

- *The United States represents 4.4% of the world's population, but has 22% of the world's prisoners.*
- *One third of black babies born today can expect to be put in prison at some point in their lifetime.*
- *Almost 70 percent of released prisoners are arrested for a new crime within three years.*

In 2008, shortly after graduating college and moving to Brooklyn, the minyan I attended put out a call for volunteers to tutor high school math at Providence House, a Catholic organization that helps formerly incarcerated people transition back into society.

I had never been the social justice type. I have a strong Jewish identity, but I have always been more of a tefila (prayer) Jew than a Tzedek (social justice) Jew. But high school math was a highlight of my Schechter education. Mrs. Pasetsky (z"l), Mrs. Lucas, Bob Winston, and Mr. Levine instilled in me a passion for the subject that remains to this day. So I volunteered to be a tutor.

In the 12 years since then, I have worked with 6 different students to help prepare them for the GED -- the high school equivalency exam. They have varying educational levels, but they share a dedication to self-improvement in their adult years after a tumultuous period in their lives.

My students don't share that much about themselves, but I have gleaned pieces of their stories. One student, a single mom, brought her 5-year-old daughter to our lessons because there was no one else to watch her. My student told me that she wanted to get her GED to set an example for her daughter. Another student suffered from chronic back pain, which was exacerbated by frequent 90-minute subway rides to the Bronx to visit his aging family. Another woman had a job as a security guard, but passing the GED exam would mean an automatic raise of \$4/hour that she needed to afford basic necessities.

Sometimes my students and I are both surprised by the muscle memory that they have for subjects they learned decades earlier. For example, one of my students struggled through basic concepts but then surprised me with a near-perfect recollection of long division. It felt like the pencil was controlling itself, and he was just watching it, stunned. Another student told me she never learned algebra, but then was able to solve inequalities effortlessly. Those moments make my students very proud, and I'm sure it would make their original teachers quite proud too.

I know just enough about criminal justice to understand that the current system is not working. When a disproportionate share of our country's population is locked up, I fault society and not the people behind bars. When a grossly disproportionate number of black men end up in prison, I think about income inequalities, policies, law enforcement tactics, and sentencing methods that might be disproportionately affecting minorities. And when so many prisoners go on to become repeat offenders, I can't help but think that the system is failing to actually rehabilitate. What's most sad for me is that the people who care most about these issues -- those actually behind

bars -- often lack the education, the means, the platform, or the attention of society to do anything about it.

אין חבוש מתקן עצמו מבית האסורים
A prisoner cannot free himself from prison
- Berachot, 5b (Talmud)

Who knew that it would be my math teachers who would prompt me to become involved in tzedek work as an adult? I suppose that's the power of Schechter. The values of tzedek and tikkun olam were taught beyond the walls of rabbinics and tanach class. Although my teachers all taught different subjects, they were aligned in a common mission to instill Jewish values in me and in my peers. I am grateful to all my teachers for motivating me to give back to my community and to do my part in making this world a little more equitable.

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