ALUMNI

Books behind Bars

Avi Steinberg’s memoir of life as a prison librarian

An “earnest yeshiva boy,” Avi Steinberg ’02 never thought he’d spend his days in prison. But in 2005, when offered the post of librarian at the Suffolk County House of Correction in Boston, he took it, glad to trade writing obituaries for the Boston Globe as a freelancer for a more secure job with dental insurance and a surplus of live, albeit caged, bodies. He was eagerly unaware of what was in store. “I knew this would be a stretch, and I went there searching for something,” he adds. “But I didn’t know what that was.”

For nearly two years he promoted books and creative writing to a range of students: pimps, prostitutes, junkies, thugs, robbers, con men, and even killers. His recently published memoir, Running the Books: The Adventures of an Accidental Prison Librarian (Random House), is a rich meditation on this wild experience and the related nuanced questions about morality and humanity that he confronted armed with little more than his own sensitivities and book learning.

“A prison library is a fascinating place,” Steinberg says in retrospect. “People there have a dire need to connect—with other people, with estranged loved ones, with their past, with themselves.” At the same time, the library is the only place, apart from solitary confinement, where inmates can experience any quiet in a social setting; carpeting and books dull the roar and screams of prison life that reverberate against all that steel and concrete. It was within this context of books—of writing, reading, and thinking—that Steinberg aspired to create “a space where you can make people open up instead of close down, to awaken people instead of numbing them,” he explains. “Everywhere else in prison is a place of shut down, lock down, literally.” The library allows people to relax, briefly, away from the powermongering and threats of physical harm, and reminds them “that they are more than criminals, if they choose to be.”

The job’s immediate milieu was familiar enough: “Libraries feel like home,” Steinberg says. Born in Jerusalem, he and his family lived in Cleveland until moving to Cambridge in 1993, when his father, Bernard Steinberg, became director of Harvard Hillel. Growing up, “there was always reading, and conversations about books; we’d pull one out to talk about it. And there was a willingness to argue. That’s part of the Jewish tradition: arguing that doesn’t lead to conflict.”

Raised Orthodox, Steinberg went to the Maimonides School in Brookline, where he channeled his “considerable adolescent hooligan rage into, of all things, intense Torah study.” That included Torah summer camp in the West Bank, where whole days and nights were spent in the beit midrash, the House of Study. In an assigned table spot surrounded by the Talmud (a stack of six volumes), a Hebrew Bible, a set of Maimonides’ Code, and Hebrew and Aramaic dictionaries, Steinberg’s teenage years were taken up by studying and praying: “I loved wrestling with the ancient books, having them speak to me in their original mysterious languages,” he writes.

At the prison, inmates nicknamed him “Bookie.” With no library-related degree and only a modicum of in-house training, Steinberg threw himself into the union job. His boyish face and Harvard credentials marked him as the “youngest, greenest of staff members”—as no one ever failed to remind him. Advice came from all sides: “Trust no one,” “Be careful,” and “Watch your back.”

Any assumptions about the ease of book learning quickly disappeared. “As a prison librarian, you need to fight for the space, fight to purchase the books, fight to keep books on the shelves, fight for people to be able to come to the library, fight to keep people coming back to the library,” Steinberg says of his daily struggles. “It takes a lot of effort to bring books alive for people. To me, this was not obvious before.”

In the subculture of the library he found a “prison crossroads, a place where hundreds of inmates come to deal with their pressing issues”: pending legal cases, illiteracy, stalled educations, nonexistent...
Crimson in Congress

The Republican resurgence of 2010 decreased alumni ranks—defined for this exercise as graduates of or matriculants in a degree program at the University—overall on Capitol Hill. Two years ago, 38 Harvardians took their seats in the 111th Congress; Al Franken ’73 later boosted that number to 39, until the death of Edward Kennedy ’54, LL.D. ’08, in 2009. In the 112th Congress, the likely total at press time appears to be 31, reflecting a net gain of one for the Republicans, a net loss of eight for their rivals. Representative Jane Harman, J.D. ’69, Democrat of California, remains the only woman in the group.

In the Senate, the Harvard contingent added both a Democrat, Richard Blumenthal ’67 of Connecticut, and a Republican, former congressman Pat Toomey ’84 of Pennsylvania. Incumbent Democrat Russ Feingold, J.D. ’79, of Wisconsin lost his reelection bid, while Republicans Michael Crapo, J.D. ’77, of Idaho and David Vitter ’83 of Louisiana won theirs.

In the House, Republican Thomas Petri ’62, LL.B. ’65, of Wisconsin, remains the sole member of his party to have graduated from Harvard. Randy Altschuler, M.B.A. ’98, of New York, came close to joining him, but ultimately conceded on December 8, losing by 263 votes out of more than 194,000 cast.

On the Democratic side of the aisle, Artur Davis ’90, J.D. ’93, of Alabama, withdrew to mount a failed gubernatorial bid, and Joseph A. Sestak Jr., M.P.A. ’80, K ’82, Ph.D. ’84, of Pennsylvania, ran for the Senate but lost to Pat Toomey.

Meanwhile five alumni first elected in 2008—John Adler ’81, J.D. ’84, of New Jersey; Bill Foster, Ph.D. ’83, of Illinois; Alan M. Grayson ’78, M.P.P. -J.D. ’83, G ’87, of Florida; Dan Maffei, M.P.P. ’95, of New York; and Walter C. Minnick, M.B.A. ’66, J.D. ’69, of Idaho—lost their seats, as did House veteran Chet Edwards, M.B.A. ’81, of Texas.

The line-up at press time (asterisks mark newcomers):

**Senate Republicans:** Michael D. Crapo, J.D. ’77 (Id.); *Pat Toomey ’84 (Pa.); David Vitter ’83 (La.).

**Senate Democrats:** Jeff Bingaman ’65 (N.M.); *Richard Blumenthal ’67 (Conn.); Al Franken ’73 (Minn.); Herbert H. Kohl, M.B.A. ’58 (Wisc.); Carl Levin, LL.B. ’59 (Mich.); John F. (Jack) Reed, M.P.P. ’73, J.D. ’82 (R.I.); John D. Rockefeller IV ’58 (W.Va.); Charles E. Schumer ’71, J.D. ’74 (N.Y.); Mark R. Warner, J.D. ’80 (Va.).

**House Republicans:** Thomas E. Petri ’62, LL.B. ’65 (Wisc.).

**House Democrats:** John Barrow, J.D. ’79 (Ga.); Gerry Connolly, M.P.A. ’79 (Va.); James H. Cooper, J.D. ’80 (Tenn.); Barney Frank ’61, G ’62–68, J.D. ’77 (Mass.); Jane Harman, J.D. ’69 (Calif.); Brian Higgins, M.P.A. ’96 (N.Y.); Jim Himes ’88 (Conn.); Ron Kind ’85 (Wisc.); James R. Langevin, M.P.A. ’94 (R.I.); Sander M. Levin, LL.B. ’57 (Mich.); Stephen F. Lynch, M.P.A. ’99 (Mass.); James D. Matheson ’82 (Utah); John P. Sarbanes, J.D. ’88 (Md.); Adam B. Schiff, J.D. ’85 (Calif.); Robert C. Scott ’69 (Va.); Bradley J. Sherman, J.D. ’79 (Calif.); Christopher Van Hollen Jr., M.P.P. ’85 (Md.); David Wu, M ’81 (Ore.).

Steinberg found the best approach to inmates was to ask the simplest question: “What are you looking for?” Many sought what was elusive: finding peace with themselves. Despite repeated warnings, those were the people Steinberg drew close to. This caused him no end of worry about the boundaries between prisoner and jailer, but also honed his conscience—and spurred a maturity—in a way he never could have done by himself in the library of the yeshiva, or even at Harvard.

“It takes a lot of courage to be kind to anyone in prison,” he says. “Kindness was literally outlawed.” Strict bureaucratic rules applied, as did an unwritten “us versus them” mentality; nobody was explicitly trusted, no one was a “friend.” Policies precluded staff from “sharing any item, no matter how small, with an inmate,” Steinberg writes. “This was what made the prison library—a lending library after all—such a radical concept.” And
was Steinberg himself a teacher, mentor, jailer, or baby-sitter? Sometimes he “quietly permitted modest amounts of dancing in the library,” or did online searches for inmates, or allowed loans of prohibited books, such as the black, urban pulp fiction novels of Triple Crown Publications.

Once, breaking serious rules, he brought in a chocolate cupcake for a man celebrating a lonely birthday and allowed him to eat it in private in the library office. “Even the toughest guys I met said that anyone who tells you they didn’t cry in the early days of imprisonment, or still don’t, sometimes by themselves in the dark of night, is lying,” Steinberg notes.

Among those he became closer to was a former drug dealer turned aspiring television chef, Chudney; Steinberg helped him develop a plan of action, track down recipes, and plow through extensive applications to cooking schools. Another inmate, C.C. Too Sweet, a short, loud-mouthed attention-seeker, was writing his magnum opus: an autobiography detailing his rise from a childhood of physical abuse by his mother to a successful career as a pimp. He and Steinberg together edited and shaped hundreds of pages of a handwritten manuscript over the course of a year. (Inmates may write only in prison-issued notebooks, using specially designed bendable pens.)

One inmate Steinberg befriended was Jessica, an addict and a Sylvia Plath fan (as were many women inmates) who came to his creative-writing class. She longed to reunite with the baby son she had left in a church pew with a note—who had turned up on the male side of the prison. From the library window, she silently watched him play basketball in the yard, but never came into contact with him. Surely one of her tasks, as Steinberg points out, was “to come to terms with the crime she was never charged with—abandoning her son.” He urged her to compose a letter and another inmate spent weeks drawing her portrait, both of which Steinberg had ambivalently agreed to deliver to her son. But as this once-removed encounter drew near, Jessica ripped up the letter and portrait and was transferred to another prison without saying good-bye. A few months later, shortly after her release, she was dead of a drug overdose.

Later on, Steinberg found out that another recently released inmate, Chudney, the aspiring chef, had been shot in the back and killed, apparently because he had inadvertently crossed into enemy gang territory with his brother. At this news, Steinberg shut the library for the day. “Then I closed my eyes and was initiated into an ancient club, those who cry alone in the darkness of prison.”

By that time he had developed serious stress-related back injuries and had had some unsettling run-ins with a few guards. One deliberately set off a foul-smelling spray to disrupt Steinberg’s most constructive movie discussion (on Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo + Juliet, a modern take involving Verona Beach street gangs shown during the library’s Shakespeare Festival). That caused chaos and justifiable fury among the inmates. Meanwhile, he writes, even though the “book-slinging persona still worked wonders at cocktail parties,” the reality “was starting to give me acid reflux. I wasn’t a visitor in this prison. I held a key and was beginning to feel infected by it. Frankly I was falling apart, headed toward something of a mental and physical breakdown.” To top things off, he was mugged at knifepoint on his way home one night by a former library patron. Though he recognized Steinberg—“You’re the book guy!”—the mugger still took Steinberg’s wallet and ran, turning back to yell, “Hey, I still owe you guys two books!”

Five months later, Steinberg left the library. For him, that incident “encapsulated the humor and sadness of prison life, and the fact that not everything has a redemptive ending. It made my decision to leave a little clearer.”

He is now a full-time writer in Philadelphia, still sorting through the depth of his prison experience. Much of what he saw and heard he did not write about, preferring to focus on the “human stories” because “I want people to see that this place cannot be reduced to a message or, as it is so often, a political spin.” The guards, for example, deserve a whole book to themselves: “I know they encounter inmates in much more trying circumstances than I saw in the library.” Still, he suspects his book will not be on the shelves of the Suffolk County House of Correction—or touted by his Orthodox schools.

In the book, he details an episode from Torah camp in which he and two friends unwittingly trespassed into a Palestin-
ian farmer’s field and were suddenly confronted by his sons. “They were tough and courageous. We, on the other hand, played adventure video games in air-conditioned suburban palaces.” His friend Moshe took out a well-worn copy of the Torah and gave the book to the Arab boys’ leader, indicating it was a gift. Steinberg was ashamed at the time because it is taboo in Jewish tradition to give away a holy book, especially to an enemy.

Prison helped changed Steinberg’s view of that incident. “We had been taught to place the Other on a narrow spectrum of pity, suspicion, and hate....But Moshe...knew the holiness of the book was in sharing it.” In prison, as on the West Bank, he writes, book-sharing is taboo. “I met people on the outside of prison who made it clear they didn’t want their tax dollars funding a pretty library for violent criminals.” Steinberg understands that, just as he understands “the misery we had felt as kids relinquishing our holy book to the enemy. It involved crossing a very real boundary. What did we accomplish by it, or by running a library for convicts? Perhaps nothing. But there was a greater danger in not doing these things—or, at least, in not being willing to try.” ~NELL PORTER BROWN

A Milestone for Asian American Alumni

Organized by the Harvard Asian American Alumni Alliance (HAAAA), the three-day Asian American Alumni Summit on October 15-17 drew more than 400 people from six decades and all of Harvard’s schools (http://summit.haaaa.net).

“We are immeasurably diverse as a group, yet we share many of the same goals,” said Jeannie Park ’83, who co-chaired the event with Jeff Yang ’89.

The summit celebrated progress made since the 1970s, when an Asian-American presence was virtually nonexistent on campus, and examined remaining challenges faced by Asian Americans today. During the opening plenary session, “Where We Stand: The Changing Asian-American Experience at Harvard,” William F. Lee ’72, managing partner of WilmerHale and the first Asian American to serve on the Harvard Corporation, spoke of a time when encountering another Asian student at Harvard was a rarity.

Yet by the time Jane Bock ’81 arrived on campus in 1977, a critical mass of Asian-American students was ready to be politically organized. They worked to gain minority status for Asians at Harvard, and Bock’s sociology thesis, “The Model Minority in the Meritocracy: Asian Americans in the Harvard/Radcliffe Admissions Process,” prompted a Department of Justice inquiry into the treatment of Asian-American college applicants. The number of Asian-American students at Harvard doubled in the next four years. Not quite 20 years later, HAAAA co-chair Jeff Yang could point out that the group’s summit venues on campus included both the Fong and Tsai auditoriums.

The summit’s 50 speakers and presenters ranged from Secretary of the Cabinet Chris Lu, J.D. ’91, to novelist Gish Jen ’77 and professional poker player Bernard Lee ’92, A.L.M. ’94. There were panel discussions on topics such as social entrepreneurship and public service, film screenings, and an “elevator-pitch” competition.

Affirmative action and race-blind admissions were recurrent themes. Several speakers expressed concern that enrollment of Asian-American students at the College, currently 17 percent, has remained flat for the past 30 years despite that group’s growing representation in the applicant pool.

The summit was also a forum to advocate academic study of Asian-American culture at Harvard. Eileen Chow ’90, former assistant professor of Chinese literature and cultural studies, who helped develop the Asian-American studies minor track in the East Asian studies program, was among the speakers, as was Athena Lao ’12, who helped with that effort and is co-president of the Asian American Association (AAA) student group. The AAA can help bring the more ethnically specific Asian cultural groups at Harvard together, Lao says, and encourage students who identify with the Asian-American community “to say it proudly.”

Reaching across divides within that community was also a theme in the keynote address by Chris Lu, who serves as an assistant to his law-school classmate Barack Obama. Lu emphasized responsibilities beyond Harvard, pointing out that although the “model minority” stereotype applied to all the Harvard graduates in the room, it didn’t necessarily apply to the Hmong high-school dropout. “Let us commit ourselves to those who have not fared as well,” he said.

Lu asked the audience to raise their hands if their parents were immigrants, and nearly everyone did. “My story is your story. It’s the quintessential immigrant story,” he said, after narrating his then 18-year-old father’s arrival in America, which included a five-day bus ride to Tennessee during which the traveler consumed nothing but hamburgers and milk, the only items he could name in English. Many other speakers also cited the importance of their immigrant parents’ having given them the opportunity and, in some cases, the freedom to pursue their dreams.

All the same, if there’s any constant at Asian-American alumni gatherings, it is jokes about overbearing parents. During the panel “The Road Less Traveled: Asian Americans in Atypical Careers,” Georgia Lee ’98, director of the film Red Doors, said her parents told her, “You can do anything you want—as long as you are a biochemist, doctor, or lawyer.” ~SARAH ZHANG

Harvard’s 360th Commencement will take place on May 26. For information regarding tickets, events, and alumni gatherings, visit www.commencementoffice.harvard.edu.

Harvard Arab Weekend

The Harvard Arab Alumni Association and the Middle East and North African Groups (MENA) at Harvard hosted a fourth annual gathering at the University on November 18-21. Among the major speakers were Queen Noor of Jordan, who gave the opening speech, and Prince Turki Al Faisal Al Saud, who presented “A Saudi Foreign Policy Doctrine for the New Decade.” Panel discussions focused on the global economy in the Middle East, as well as on career opportunities in medicine, public health, design, and education. For additional details, visit www.harvardarab-alumni.org/MENAweekend/index.php.