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Andrew Cuomo, Governor  
State Capital  
Albany, New York 12224

RE: Helping Richard Berger #86-C-0790, to receive Commutation from your office.

Dear Governor Cuomo,

I am writing this letter to you, in hope of helping Richard Berger get out of prison! Currently, Richard is in Sullivan Correctional Facility, and is serving a fifty plus year to life sentence! Just those numbers boggle my mind.

I was once in prison myself, although it was for a short period, Richard has been in prison for over 26 (twenty-six) years. In fact, this past summer he finished half of the minimum required sentence. For awhile now, as a volunteer for one of the Jewish Organizations (L'a'surim), I go see men and women in prison, as a form of Chessed (kindness). Some of them I just talk with, some I learn Torah with, some get to offload their troubles and gripes on an attentive ear. I am there for them.

When I started going to New York State prisons, I was told about a man (he is approximately my age) who was different from the rest. I was in prison, so naturally, I was skeptical. However, I went to meet this gentleman, and I was pleasantly surprised. I actually found a MENTSCH! (Jewish word that has many connotations, but in this case really meant a kind and caring soul)

I have had the chance now, to visit with Richard many times since then, and I truly find his spirits remarkable! There isn't really any other way to put it. He has done more than half of his life sentence in prison. He came in at 24, and he is now 51. He has lost quite a few members of his family during the years he's been in prison, including all of his grandparents, and almost all of his great aunts and uncles. This past spring, his father died, and he was really affected by it.

I know I am only one of many that come to see him, but his attitude and mien, really make people step back and look at him again. One would never think that he has been in prison this long. He studies, learns, programs, and talks with knowledge that is current and up to date. He's familiar with what's going on in this world and of course his surroundings. He puts himself out in the way he asks if he can be of help, not just to me, but to all his visitors. He really cares about the people who come to visit him, and we too, have come to care about him!

I spoke with one of the Rabbi's who goes to visit Richard, and asked what I can do to help him get out of prison? He answered me about this program, Commutation of Sentence, that you administer and I wanted to make sure that my views were heard.

Richard puts a lot of time and effort into charity organizations, but he does so much more! He's involved helping other inmates as well! They have program in prison, call AVP (Alternative to Violence), that holds seminars over three days, that teach people how to deal with their anger and frustrations in prison. This is a prisoner point of view, based on the teachings that they are taught by Quaker's (an outside group that volunteers to help stop Violence and Aggression) local affiliate. Richard has learned from them, and advanced in their teachings, enough to become an facilitator for them and now teaches these groups as well. Richard has been doing this since 1991! I called the Counselors Unit at Green Haven CF, the prison where Richard was housed at the time of our conversation, and she confirmed that Richard did indeed have dozens of these workshops under his belt, and that he has received his facilitator status for that group.

At first I felt it incredulous that someone with all this time in prison would still have the verve and push to do all these things, and to help others who need it. Here was a man who, has all his time in, and still has all the time to go, helping others who haven't been able to help themselves!

But, as I got to know Richard, I saw this was just the type of person he was! He is gentle and caring, not only for other Jewish people, but for all those who want to help themselves, to better themselves, and who want to try and get out of prison.

Rabbi Chill, who was the Rabbi at Green Haven, showed me a letter he had written a few years ago, on Richard's behalf, and I saw that my views were also noted by him. He said there were plenty of people who had the same feelings, and that they too, were writing to you on Richard's behalf.

I cannot tell you the varying subjects that we've spoken on, nor on his knowledge of them, as I have never been able to plumb the depths of his mind. He has been a wonder to me, and to the fellow volunteers that I have met, who go to see him.

But I have spoken to him about a possible release, and what he might do? Richard wants to finish his schooling, both in the secular education field (where he is only 33 credits short of a Bachelors Degree) and in the religious field, where although he does not want to be a Rabbi, he would like to get back into being conversant in Hebrew and possible Yiddish. I have had a chance to meet some of Richard's family members, and I see that they are all behind him and support him in every way possible.

Richard is not the same person that he was those twenty-six (26) year plus years ago! He is now a middle aged man who can only help and better any situation he finds himself in. He would not be any problem to anyone if released. He would certainly not violate and parole or community restrictions placed upon him, and wouldn't need to be a burden on the community! Not any community, as his family has said they would support whatever field he would be allowed to follow, whether it is schooling or working, they would sponsor it. He would not be on any public assistance programs, and he would be an asset to whatever community he would be allowed to go to.

I have had many hours talking and conversing with him. I am sure that if you did, you'd see what I see, and would commute his sentence.

I don't want you to think I am soft on crime, because everyone must take responsibility for their actions! But there is a difference between retribution and rehabilitation, (I believe I saw this in one of the letters I read), and I believe that after twenty-six (26) plus years, that Richard has shown that he is and has changed!

Commutation gives Richard a chance to show that he has changed for the better, and also allows the State Government to show that rehabilitation works!

If you have any question, please feel free to call me and discuss them. Richard truly deserves a chance to show you that he has been rehabilitated, and will live a life without any problems and that he will not fall into or between the cracks that so many often do.

Very Sincerely,

Isaac Itzkowitz

Cc: Francis J. Herman  
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