



Rabbi Michael Lezak serving a guest at one of Glide's daily free meals. /Alain McLaughlin

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Tenderloin Rebbe brings prosecutors face-to-face with homelessness

BY **ELISSA EINHORN** | OCTOBER 31, 2019

A few years ago, Matt Carmichael stepped out of an upscale hotel not far from San Francisco's Union Square and glanced across the street. What he saw fundamentally changed him.

“There was a line of people in front of the Glide Church — folks who probably had the polar opposite experience that I just had: sleeping on a king-size bed and a plush

mattress, and holding a warm cup of coffee,” recalled the **former police chief at UC Davis**. “It hit me like a ton of bricks.”

Immediately, Carmichael felt he wanted to change policing in underserved communities such as the Tenderloin.

Carmichael decided to team up with his friend and colleague, Jeff Reisig, the **district attorney of Yolo County**, west of Sacramento. Known for developing restorative justice programs in his county, Reisig, too, had asked himself how he could help police and prosecutors understand what was really going on with the populations that places like Glide Memorial Church serve, primarily people who are homeless, mentally ill or addicted to drugs.

The pair looped in Rabbi Michael Lezak, the **staff rabbi at Glide’s Center for Social Justice** since 2017, and together they created a curriculum Carmichael and Reisig describe as “immersive experience toward harm reduction.”

Lezak calls it “An Officer and a Mensch.”

“People associate the Tenderloin with deep, third-world poverty,” the rabbi explained. “Mental illness, addiction, people injecting drugs, defecating on the streets in between cars — these are the deepest margins of society.”

The goal of “An Officer and a Mensch,” which began last year, is to have prosecutors come face-to-face with people who are suffering, to see the human tragedy and to develop a deeper level of understanding and empathy.

In other words, rather than seeing a prostitute who needs to be arrested, Lezak, Reisig and Carmichael want law enforcement personnel to see a mother or a sister who has experienced trauma.

“We have to see what people are going through and what the root of their suffering is so we can make better decisions with certain types of offenders,” Reisig said. “It’s easy to sit in the ivory tower of a courthouse and judge, but to go to Glide, [which serves] people who experience suffering on a daily basis, is different. We wanted prosecutors to appreciate the human element to crimes.”

“ **These are very challenging cases. We can’t arrest our way out of them.**”

The three-day training takes public servants and law enforcement officials out of their comfort zones, bringing them to ground zero of human suffering. It begins with an early-morning tour of the Tenderloin, typically led by neighborhood residents, and includes a shared meal after standing in line with the hungry.

Lezak describes the program as “the deep connective tissue between Glide’s compassionate values and Jewish values,” as well as the actualization of a prayer in **the Amidah** that describes how God brings people back from the dead.

Known by many of the area’s homeless residents, Lezak shares with them what’s going on when a training group comes through. He also tells program participants that when they walk the streets of the Tenderloin, they’ll be walking “through someone’s living room, [so] the least you can do is say hi.”

Jonathan Raven, Yolo County’s assistant district attorney, admitted that before visiting the Tenderloin, he would simply ignore the homeless. Now, he looks them in the eye and says hello.

“The impact goes beyond my job,” added Raven, who is Jewish. “It’s how I live my life. So many people who interact with police are homeless, or have mental health or substance-abuse issues. These are very challenging cases. We can’t arrest our way out of them and just lock people up. That hasn’t worked.”

Now the police chief at the University of Oregon, Carmichael brings college students on trips to the Tenderloin — and eight out of 10 of them report that the experience changed their lives, he said. One student was so inspired that he moved to San Francisco.

“You can’t spend two days at Glide and not be changed in some way,” Carmichael said.

Lezak wants district attorneys in cities across the nation to participate in the training. The program is being introduced in Las Vegas later this year, and in four months,

some 80 lawyers from the Contra Costa County DA office are scheduled to participate. Carmichael is also looking to extend the curriculum internationally.

The rabbi also wants to open the experience beyond law enforcement. Already he is bringing in students from Jewish day schools and teens from The Kitchen, a Jewish spiritual community in San Francisco **started by his wife, Rabbi Noa Kushner.**

“They are not just learning Torah,” he said of the youth participants, “they are *living* Torah.”

As a rabbi for 18 years at Peninsula Temple Beth El in San Mateo and Congregation Rodef Sholom in San Rafael, Lezak regularly visited jails and prisons with congregants. With “An Officer and a Mensch,” he hopes to continue along those lines with an army of “righteous mensches.”

“My dream is for every other district in the city to see the Tenderloin as its own and to be more of an ally, to take financial responsibility, to feel outraged, to vote like mad, and to give more tzedakah than ever before,” he said. “We have to see that we are all in this together, tap into the eternal Jewish hope, and do this.”

An Officer and a Mensch

For information, call Glide Memorial Church at (415) 674-6000, email Rabbi Lezak at mlezak@glide.org or visit glide.org/an-officer-and-a-mensch.

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Elissa Einhorn

Elissa Einhorn began her writing career in the Bronx at the age of 8. She earned a master's degree in communications and journalism 20 years later. While Elissa worked for non-profits her entire career, including as a

Jewish communal professional, she now enjoys working for herself as a freelance writer. Still, her most treasured role is that of *ima* (mom) to twin daughters who she is (finally) happy to count among her friends.

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