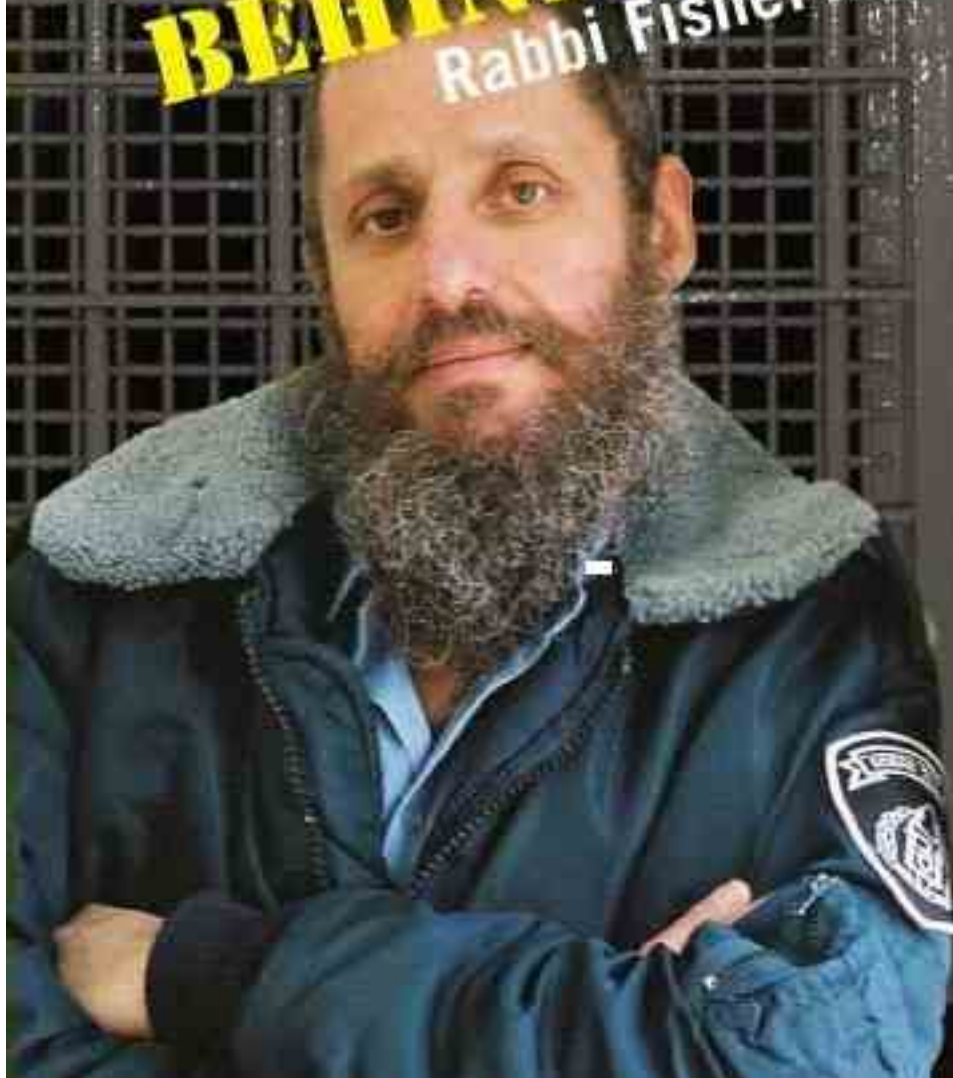


True stories of hope and redemption
Memoirs of an American karate champ
turned Israeli prison chaplain

ISRAELI BEHIND BARS

Rabbi Fishel Jacobs



A Eulogy

When an inmate's father passed away, I became the perfect choice to act as escorting officer to the cemetery: As an officer, I had the necessary rank, as chaplain I fit the role. Seated in my office, at exactly 12:00 noon, I received a phone call from the security officer: "Get ready to escort a prisoner to his father's funeral. You've got three guards, and a driver. Come to my office for orders."

It was a hot summer day. I expected the van's air-conditioner to be on one of its off-days. I also expected cramped seating and bumper-to-bumper Tel Aviv afternoon traffic. Besides the discomfort and hassles traveling, I'd be expected to deliver a eulogy once there. In general, I avoid doing eulogies. I'm just not good at them. Doing one about someone I've never met is a nightmare.

I waited at the front gate for our mourning prisoner to be

brought down. He was an inmate I didn't know personally.

"Rabbi!" he said, as soon as he saw me. "Great! You're escorting officer." I knew what he was going to ask.

"I'd like us to stop by my home on the way to the cemetery," he continued. "That shouldn't be a problem. Right?" I suspected he was more excited about the trip than upset about his father's passing.

"I'll ask the security officer and see what he says," I said, knowing perfectly well what he'd say. And he did, as soon as I got him on the line. "Your route is from here to the cemetery and back!"

"Repeat that, please," I requested, turning up the phone's speaker. "I said, he's got permission to attend his father's burial. Period. *Not* to visit home and return with contraband."



The guards handcuffed and attached a leg-clamp over the inmate's left knee, bolting the lower part of his thigh to his upper calf. This type of lock, which restricts knee movement, is worn inconspicuously under the clothing during excursions.

We walked out to the van. The driver and another guard got into the front seat. Two hopped into the back. I slid open the side door to the middle seat. The prisoner, of course, couldn't step up into the vehicle. To get in, he put his backside onto the edge of the seat, using his unshackled leg to back-step up and shimmy in. We closed the door.

There was only a foot of space between us and the metal bars separating our compartment from the driver's. Barely enough room, the inmate's leg got wedged diagonally into an impossible angle. "I'm gonna break my leg!" he yelled. The only solution was putting it *onto* the seat, which we did—in the process, wedging *me* into the door. My left hip was jammed into the window handle. "Can't you move?" I complained. "This handle is killing my side!"

"Sorry," he lied, "I have problems of my own."

The van began rolling. I had hoped for some quiet to compose the eulogy. That wouldn't come, though shortly the inevitable did. "I'm so happy you're the escorting officer," my seating partner whined. "Tell the driver to go past my house."

"You already heard the security officer," I said.

"It's my father's funeral," he said, adopting a forlorn

expression. “Come on, I have to be there for my mother. Radio the warden.”

“We have orders,” I said. “And, if you really care about your mother, stay out of prison,” I said.

“A lesson in morals! My family is grieving. What kind of rabbi...”



Two miserable hours later, we arrived. None of his family had. We waited. The temperature was a hot and humid 97° F. With nowhere in sight to buy a cold drink, I took a long swig of warm water from a hose. The moisture only ran through my skin, covering me with a thick layer of perspiration.

By 5:30, we were still alone. Suddenly, a bus full of people

showed up. Some cars. Three more buses. *A lot of people came to show their respects*, I thought.

I noticed something disturbingly familiar about a couple dozen men—the clothes, gold chain necklaces, the walk. They debarked from the buses, greeted the guards, handshaking, backslapping. Our prisoner’s neighborhood buddies—ex-inmates—were enjoying a reunion with the guards!

Frankly, my mood was lousy. If not for this ceremony, I’d be home, taking a refreshing shower. The perspiration dried on my back, but my hip still throbbed. But, my main problem was I still knew absolutely nothing about the one I’d be speaking about—something I’d take care of promptly.

I ordered our three armed guards to watch the prisoner, then went fact-finding.

I introduced myself to a young man standing nearby, asking if he could tell me a few things about the deceased: his name, something about his family. He said the departed’s name was Saul. The family? He motioned with his head in the direction of two dapper, well-decked fellows—ex-inmates. The genetic similarities to our prisoner were striking—these were his brothers. I asked what Saul had done for a living. He replied, “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree...”

To say I was running out of time and groping for material would be an understatement. I scouted for someone else, and noticed something odd. Here and there, throughout the cemetery grounds, were individuals and couples, who stood out: very well dressed, professional types. People who carried an educated demeanor.

I approached one such couple and said, "Could you tell me something about Saul?"

"Yes," the fellow replied humbly. His wife lowered her head, averted her glance. "I...suppose..."

"Okay..." I nudged.

"In the neighborhood...he...took...kids..." he motioned with his head to the other atypicals, lowered his voice and continued, "under...his...wing..."

What the...? I wondered.

"My father was constantly in trouble with the law. In and out of jail," the gentleman continued laboriously. It was clearly painful for him to admit all this. "My mother tried supporting us. Not an easy task, seven kids, two rooms..."

You seem, it dawned on me, to have done okay.

"I was in the streets, most of the time, from eleven years of age..."

I continued my rounds.

The outdoor loudspeaker barked, directing our band towards the

enclosed courtyard where the remains are placed during the final farewell. We clumsily meandered over: weeping women, family, loud children, a crew of ex-inmates, in the center a hand- foot-cuffed inmate, surrounded by armed guards.



We entered the courtyard, the sobs and shouting died down, the cluster settled into place. Somebody hushed, “Quiet, the rabbi is going to speak.”

I approached the podium, glanced at the deceased wrapped in a prayer shawl, according to tradition, then around at waiting faces.

“We’re gathered here to honor the deceased. In the name of the Prison Service, I’d like to convey condolences to the family. He has given, He has taken. May your family know only good tidings from here on. Stay strong and united.”

“I didn’t personally know the deceased, Saul. But this afternoon I have met a number of people who did. Some of them have been affected deeply by him. They have shown a willingness to say a few words.” I nodded to the first fellow I’d met. He approached the podium.

Unused to speaking publicly, he waited for my nod of encouragement to begin. He related how Saul had called him aside as a fifteen year old. The gentleman explained how his own father had had problems with the law, until he passed away prematurely at forty. Saul, saw the teenager, devastated by his loss, wavering between good friends and friends who nothing good would come from. He described how Saul had leveled with him: “It’s your life. But, remember, you eat what you cook. Look at me. In and out of prison. Is that the life you want? To never know if you’re speaking with a friend or police informant? Where you’ll be spending the night? Or, a good family, stability?”

Saul also supplied the answers: “Stay in school. Do your prayers every day. Stay away from bad friends.” But Saul did more. He spoke with the boy constantly when he was free. He even kept on him by phone—from prison.

Then spoke Shimon, a local cop, and boxing instructor who thought he was tough until Saul slapped some sense into him in front of his buddies saying, “You’re too smart to end up like me.” There were others, a housewife, a bus driver.

As I listened, I wondered if Saul’s inability to tear himself away from the routine of his life, or save his own sons, added to his resolve to help others.

My knockout punch, though, was Deborah, a woman who immediately commanded respect. In her mid-fifties, she had a calculated determination, an aura of authority. Deborah was also very well known. She was the local high school principal.

“I was sixteen,” she began. “One day, on my way home from school, Saul saw me on the street. He asked me if I was Dan’s sister. I said yes. He asked me to meet him the following afternoon outside his home. I agreed. When I got there, he was waiting with a photo album. He showed it to me: shots of his family, bar-mitzvahs, birthday parties. He asked me if I saw anything unusual. I said no. He told me to look again. I still saw nothing. I was young, it looked like any album. We had one at home.

“Finally, Saul looked me squarely in the eye and said, ‘I’m not *in* any of those photos.’

“Then, he asked me if my family does things like those activities together. I answered that of course we did. He asked me if everyone attends. I said, of course. He asked me how many siblings

we had. I said, five. And, he pressed further: if one did not come to any of these functions, how would the family feel? I was starting to feel frightened, I didn't know what he wanted. Then he made the most powerful statement of my life.

“Saul said, ‘Deborah. You’re a smart girl. If you want your family to stay together, watch your younger brother, Dan. He’s into bad things.’ ”

“From that day on, I watched Dan with four eyes,” Deborah continued. “I made sure he did his homework and didn’t wander around late at night.

“Saul, correctly, had told me not to rely on my parents’ intervention. They had their hands full just paying the bills. I threw myself head first into my new responsibility. Thank God, Dan completed high school, got married, created a family, and supports himself respectfully.

“That’s not all. That experience set me down a path. I attained my teachers’ certification. And, twenty years ago, became high school principal.

“It was the satisfaction I got from doing that which made me decide to dedicate my life to *other* peoples’ younger brothers and sisters.”

I stood listening next to the podium while Deborah spoke. This was the best eulogy I’d ever heard. Not only because it was said

naturally, but because it was real.

Ultimately, I don't know if and to what degree the audience was moved. You never know. I'm sure a few of the older people were. Perhaps, some of the younger ones were assessing themselves, if only for that brief moment.

I wonder if Saul helped these people on the spur of the moment to soothe his conscience. Or, did he know he was setting them on the right path for life?