

'There Are No Secrets'

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Fort Dix, N.J.: Juda Mintz may look like an ordinary guy (middle aged, medium height, with a comb-over and thick glasses) yet there is something about the Modern Orthodox rabbi that makes him stand out among the 4,500 inmates at the Fort Dix Correctional Institution, a federal prison in southwestern New Jersey. Under the glaring fluorescent lights of the large cinder-block walled prison visiting room, Rabbi Mintz walks calmly over to greet a visitor. He is dressed in the same beige work-shirt and pants that every inmate wears from the day he arrives until the day he is freed. Amid the dozens of prisoners playing with their young children, sharing vending machine snacks with their wives and parents, canoodling with their girlfriends though there is no privacy in the rows of plastic chairs, there is something striking about Rabbi Mintz. It's his equanimity. Rabbi Mintz seems almost happy to be here. "It sounds crazy, I know, but I am happy," he says in a brief interview in the meeting room. It's a place he never imagined he would be. Rabbi Mintz was arrested just before the High Holy Days four years ago and charged with viewing child pornography. The computer in his office at New Jersey's Mount Freedom Jewish Center was running slowly and a technician working on it found pornographic images, including eight involving children, stored on the hard drive. Congregational leaders alerted the FBI. Rabbi Mintz, almost before he knew what had hit him, had lost his job, his marriage, his home and the career that he had begun decades before at Yeshivat Torah V'Daas in Brooklyn. He pleaded guilty to one count of possessing child pornography, which carried a maximum prison sentence of five years and a \$250,000 fine. The rabbi was given a prison term of a year and a day, with time reduced for good behavior. He expects to be released before Passover next spring after serving about 10 months. In the meantime, Rabbi Mintz does much of what all the prisoners do. He sleeps on the bottom bunk in the room he shares with 11 men: a privilege granted him because of his age, 61. Showers and a television are shared with other rooms. He takes his turn mopping the floors, Rabbi Mintz writes in an interview conducted by mail. Prison officials did not permit a visiting reporter to bring writing materials or a tape recorder into the reception room, so after the visit questions were mailed to Rabbi Mintz and he sent back hand-written responses. Between standing on line in the mess hall and being in his room for the mandatory head counts at 4 p.m., 10 p.m., midnight and 5 a.m., Rabbi Mintz writes that he spends his days praying and studying, teaching and counseling. He and the two dozen or so other observant Jewish inmates (there are another 25 Jews who are not observant) receive three certified kosher meals a day. His prison job, for which he gets paid \$5.50 a month, is being an orderly in the Jewish chapel. He sweeps, empties the trash and sets things up for worship services, which he also leads. The Jewish chapel has a Torah scroll, and a sukkah will soon be erected in the jail yard. Rabbi Mintz and his friends will eat their meals there, and bless the lulavs and etrogs for Sukkot. "There is some type of Jewish learning going on here from 6:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m., except for meals and the count," the rabbi writes. "Interestingly, there's the same type of friction between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish communities here as there is on the other side of the fence. "Ironically, this is the first time in 40 years, since I moved from Williamsburg [where he grew up] to Montreal at age 21, that I have lived in a shomer-Shabbat community." Before moving to Mount Freedom several years ago he lived in Atlanta, where he established an innovative congregation that brought together traditional/Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist and Reform Jews. The Jewish community inside the Fort Dix walls is diverse, too. Among the prisoners in with Rabbi Mintz are chasidim (including a 27-year-old from New Square, N.Y., sentenced to 13 years for money laundering) Israelis, Russian Jews and some non-chasidic black-hat types, he says. "I study daily with a chasidic chevruta [partner], we're studying [the classic Torah text] 'Duties of the Heart,' "writes Rabbi Mintz. He teaches two classes, one on the Ethics of the Fathers, and one on the weekly Torah portion, does one-on-one teaching and "informal counseling," he writes. Most everyone, including guards, administrators and inmates, calls him rabbi,

he says, though he's never asked them to. Each week he attends three 12-step meetings, Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous. "I am neither an alcoholic nor a drug addict," he writes. "I am addicted to pornography, but the label of the addiction is far less important than recognizing addiction as a disease of chemical imbalance in the brain that manifests itself into compulsive behavior." He also meets daily with one of the addicted inmates he mentors. Being in prison has given Rabbi Mintz plenty of time to reflect on his crime. "I must always realize that it is because of people like me, and tragically the millions of others in the world who view child pornography, that there is an industry that abuses the most innocent of all victims; these helpless children who are forced to participate in this most heinous of crimes," he writes. "If there weren't people who sought and viewed these images, there would be no market for child pornography. I must do teshuva [repentance] for contributing to the destruction of young, innocent lives. "I am comforted to feel the acceptance of my teshuva by G-d," he writes, "and I am hopeful that my teshuva will be accepted by my victims and by my community." "The worst aspect of being in prison," he writes, is realizing that no matter how much he repents, he will never move past "the stigma I will have the rest of my life. I'll forever be 'a felon.' " Once released, Rabbi Mintz plans to return to the residential treatment program for Jews in Los Angeles (Beit T'shuva) where he lived and worked after his arrest, and before he was remanded to the prison. He hopes to get a similar project off the ground in New York, and to develop a program on addiction for rabbis and rabbinical schools. In the meantime, Rabbi Mintz is spending his days at Fort Dix relishing the time he has to spend on what he loves best. "For the first time in my life I am able to take two to three hours each morning for my prayers," he writes. "I am able to speak, praise, petition, meditate, study, sing, all in the context of my tefillot [prayers]. "For the vast majority of my life, even in adolescence, I was the giver, the teacher, the counselor, the provider. Being 'discovered' as a pornography addict and being turned in to the authorities was one of the most important turning points in my life. "It is teaching me the importance of recognizing how much in need I am of receiving. Receiving consequences for my actions. I am not above any law, and most importantly, I'm now experiencing the loving intimacy I have with G-d. I live in His light; there are no secrets, no dark places." His Shabbats at Fort Dix are spent out in the yard, communing with his new friends, blessing and enjoying the challah rolls and grape juice provided by the prison, singing together as the day of rest wanes. "I try to spend as much time as I can in the fresh country air," Rabbi Mintz writes. "There may be barbed wire fences surrounding the prison, but it doesn't block out the blue skies, bright sun, moon, stars, trees, and singing birds." Don't you see the fences and barbed wire, a visitor asks? "I can look out at the fence," he said in the windowless, linoleum-floored visiting room, "or I can look up. I look up."

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