

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2013/01/26/companionship-or-death-jewish-engagement-with-the-injustice-of-solitary-confinement/>

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close

Search

close

close

by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | January 26, 2013

The title of this post is the title of [an article](#) by Johns Hopkins student and Solitary Watch reporter/researcher **Rachel M. Cohen**, originally published on the website [New Voices](#). It documents one part of the growing resistance to solitary confinement in the religious community, much of it spearheaded by the [National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#).

If community is a foundation of Jewish life, what does Judaism have to say about solitary confinement, the forcible separation of a person from the community? A few months ago I began an internship with [Solitary Watch](#), an investigative news organization dedicated to reporting on solitary confinement. Once I got started, I became interested in learning more about the work the American Jewish community organizes around this issue.

It turns out there is a lot of work being done, though it started quite recently. Beginning in 2012, [Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights](#) (recently renamed from Rabbis for Human Rights-North America), a coalition of 1,800 rabbis, and [Uri LTzedek](#), a prominent liberal Modern Orthodox social justice organization, have both made the issue of solitary confinement a prominent part of their advocacy efforts.

Solitary confinement is a form of imprisonment where individuals are subjected to approximately 22-24 hours per day of isolated lockdown in tiny cells. Many Americans mistakenly believe that solitary confinement is used sparingly, only for the most dangerous or threatening prisoners. However, according to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#), there are more than 80,000 men, women and children currently in some sort of solitary confinement in United States prisons. Many have [a mental illness](#) or cognitive disability, and the majority has been placed there for nonviolent violations of prison rules.

The costs of solitary confinement are much higher than housing inmates in the general prison population. Mississippi recently reduced the number of prisoners it holds in solitary from 1,000 to about 150, and closed down their high-security Supermax unit. According to the [ACLU](#), the reforms are saving Mississippi taxpayers approximately \$8 million per year.

That economic perspective on solitary confinement is important, but there is a moral perspective to consider as well and that is where the religious community can add a unique voice to the national conversation.

We're looking to provide some moral weight to the solitary confinement conversation by applying Jewish values, said Shlomo Bolts, a prison consultant from Uri LTzedek.

Sympathy for prisoners is not the most common sentiment amongst the American public. People do not want to be seen as weak or soft on crime, said Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster, director of Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. In the Torah however, it clearly says that if someone asks for forgiveness three times and you don't forgive them, then the onus is on you. In Judaism we believe in repentance and that punishments don't go on forever.

While Uri LTzedek and Truah approach the issue of solitary confinement from a distinctly Jewish perspective, the scope of both groups work on the issue extends well beyond the Jewish community.

We don't want to make this a Jewish issue. We want to make it an American issue. As Americans were allowing for it to happen, were paying for it with our tax dollars, said Kahn-Troster.

We want to apply the Jewish values we learn to help all people, said Bolts.

The two groups are part of a growing movement against solitary confinement. A feeling that the status quo is simply untenable is circulating in religious communities and among the politically engaged in general; change, while it may not be imminent, feels inevitable.

This is an exciting time. We really do see ourselves as being a force to help pass legislation to abolish or reduce solitary confinement, said Bolts.

In June, Senator Dick Durban (D-IL) led [a congressional hearing](#) on solitary confinement, the first in American history. The hearing focused on the human rights issues associated with isolation, the economic implications of solitary confinement and the psychological impact on inmates during and after their imprisonment.

Both Truah and Uri LTzedek contributed written testimony to the hearings. They also participated in the [National Day of Fasting](#), an interfaith effort to raise awareness of the significance of the congressional hearing.

Fasting serves as a way to repent and bear witness. For me to be at the congressional hearing, sitting with a group of religious leaders fasting was a very powerful experience, said Rabbi Kahn-Troster.

Fasting also serves as an act of solidarity with prisoners in solitary confinement, for whom hunger strikes are often the only available form of protest.

I think about [the hunger strikers at Pelican Bay](#) [a California Supermax facility]. They get poor food, and then they refuse to eat it in order to draw attention to their situation. When I fasted it really hit home what these people must be going through, said Rabbi Kahn-Troster.

Truah and Uri LTzedek are also working with [the National Religious Campaign Against Torture](#). Founded in 2006 and comprised of more than 300 religious organizations, the campaign organizes protests against different forms of torture employed by the U.S., including those used at sites like Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib.

Turning her organizations focus toward solitary confinement now seems like a natural outgrowth of our torture work, said Rabbi Kahn-Troster.

Uri LTzedek and Truah now face the task of motivating American Jews to get more involved with the issue. Despite a history of involvement in a wide variety of social justice causes, the American Jewish community has generally avoided issues of prison reform.

There is this misconception that Jews are somehow not incarcerated, yet Jews go to prison for the same reasons as everyone else, said Chaplain Gary Friedman, chairman of [Jewish Prisoner Services International](#), an organization that provides advocacy and spiritual services to Jewish prisoners and their families. Friedman estimates there are approximately 12,000-15,000 Jews in American prisons today, including some in solitary confinement.

Uri LTzedeks approach to raising awareness is a mix of traditional advocacy combined with social science [research led by the Tag Institute](#), a British-based think tank driven by Jewish social values. Among other things, Tags research seeks to generate quantitative survey data on the Jewish communitys perceptions of prisons and punitive punishment and to find the most effective ways of organizing Jewish communities to advocate for humane alternatives to solitary confinement.

Meanwhile, Truah is mobilizing its network of 1,800 rabbis to raise the consciousness of members of their respective communities on the issue and hopefully to inspire some activism about solitary confinement within their communities

As solitary confinement becomes an increasingly mainstream human rights issue, the work of the Jewish community is likely to grow and inspire further activism.

As it says in the Talmud (Ta'anit 23a), Either companionship or death.

James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, Blood in the Face. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in The Guardian, The Nation, and Mother Jones, and is co-editor of the book Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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cooperation.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/201322511744515745.html>

With cases like the following which took place in an Israeli prison they are losing the battle of international public opinion.

Arafat Jaradat had been pummelled by repeated blows to his chest and body and had sustained a total of six broken bones in his spine, arms and legs; his lips lacerated; his face badly bruised.

The ordeal that Arafat suffered before he died at the hands of Israels Shin Bet is common to many Palestinians that pass through Israels prisons. According to the prisoners rights organisation Addameer, since 1967, a total of 72 Palestinians have been killed as a result of torture and 53 due to medical neglect. Less than a month before Jaradat was killed, Ashraf Abu Dhra died while in Israeli custody in a case that Addameer argues was a direct result of medical neglect.

Also read this Foreign Policy article

Israels Script Turns Sour

Hollywood used to portray Israelis as heroic and brave. Today, its films about the brutality of the occupation that make it to the silver screen.

BY LISA GOLDMAN

I first saw heard about this man on CNN then I read this account.

Excerpts:

<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/02/20132148266237403.html>

Details about Prisoner X, an Australian-Israeli who was found dead in a high-security cell in Israel are emerging more than two years after his death with reports claiming he was a spy for Mossad.

Any news about the man unveiled this week to be Ben Zygier, who according to Israeli officials committed suicide in 2010, had been censored by Israel.

Bens father Geoffrey Zygier, is an executive director of Bnai Brith Anti-Defamation Commission.

Zygier attended Bialik College in Melbourne which is described as a co-educational, Zionist, Jewish day school on its website.

High-security cell

The 34-year-old reportedly moved back to Israel more than 10 years ago, married, started a family and became known as Ben Alon.

No information has been released about how and why Zygier ended his life in the virtual isolation of a state-of-the-art surveillance cell designed to prevent suicide.

Bens cell had been specially designed for Yigal Amir, the Jewish ultranationalist who in 1995 assassinated then-prime minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Ben was a prisoner whose identity and alleged crime were not even known to his jailers.

This man who is said to have been a Mossad agent, that had been schooled in a Zionist day school, whose father is an executive director of Bnai Brith Anti-Defamation Commission and who is a war veteran is suddenly accused of treason.

Something doesnt add up. Maybe he was just another ultranationalist like Yigal Amir or maybe he was a Mosad plant to gather information on the others held at the prison?

Either way since his jailers did not know who he was they might of had a hand in his death. Oops!

Our tactics are shared with the state of Israel and vice versa. Solitary is one of them. The errors of thinking only tactically and not statically are made clearer over time.

This is the conclusion of the following film featured this morning on Morning Joe.

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/3036789/ns/msnbc_tv-morning_joe/#50614372

The New Yorker also reviewed this film and wrote:

The Gatekeepers, a documentary history of the country told from the point of view of its internal security chiefs, is both honest and saddening. The movie is built around interviews with six men who pretty much consecutively ran the Shin Bet, Israels internal-security intelligence operation, from 1980 to 2011. They are masters of tactics, but they know that strategythe point of all these brilliant counterterrorism operationsmay have eluded them, and has certainly eluded Israels leaders.

Another film you can google is titled:

Cell 36: Palestinian children locked in solitary confinement in Israel

Summary and recommendations

Solitary confinement should not be used by the IPS for any reason, as it undeniably causes harm to the physical and mental health of prisoners and constitutes illegal and disproportionate punishment and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Solitary confinement should not be used as a solution to hold mentally-ill prisoners who may pose a threat to themselves and/or those around them. As psychiatric hospitals do not hold violent patients in solitary confinement, there is no justification for treating violent patients who are prisoners differently. Prisoners should be permitted to have social interaction with other prisoners under professional supervision and provided with adequate activities.

Solitary confinement is also not a legitimate solution for prisoners who constitute a security threat or who face the threat of harm from other prisoners. The definition determining a security risk is overly broad and vague, and even in cases in which prisoners do constitute a security risk, they should be placed with appropriate groups of prisoners to whom they do not pose a danger and are not exposed to harm. Prisoners whose contact with other prisoners is limited should be provided with opportunities to engage in suitable activities to help them pass time and they should be permitted greater contact with the outside world through increased visits and the use of telephones for Palestinian prisoners, for example.

Due to the clear negative health implications of solitary confinement, medical organizations and authorities should play an active role in opposing it. Physicians who examine and treat prisoners held in solitary confinement should demand an end to their isolation in every case, not only in cases in which they specifically detect harm to the prisoners health.

Moreover, until the use of solitary confinement ends, Adalah, PHR-I and Al Mezan demand that prisoners held in solitary confinement have access to fair legal proceedings and that secret evidence should no longer be used as a justification its continuation. The discrimination between Palestinian prisoners and those classified as criminal prisoners in solitary confinement should cease immediately, and the physical conditions of incarceration in solitary confinement cells should be improved to ensure a minimally dignified existence.

It is the position of Adalah, Physicians for Human Rights-Israel and Al Mezan, as human rights organizations, that all types of solitary confinement in prison should end, given the severe impact on the physical and mental health of prisoners. Solitary confinement in prison is a cruel and harsh punitive and administrative act, and constitutes a violation of CAT and the ICCPR. The Israel Medical Association and the Ministry of Health should also strongly oppose the use of solitary confinement.

Justice allows for mercy,law does not,that is why we are supposed to be as we say in America .and Justice for all,Not and law for all.

Well done, Rachel Cohen et al. I am an (atheist) Jew who grew up Orthodox Jew, who worked in NOLA for LCDC in the mid1960s, pt time volunteer 2 days a week, doing research and art charts for court and general dogsbody work, as needed. LCDC was Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, a civil rights law office.

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