many of my people did horrible things. Does that make them unworthy of my compassion? For 13 years, I spent every day getting past the actions and trying to find the *nefesh*." ●