

REHABILITATION PHILOSOPHY

from prison back into society – and its crucial importance to society in our Era

By Avraham Hoffmann, PRA, Israel¹.

And the story of rehabilitation began...

On April 1984 the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority officially opened its doors. On the door, I hanged a sign stating: "Entrance is through the **window**". I've put a footstool under the window – it was on the ground floor. All of the new workers, who came for their first day of work, were excellent social work and criminology students. They all entered the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority's office through that window. But, from the look on their face, it seems they all regretted their decision to work with such a boss.

After they had all come in through the window, I opened the door and told them: "This door shall always be opened. However, I just wanted to remind you that in spite of what you had learned in university, you must also think like prisoners themselves in order to help them rehabilitate. A smile from ear to ear spread over their faces and they began working full of enthusiasm.

The purpose of this prank was to stress that rehabilitation of delinquents is possible only by changing ways of thinking - both of the released prisoners as of their care takers – to enable the development of creative paths to rehabilitation, not those written in books, but those found in life and especially on street life, where delinquents live. And each prisoner is a world in itself.

The never ending story of rehabilitation...

We believe rehabilitation is the start of a perpetual struggle, with no end or limits, in which a man stands alone in a struggle with him. The Authority's philosophy is that there is no person who cannot rehabilitate, and that everyone has a right to a new beginning. However, it should be recognised that not everyone has the power and ability to achieve the same heights, and that the jumping-off point differs from person to person. Hence, measuring rehabilitation from a solely statistical standpoint implies reducing the value of a human being to an insignificant number. In spite of this conception, and maybe by virtue of this belief, 81% of the prisoners that joint the PRA's programs are successfully rehabilitated - they do not use drugs or commit crimes - as opposed to 30% among those that did not participate in rehabilitation programs.

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The Israeli Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority is a state entity. It was founded in 1984, to deal with all prisoners: male and female, Jewish and Arab, single and married, as well as with their families. It is mandated to deal with prisoners' rehabilitation 4 to 6 month preceding their release and in the community during the year following their release from prison. During the pre-release period, an individual rehabilitation program is set with each prisoner. Participation is voluntary.

The PRA offers every released prisoners an equal chance to a successful rehabilitation, by developing programs to fulfil the special needs of the different populations.

Why today the story of prisoners' rehabilitation is actual more then ever before?

It seems that these days the importance of rehabilitation has increased dramatically. There are so many opposing trends that the old system seems to have gone bankrupt:

On the one hand the public atmosphere, the media and political settings demands to toughen sentencing and prolong the imprisonment terms in light of the social danger and sophistication of crime, and also to satisfy feelings of revenge.

Hence, the penal system is pressured to imprison offenders and tends to impose longer prison terms. However, at the same time, there are only limited public funds available to building prisons. Moreover, as a result, prisons become over populated and the prisoners' conditions worsen.

While human rights activists call to lighten sentencing, civilians' safety must be kept. And, in the meanwhile, released prisoners revert to their criminal behaviour, and gain publicity through the media.

How new laws brought new pressures

The Israeli "Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty" emphasises that :

Article 2 – **There shall be no violation of the life, body or dignity of any person** as such.

Article 3 – There shall be **no violation of the property of a person.**

Article 4 – **All persons are entitled to protection of their life, body and dignity.**

Article 5 – There shall be **no deprivation or restriction of the liberty of a person** by imprisonment, arrest, extradition or otherwise.

Article 7 a. All persons have **the right to privacy and to intimacy.**

- b. There shall be no entry into the private premises of a person who has not consented thereto.
- c. No search shall be conducted in the private premises of a person, nor in the body or personal effects.
- d. There shall be no violation of the confidentiality of conversation, or of the writings or records of a person.

These single citations from the Law of Human Dignity and Liberty emphasise the many limitation, restraints and constraints the Prison Services face. This law oblige a new approach to prisoners and sets the rehabilitation following the imprisonment in a more central place – striving at shortening the imprisonment term, extending of the supervised period and deepening the rehabilitation process after the release.

New pressures from the media

The rehabilitation system, like the imprisonment system, faces new media. If years ago the prisons were almost outside media coverage, today more and more apertures are opened to the media. There are fewer and fewer prisons where wardens can do whatever they like enduringly.

Moreover, every failure is inflated by the media and, a lot of pressure is put on the political system and those in charge of the police and the Prison Services. This process necessitates a new approach to the media by the prison wardens. They must be prepared to the conversation with the media. When released prisoners go back to crime, their stories gain large media coverage.

Therefore the thought that a prisoner that is released from prison also frees the prison from the prisoner is not true anymore. The media buzz comes back to the prison, its wardens and the Prison Services, the Minister and political system in charge, like a boomerang.

The new opposing pressures on Prison Services

As a result, the Prison Services suffer of a constant contradiction in light of the social trends of the Law of Human Dignity and Liberty on the one hand and the pressure of the media to toughen their fist on the other hand.

The public opinion shouts "toughen the imprisonment, lengthen the incarceration term" but at the same time supports values of Human Dignity and Liberty: the Prison Services work in a new reality – while the old prison system that could have done almost anything behind its walls has gone bankrupt.

Those who dealt with rehabilitation of prisoners [within prison] are also required to adopt a new approach. The sages of Israel have said: "*It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task, but neither are you free to absolve yourself from it*" (Aboth 2:21) that is dealing with a prisoner's rehabilitation without ensuring a continued rehabilitation after the release from prison is doomed to fail.

Punishment vis à vis rehabilitation...

In light of these contradictions, and the failure of the old system, in which even those who dealt with prisoners' rehabilitation did not do it within an approach of continuity and a continuum of therapy between prison and the external reality, the verdict must already include both the punishment and the succeeding rehabilitation.

In the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy - it says (chapter 25: 2-3): "*and it shall be, if the guilty one has incurred [the penalty of] lashes, that the judge shall make him lean over and flog him in front of him, commensurate with his crime, in number. He shall flog him with forty [lashes]; he shall not exceed, lest he give him a much more severe flogging than these [forty lashes], and your brother will be degraded before your eyes.*"

It tells us about the difference and the importance of differentiating between punishment and rehabilitation. Punishment has a beginning and an end.

How did we fill in this gap?

Israel created the Law of the Prisoner Rehabilitation Authority that secures the continued therapy from prison to rehabilitation. And real rehabilitation can be achieved only by a free person. As King David wrote in Psalms (23: 4-5): "*Even when I walk in the valley of darkness, I will fear no evil for You are with me; **Your rod and Your staff-they comfort me.***"

That is, the punishment and rehabilitation of the released prisoner must be, according to King David" an integral part of the verdict, so it shortens the imprisonment term and extends the period of supervised rehabilitation – after the release from prison.

This world-view necessitates change of positions among the public and among the political leadership. This world-view is also preferred by economists, who know the limited resources available to build new prisons.

What is then the innovation?

The verdict must include the continuum from punishment to rehabilitation.

To do so success stories and statistics should be presented to the wide public. We must educate the public, the media and the political arena to change positions, to see rehabilitation not as mere incidental or episodic, but as a method that cannot succeed in the long run without a significant public's involvement.

At this conference, we are all professionals dealing with prisons, their residents and those released going back to live in the community. Those not represented here are the public, the media and the political arena.

Whose attitude did we have to change first?

In Israel the revolution we did was that we did not confine ourselves to working only with the prisoners before their release from prison by preparing them toward their release. We had opened a continued therapy in the community. In order to do that, we worked at changing attitudes among the prison command within the Prison Services as well as among the community professionals – including the social workers, criminologists and psychologists. We had to work hard to obtain the police and courts trust and convince them that our new way will be able to stand the test of time.

This hard work couldn't have been a one time effort; it had to be an integral part of the rehabilitation activities. Both the police and the courts are under a lot of pressure to toughen the punishment in light of the perceived social danger, the perfection of crimes and revenge feelings toward criminals.

Why is it so important to change the public opinion?

In addition, also the general public's position must be changed in order to create a public atmosphere that accepts the released prisoners and offers a social and political support to those who deal with their rehabilitation.

Moreover, rehabilitation of released prisoner in the long-run is impossible without engaging the public in the rehabilitation process itself. For example, released prisoners were accepted in the Kibbutz rehabilitation program only if at least 2/3 (two third) of the kibbutz members gave their consent.

And, the released prisoner must live within the normative community in order to be able to rehabilitate. For that reason I led processes of prisoners' rehabilitation in Kibbutz, small vilages, Yeshivas, apartments with students, employing released prisoners by employers who were willing to take part voluntarily in the rehabilitation system, involving women's organisations who helped rehabilitate released female prisoners with their children.

And eventually, an additional crucial by-product of engaging the public in the rehabilitation processes is creating a group of "natural" promoters which constitute the social backup and support for the professionals who work to rehabilitate released prisoners every day.

Why are the media so important to rehabilitation?

The major influence on the public is conditioned upon the change of attitude among the media professional. They who skilfully describe crimes should also learn how to raise public awareness to the revolution [changeover] a prisoner goes through on his way to rehabilitate, by telling the stories of those who succeeded.

And since we all know how much the political leaders are influenced by the media, for good or for worth, a positive message in the media could also have an impact on the politicians.

Why should governments care about rehabilitation?

The governments are encouraged to toughen the punishment and to prolong the imprisonment terms, while at the same time the public budgets to build new prisons are cut off.

Moreover, the imprisonment is unpopular among the human rights and civilian rights movements. While they were previously content with demanding the prison authorities to deal with their prisoners according to civilian rights, today they increasingly stress the importance of the human dignity and liberty values.

And, even from the economic standpoint, rehabilitation is worthwhile, since it costs only 50% of the imprisonment cost. Hence it is profitable to shorten the imprisonment sentence and extend the period of rehabilitation outside prison. And it becomes even more appealing as the world faces economic crisis.

I have shortly presented the fundamental problems that life in the modern society creates for the prison services and to those who deal with the rehabilitation of released prisoners.

We have overviewed the way to build a narrow bridge on the face of the stormy waters, by integrating the media, the political system and the public in the rehabilitation processes after the release from prison, to ensure support for the professionals' work and ability to overcome failures that are an integral part of the rehabilitation test.

When we know that "our entire world is but a narrow bridge – the most important thing is never to be afraid" – the most important thing is to have courage to climb up the mountain and know that rehabilitating a released prisoner is a key element to fighting crime. This is the only way to dry up the swamp of crime before it drowns us and our liberty.

Rehabilitation is a lifelong process, and therefore, rehabilitation services should be attentive and accessible because released prisoners must have somewhere to turn to whenever the need arises.

In conclusion: one of the modern rehabilitation's roles is to show the public, politicians and media that rehabilitation eventually saves public funds, and to change their positions. Rehabilitation is not possible in the long run without the public's cooperation.