

## SOLEDAD CORRECTIONAL TRAINING FACILITY

# Rabbi brings purpose to incarcerated men



Rabbi Yochanan Friedman, who directs Chabad by the Sea in Santa Cruz, leads a session of Choices for Life at the chapel at the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's Correctional Training Facility in Soledad. As a prison chaplain with over 10 years of service and thousands of hours leading Torah classes, Friedman works to help those incarcerated derive personal inspiration from the ancient wisdom of the Torah. "I wanted actionable Torah teachings tailored to the specific experience these guys are going through," he said. The core idea of Choices for Life, which Friedman created with his father Rabbi Manis Friedman, centers around the critical distinction between merely existing and truly living, emphasizing that conscious choices are key to creating a life of purpose, meaning and happiness. To see more photographs, go to Sentinel staff photographer Shmuel Thaler's Weekly Photographer's Eye feature/A3 PHOTOS BY SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL



Paul Moreno, second from left, is among those incarcerated at Soledad who have been impacted by Rabbi Friedman's Choices for Life classes. Moreno was granted parole last Thursday.

**BY WENDY MEDINA**

[WMEDINA@SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM](mailto:WMEDINA@SANTACRUZSENTINEL.COM)

**SOLEDAD >>** The power in seeking help is rarely recognized, but there is strength in the choice to transform. At the root of a self-help class at the Soledad Correctional Training Facility — a medium-security state prison on the Central Coast — is the power of choice. Led by Rabbi Yochanan Friedman, Choices for Life gives incarcerated people the opportunity to embark on a journey of healing and purpose.

Friedman, who directs Chabad by the Sea in Santa Cruz, began serving as the prison's Jewish chaplain in 2008. After years of witnessing the emotional isolation many residents faced, he along with the help of his father, renowned lecturer Rabbi Manis Friedman, created Choices for Life in 2017 as a pilot program to teach participants how to redirect their energy toward helping others and in doing so, help themselves. Eight years later, the weekly course has seen over 600 graduates walk through the chapel doors where it takes place.



A program many residents say has transformed their thinking and their lives; the class weaves sacred wisdom from the Torah into modern-day lessons. Each session begins with a conversation about the difference between living with intention and just surviving, usually centered around a theme involving self-reflection, such as family.

“It’s no group like this,” said Derek Ancrum, a six-time enrollee who plans on retaking the class until he is eligible for parole in 2032. “Other groups focus on exterior things, this group is more internal. This group deals more about how you can help humanity, not just helping yourself. This group is about making yourself better for society. To be needed, instead of being needy.”

Ancrum’s reflection highlights the deeper impact of the course. Essentially, the class acts as a mirror, helping participants recognize the weight of their decisions and how those decisions affected the people around them, ultimately shifting their focus toward the well-being of others.

### **It starts with a question**

“What have you done in the past two weeks that is good?” the class began. This sparked a conversation within the roughly 35 students in attendance. Guided by insightful questions, the discussion often revolves around spirituality and ethics. Next, the men are encouraged to share their homework responses, which is assigned after each session. Giving the example of Robin Hood stealing from the rich to give to the poor, the lesson provokes critical thinking about moral choices.

“It makes you answer the question: Are you living, or just existing?” added Steven Estell, a third-time student. Miguel DeSilva, a chaplain/facilitator for the course, expanded the program into a Spanish-speaking chapter after applying the same principles he learned from Friedman to become a more impactful presence in his community. “I can read and write Spanish, and a lot of Spanish-speaking people here don’t have the opportunity with a lot of groups,” he explained, “so I wanna make sure I can at least do something.”

With the help of Choices for Life, DeSilva emphasized that the need to be of service is what turned his life around after years of living destructively. Upon joining the course and getting sober, the guilt of his actions caught up with him. Friedman encouraged him to use that pain as motivation to do better. Now qualified to lead his own cohort, DeSilva is scheduled for a parole hearing early next year. “I’m gonna continue doing this when (I’m out), I’m not stopping,” he said.

To encourage good behavior, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation offers credit-earning opportunities, such as Rehabilitative Achievement Credits, for participation in rehabilitative activities, potentially resulting in reduced time off sentences. Choices for Life is not part of this incentive system, and many in attendance noted that they were there because they truly wanted to change their lives.

## From self to service

After experiencing significant emotional and physical abuse growing up, Amos Stevenson, another chaplain/facilitator for the class who has been incarcerated for 32 years, admitted he made choices from a place of trauma to escape the pain, always in denial. By embracing the ideals taught in the course, facing his triggers and rebuilding a healthy sense of direction, he was able to connect with humanity and empathy — feelings that had once been out of reach.

“A lot of times in the past when I started my criminal lifestyle, I was thinking, ‘What can I get out of, what can I leverage this person for?’ But now my purpose is to share this story and bring life to this program and how it has shifted my mindset,” shared Stevenson. “It’s helped change the culture of prison politics.”

His transformation reflects a main tenet of the program: service to others. Giving back is deeply woven into the course, and participants often carry what they’ve learned into spaces beyond the chapel.

“The way (Choices for Life) helps me is, in order for me to keep what I have, I gotta give it away,” said Paul Moreno, who has been attending since 2018. “So whatever I learn in this group, I share with other men in other groups. And they get nuggets, they get a sense of the ‘aha moments.’”

Moreno came to realize that instead of taking from others, he could choose to give, a shift that led him into deeper introspection. “It’s kind of hard for a lot of us who have lost our spirituality, or who have put it in the back burner, to grasp it,” he said. “(The class) makes me wanna be more in tune with my higher power.”

As he continued to attend and share what he learned with his loved ones, it was not only a spiritual change, but a physical one, as his mother noticed a difference in his demeanor and appearance. Crediting much of his growth to the Choices for Life program, Moreno was granted parole July 3.

## Looking back to move forward

Friedman shared that by the fall of this year, Choices for Life will be expanding to the Correctional Training Facility’s north institution, Salinas Valley State Prison, as well as other prisons in California — and ultimately, to facilities across other states. Additionally, there are plans to double the number of modules of the course and broaden the curriculum to cover more life issues in-depth.

“It is so much more than anything I’ve ever imagined,” Friedman said. “I didn’t come into the prison work thinking that anything like this would happen. This is really just one of these cases of following God’s lead and He puts you where He wants you and you just make

sure to do the best you can. ... It's a tremendous blessing and blessings come with tremendous obligation."

For Friedman, this mission was built upon the teachings of his and his father's mentor, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, widely known as the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who believed that nobody is beyond our obligation to reach out to and even the most isolated deserve attention and support. It was his vision that first motivated this work and inspired all the outreach in the prison system. Building on that vision, Choices for Life hopes to eventually empower former and even current incarcerated individuals to teach the course to their peers.

"Even if I'm not paroled, I still have purpose here," Stevenson said. "There's a lot of good that has been happening here and can continue to happen. I'm incarcerated, but I am being a productive citizen from in here."

To learn more about Choices for Life, visit [mychoicesforlife.com](https://mychoicesforlife.com).