

## July 22nd, 2023 Shabbat Hazon: Reimagining Communities Sermon & Study Toolkit T'ruah Boston Cluster & #NoNewWomensPrison Campaign



### Introduction: Why focus on Reimagining Communities this Shabbat?

“Come, let us reach an understanding,  
—says GOD.  
Be your sins like crimson,  
They can turn snow-white;  
Be they red as dyed wool,  
They can become like fleece.” - Isaiah 1:18

On Shabbat Hazon, from the final and hardest of the three prophetic rebukes of unethical behavior that precede Tisha b'Av, we dare to envision a better world. We lament historical Jewish and human conditions of exile, of families scattered and houses destroyed. Guided by the words of the Prophet Isaiah ([Isaiah 1:1-27](#)) as our Haftarah for the day, we affirm the potential and power of teshuvah, restorative justice, and commit to turning away from unjust and oppressive exercises of power over one another.

Reimagining Communities is the work of making Isaiah's words real for our Massachusetts community. Incarcerating women and girls denies the power of teshuvah and puts substantial roadblocks — emotional, physical and financial — in the way of the work of teshuvah. Incarceration divides and scatters families. Incarceration destroys the functioning of homes. Reimagining Communities calls our elected officials, legislators and state administration to invest in measures that help communities thrive and decrease the factors that lead to incarceration in the first place. Investments in housing, childcare, healthcare, access to food, and universal basic income make our communities safer and honor the dignity of each person in them. To build up community health and capacity, rather than to jail and harm individuals, is deeply Jewish work. It is all of our work. It is T'ruah's work.

On this Shabbat Hazon, support your community to envision a world made whole by the decarceration of women and girls. Through divrei Torah, personal reflection and testimony, text study, discussion, messages to our communities, and more, we can face incarceration, and our part in it, in all its stark injustice. Together, we can direct our steps and our efforts to building up healthy homes and paths, not prison walls.

**This toolkit for Shabbat Hazon: Reimagining Communities includes:**

- [Background on the #NoNewWomen'sPrison Campaign & Reimagining Communities Work](#) from our partners at Families for Justice As Healing (FJAH)
- [Text sources and starter questions](#), for use in your sermons, text studies and community messages, that help apply Jewish values to decarceration and reimagining communities
  - [Matir Asurim](#) (God as Freer of the Imprisoned)
  - [Tzelem Elohim](#) (in the image of God) & [V'ahavta L'rei'acha Kamocho](#) (You shall love your neighbour as yourself)
  - [Teshuvah](#) (repentance/restitution) & [Rachamim](#) (mercy/clemency)
  - [Kavod HaB'riyot](#) (human dignity)
- [Guidance and prompts for inviting personal reflection and testimony](#) on the experience & effects of incarceration on individuals and families
- [Additional resources](#), of Jewish texts and for you to explore

*This toolkit was put together by Cantor Vera Broekhuysen, with resources compiled from Rabbi Becky Silverstein, Rabbi Jim Morgan, and Rabbi Shahar Colt. Information on the #NoNewWomensPrison campaign is from resources put together by Families for Justice as Healing.*

## **Background on the #NoNewWomen'sPrison Campaign and Reimagining Communities Work:**



MA is in the planning stages for a new \$50 million women's prison project which is intended to replace MCI Framingham, the current women's state prison. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women are leading opposition to this project, and want elected officials to use their power to release women and resource communities rather than build jails and prisons. In addition to passing a 5 year moratorium on new prison and jail construction, this includes decriminalization of drugs and sex work, diversion, community-based sentencing, parole, expanding medical parole, establishing elder parole, and clemency.

The same women leading the fight against the new prison (in organizations Families for Justice as Healing and The National Council) are also leading organizing efforts in MA communities most impacted by incarceration that they call Reimagining Communities. With limited resources, women are implementing community-based solutions to interrupt cycles of incarceration, including a community pantry, a Guaranteed Basic Income project for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, a Guaranteed Basic Housing program, transformative justice work, community-led crisis response, and Participatory Defense for community members navigating the justice system. Formerly incarcerated people lead projects all across the Commonwealth to meet people's needs, create healing and accountability, and to interrupt cycles of violence. They are asking that MA invest in these solutions — not more incarceration.



To get involved, check out the [Massachusetts Moratorium Action Guide](#), which is kept updated with current campaign priorities. Currently, the top ask is to call Governor Maura Healey's office and leave a message using a short script. The Guide also includes more information about current policy priorities.

[You can also see and sign up for upcoming campaign events here.](#) If you would like to host campaign activities, political education, or have campaign leaders speak in your community, reach out to Michaela at [mcaplan@truah.org](mailto:mcaplan@truah.org). This campaign is a priority for the MA T'ruah Cluster. If you have questions about the campaign or T'ruah's involvement, you can also reach out to MA T'ruah campaign co-chairs – Rabbi Leora Abelson ([rabbileora@gmail.com](mailto:rabbileora@gmail.com)) and Rabbi Mimi Micner ([mimi.micner@gmail.com](mailto:mimi.micner@gmail.com)).

**Learn more about The National Council and Families for Justice as Healing at  
[nonewomensprison.org](http://nonewomensprison.org)**

## Jewish Text Sources

### Matir Asurim — Freeing the Prisoner

*Compiled by Rabbi Jim Morgan*

#### Leviticus 24:11-12

(11) The son of the Israelite woman pronounced the Name in blasphemy, and he was brought to Moses—now his mother's name was Shelomith daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan— (12) and he was placed in custody, until the decision of יהוה should be made clear to them.

#### ויקרא כ"ד:י"א-י"ב

(יא) וַיִּקְבַּח בְּנוֹתְהָאִשָּׁה הַיִּשְׂרָאֵלִית אֶת־הַשֵּׁם וַיִּקְלָל וַיִּבְיֵאוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְנָשָׂא אִמּוֹ שְׁלֹמִית בַּת־דִּבְרִי לְמִטְהַדָּן: (יב) וַיִּנְחְלוּהוּ בַמִּשְׁמֶר לְפָרֹשׁ לָהֶם עַל־פִּי יְהוָה: {פ}

This passage is one of the few places in Torah (or the whole Bible) that refers to incarceration. Why might that be so? What are other options for punishing a wrongdoer (whether in Jewish tradition or elsewhere)? What are other options for holding people accountable for their actions? What are other options for allowing people to make *teshuvah* (atonement/return) from their mistakes? What does this passage suggest about the Torah's vision for the world?

#### Psalms 146:5-9

(5) Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in יהוה his God, (6) maker of heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; (7) who secures justice for those who are wronged, gives food to the hungry. יהוה sets prisoners free; (8) יהוה restores sight to the blind; יהוה makes those who are bent stand straight; יהוה loves the righteous; (9) יהוה watches over the stranger; He gives courage to the orphan and widow, but makes the path of the wicked tortuous.

#### תהילים קמ"ו:ה'-ט'

(ה) אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁאֵל יַעֲקֹב בְּעֶזְרוֹ שִׁבְרוּ עַל־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו: (ו) עֲשָׂה וְשָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם הַשֶּׁמַיִם אָמַת לְעוֹלָם: (ז) עֲשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וְלַעֲשׂוּקִים נִתָּן לֶחֶם לְרַעֲבִים יְהוָה מַתִּיר אֲסוּרִים: (ח) יְהוָה וּפָקַח עֵינָיו יְהוָה נִקְרָא כְּפוֹפִים יְהוָה אֹהֵב צְדִיקִים: (ט) יְהוָה וְשֹׁמֵר אֶת־גְּדֵרֵם יְתוֹם וְאִלְמָנָה יַעֲזֹד וְדַרְךְ רָשָׁעִים יַעֲוֶת:

These attributes of God are among those that we see throughout the prayer book (in the Morning Blessings, in Nishmat Kol Hai, in the Amidah, etc.). Why are these particular attributes repeated so often? What do they say about the kind of world the Torah envisions? What is the difference between "making the path of the wicked tortuous" and "punishing the wicked"? How might this inform our vision of "criminal" justice?

**Isaiah 42:5-7**

(5) Thus said יהוה God, Who created the heavens and stretched them out, Who spread out the earth and what it brings forth, Who gave breath to the people upon it And life to those who walk thereon: (6) I GOD, in My grace, have summoned you, And I have grasped you by the hand. I created you, and appointed you a covenant people, a light of nations — (7) Opening eyes deprived of light, Rescuing prisoners from confinement, From the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

**ישעיהו מ"ב:ה'-ז'**

(ה) כֹּה־אָמַר הָאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה בּוֹרֵא הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנוֹטִיחֵם רֶקַע הָאָרֶץ וְצֹאצְאֵיהָ נִתְּנוּ נְשָׁמָה לְעַם עֲלֵיהָ וְרוּחַ לְהִלְכֵם בָּהֶּ: (ו) אֲנִי יְהוָה קָרָאתִיךָ בְּצִדְקָה וְאַתְּנִיחֶנּוּ בְּיָדֶךָ וְאַצְרִיךָ וְאַתְּנֶנֶּה לְבְרִית עִם לְאוּר גּוֹיִם: (ז) לְפָקֹחַ עֵינָיִם עֲוֹרוֹת לְהוֹצִיא מִמַּסְגַּר אֲסִיר מִבַּיִת כְּלֹא לְשָׁבִי הַתְּשֻׁבָּה:

These verses are the beginning of the Haftarah for Parashat Bereishit--the stories of the creation of the world and of all humanity. Why does Isaiah (and, by extension, do the rabbis) link Israel's specific mission to a statement of God's creation of the entire world? Why are the tasks in verse 7 the ones that take precedence over all others? What does this say about Isaiah's vision for the world we live in? How does it inform our attitude towards incarceration?

**Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 8:10**

(10) The redemption of captives receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. [Indeed,] there is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives. For a captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, and unclothed and he is in mortal peril. If someone pays no attention to his redemption, he violates

**משנה תורה, הלכות מתנות עניים ח"י:**

(י) פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים קוֹדֵם לְפָרִנְסַת עֲנִיִּים וְלְכִסּוּתָן. וְאִין לָהּ מְצוּהָ גְדוּלָה כְּפְדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים שֶׁהַשְּׁבוּי הָרִי הוּא בְּכָלֵל הָרַעֲבִים וְהַצְּמָאִים וְעֲרוּמִים וְעוֹמֵד בְּסַכַּנַּת נַפְשׁוֹת. וְהַמַּעֲלִים עֵינָיו מִפְּדִיּוֹנוֹ הָרִי זֶה עוֹבֵר עַל (דְּבָרִים טו ז) "לֹא תֵאֱמָץ אֶת לְבָבְךָ וְלֹא תִקְפֹּץ אֶת יָדְךָ" וְעַל (וִיקְרָא יט טז) "לֹא תַעֲמֵד עַל דַּם רַעֲךָ" וְעַל (וִיקְרָא כה ג) "

the negative commandments: "Do not harden your heart or close your hand" (Deuteronomy 15:7, "Do not stand by when the blood of your neighbor is in danger" (Leviticus 19:16, and "He shall not oppress him with exhausting work in your presence" (*ibid.* 25:53). And he has negated the observance of the positive commandments: "You shall certainly open up your hand to him" (Deuteronomy 15:8, "And your brother shall live with you" (*ibid.* 19:18), "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18, "Save those who are taken for death" (Proverbs 24:11, and many other decrees of this nature. There is no mitzvah as great as the redemption of captives.

"לא ירדנו בקָרָה לְעֵינֶיךָ". וּבִטֵּל מִצְוֹת (דברים טו ח) (דברים טו יא) "פְּתַח תִּפְתַּח אֶת יָדְךָ לוֹ". וּמִצְוֹת (ויקרא כה לו) "וְחִי אָחִיךָ עִמָּךְ". (ויקרא יט יח) "וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרַעַבְךָ כָּמוֹךָ". (משלי כד יא) "וְהִצַּל לְקַחְתֶּם לְמֹת" וְהִרְבֵּה דְבָרִים כְּאֵלוֹ. וְאִין לָהּ מִצְוָה רַבָּה כְּפִדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים:

This source, along with the others on this sheet, are for your future reference and ongoing study. I will just mention here that Maimonides seems to be following Isaiah in proclaiming that redeeming the captive is the greatest mitzvah, although he is more explicitly following Baba Batra 8b and Jeremiah (see below). One question I have is to what degree we can equate *matir asurim* (freeing the prisoner--Isaiah's language) with *pidyon shevuyim* (redeeming captives--Baba Batra's and Jeremiah's language). Is there, for example, a sense in which a "prisoner" is somehow responsible for some offense while a "captive" is a blameless victim? If so, why would Isaiah and the Psalmist focus on the prisoner rather than the captive?

**Bava Batra 8b:1-4**

**Redeeming captives is a great mitzva. Rava said to Rabba bar Mari: Concerning this matter that the Sages stated, that redeeming captives is a great mitzva, from where is it derived? Rabba bar Mari said to him: As it is written: "And it shall come to pass, when they say to you: To where shall we depart? Then you shall tell them: So says the Lord: Such as are**

**בבא בתרא ח' ב:א'-ד'**

כְּפִדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים מִצְוָה רַבָּה הִיא אָמַר לִיה רַבָּא לְרַבָּה בַר מַרִי מְנָא הָא מִילְתָּא דְאָמֹר רַבְּנָן דְּכְפִדְיוֹן שְׁבוּיִים מִצְוָה רַבָּה הִיא אָמַר לִיה דְּכִתִּיב וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֵלֶיךָ אָנָּה נֵצֵא וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלֵיהֶם כֹּה אָמַר ה' אֲשֶׁר לְמֹת לְמֹת וְאֲשֶׁר לְחֶרֶב וְאֲשֶׁר לְחֶרֶב לְרַעֲב וְאֲשֶׁר לְרַעֲב וְאֲשֶׁר לְשָׂבִי לְשָׂבִי וְאֲמַר רַבִּי יוֹחֲנָן

**for death, to death; and such as are for the sword, to the sword; and such as are for famine, to famine; and such as are for captivity, to captivity”** (Jeremiah 15:2). **And Rabbi Yoḥanan says: Whichever punishment is written later in this verse is more severe than the one before it.** Rabbi Yoḥanan explains: **The sword is worse than death. If you wish, say** that this is learned from a **verse; if you wish, say** instead that it is derived by way of **logical reasoning. If you wish, say** that this is derived by way of **logical reasoning: This punishment, i.e., death by sword, mutilates the body, but that punishment, i.e., natural death, does not mutilate it. And if you wish, say** that the fact that the sword is worse than death is learned from a **verse: “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His pious ones”** (Psalms 116:15). **Famine is worse than the sword. If you wish, say** that this is derived by way of **logical reasoning: This one, who dies of famine, suffers greatly before departing from this world, but that one, who dies by the sword, does not suffer. If you wish, say** instead that the fact that famine is worse than the sword is learned from a **verse: “More fortunate were the victims of the sword than the victims of famine”** (Lamentations 4:9). **And captivity is worse than all of them, as it includes all of them, i.e., famine, the sword, and death.**

כָּל הַמְּאוּחָר בְּפֶסוּק זֶה קִשָּׁה מִחֲבִירוֹ חָרַב  
 קִשָּׁה מִמָּוֶת אִי בְּעֵית אֵימָא קָרָא וְאִי בְּעֵית  
 אֵימָא סְבָרָא אִי בְּעֵית אֵימָא סְבָרָא הָאִי קָא  
 מִיַּנְוּוּל וְהָאִי לָא קָא מִיַּנְוּוּל וְאִי בְּעֵית אֵימָא  
 קָרָא יְקָר בְּעֵינֵי ה' הַמָּוֶתָה לְחֻסְדֵּי רָעַב  
 קִשָּׁה מִחָרַב אִי בְּעֵית אֵימָא סְבָרָא הָאִי קָא  
 מִצְטַעַר וְהָאִי לָא קָא מִצְטַעַר אִי בְּעֵית אֵימָא  
 קָרָא טוֹבִים הָיוּ חֲלָלֵי חָרַב מִחֲלָלֵי רָעַב  
 שָׁבִי [קִשָּׁה מְכוּלָם] דְּכוּלְהוּ אֵיתְנָהוּ בֵּיהּ:



**Jeremiah 15:2**

(2) And if they ask you, 'To what shall we go forth?' answer them, 'Thus said GOD: Those destined for the plague, to the plague; Those destined for the sword, to the sword; Those destined for famine, to famine; Those destined for captivity, to captivity.'

**ירמיהו ט"ו:ב'**

(ב) וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֵלַיךָ אַנְּהָ נֵצֵא וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵיהֶם כֹּה־אָמַר יְהוָה אֱשֶׁר לַמָּוֹת לַמָּוֹת וְאֱשֶׁר לַחֶרֶב לַחֶרֶב וְאֱשֶׁר לָרָעַב לָרָעַב וְאֱשֶׁר לְשָׁבִי לְשָׁבִי:

**Berakhot 54b:12**

**Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Four must offer thanks to God with a thanks-offering and a special blessing. They are: Seafarers, those who walk in the desert, and one who was ill and recovered, and one who was incarcerated in prison and went out.** All of these appear in the verses of a psalm (Psalms 107).

**ברכות נ"ד ב"י"ב**

אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: אַרְבָּעָה צָרִיכִין לַהֲדוּת: יוֹרְדֵי הַיָּם, הוֹלְכֵי מִדְּבָרוֹת, וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חוֹלָה וְנִתְרַפָּא, וּמִי שֶׁהָיָה חֲבוּשׁ בְּבֵית הָאֲסוּרִים וַיֵּצֵא.

**Psalms 107:8-10**

(8) Let them praise יהוה for His steadfast love, His wondrous deeds for mankind; (9) for He has satisfied the thirsty, filled the hungry with all good things. (10) Some lived in deepest darkness, bound in cruel irons...

**תהילים ק"ז:ח-י'**

(ח) יוֹדוּ לַיהוָה חֲסֵדוֹ וְנִפְלְאוֹתָיו לְבָנֵי אָדָם: (ט) כִּי־הִשְׂבִּיעַ גִּבְשׁ שִׁקְקָה וְגִבְשׁ רָעֵבָה מִלֵּא־טוֹב: (י) יִשְׁבִי חֹשֶׁךְ וְצַלְמוֹת אֲסִירֵי עֲנִי וּבְרִזָּל:

## **Tzelem Elohim — Made in God's Image & V'ahavta L'rayecha Kamocho — Love your Neighbor**

*Source Sheet by Rabbi Shahar Colt*

### Questions:

- Why is it in our interest to find our ability to love/see the humanity in our neighbors who are not “like us”?
- Where and how have we/do we uphold boundaries between ourselves and prisoners? Their families and loved ones? Where do we/have we/could we extend our love beyond people “like us”?
- How do the following texts push us to take seriously and personally the obligation to support these abolitionist legislative priorities?

### **Leviticus 19:18**

(18) You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow [Israelite] as yourself: I am יהוה.

**ויקרא י"ט:י"ח**

(יח) לֹא־תִקֹּם וְלֹא־תִטַּר אֶת־כְּנִי עִמּוֹ  
וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמֹדֶךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

### **Rashi on Leviticus 19:18:2**

(2) YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF  
—Rabbi Akiba said: “This is a fundamental principle of the Torah”  
(Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 4 12; Talmud Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:3).

**רש"י על ויקרא י"ט:י"ח:ב'**

(ב) וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמֹדֶךָ. אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא  
זֶה כְּלָל גָּדוֹל בַּתּוֹרָה (ספרא):

Excerpt from *What We Can be Certain of Even in Uncertain Times: Using the New Year to Find our Inner Voice*, Rabba Yaffa Epstein Sept. 3, 2020

“Rabbi Jeffrey Cohen, in his book *Prayer and Penitence*, explains...there is ... a *Kol Demama Daka* – a **silent** voice, representing the Divine within each one of us. The inherent *Tzelem Elohim* – Human dignity that each one of us carries. This voice calls to us differently. It asks us to believe that we are worthy of compassion, and love,

just by being human. We do not have to do or be anything other than who we are.  
**Your Inherent Human Dignity is a Certainty.”**

**From the Kol Nidre liturgy**

With the consent of the Almighty, and  
consent of this congregation, in a  
convocation of the heavenly court, and a  
convocation of the lower court, **we hereby  
grant permission to pray alongside  
(other) criminals.**

*(Translation by Rabbi Shahar Colt)*

עַל דְּעַת הַמָּקוֹם וְעַל דְּעַת הַקָּהָל. בְּיִשְׁיבָה  
נָשָׁל מְעֵלָה, וּבְיִשְׁיבָה נָשָׁל מִטָּה. אָנוּ מִתִּירִין  
לְהִתְפַּלֵּל עִם הַעֲבָרִימִים:

Excerpt from: **“Prisons: A Social Crime and Failure,”** in: Shulman AK, ed, *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1998), 332–46.

Well-meaning persons are now working for a new departure in the prison question—reclamation, to restore once more to the prisoner the possibility of becoming a human being. Commendable as this is, I fear it is impossible to hope for good results from pouring good wine into a musty bottle. Nothing short of a complete reconstruction of society will deliver humankind from the cancer of crime. Still, if the dull edge of our social conscience would be sharpened, the penal institutions might be given a new coat of varnish. But the first step to be taken is the renovation of the social consciousness, which is in a rather dilapidated condition. It is sadly in need to be awakened to the fact that crime is a question of degree, that we all have the rudiments of crime in us, more or less, according to our mental, physical, and social environment; and that the individual criminal is merely a reflex of the tendencies of the aggregate.

**Additional sources on B'tzelem Elohim compiled by Rabbi Becky Silverstein**

*The Torah teaches that all humans were created in God's image. To live this means to seek to find the inherent worth within each person and to work to bring that out. The carceral system is not designed to uplift each other's worth.*

**From *The Jewish Way* by Rabbi Irving Greenberg**

"Because Humans are the image of God they are endowed by their creator with three intrinsic dignities: infinite value, equality, and uniqueness."

**Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5**

It was for this reason that man was first created as one person [Adam], to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and anyone who saves a life is as if he saved an entire world...

And also, to promote peace among the creations, that no person can say to their friend, "My ancestors are greater than yours."...

And also, to express the grandeur of The Holy One: For a person prints many coins from the same mold, and all the coins are alike. But the King, the King of Kings, The Holy One, imprints every person from the cloth of the first person, and yet no human is quite like their friend. Therefore, every person must say, "For my sake the world was created."

*(Translation by Rabbi Becky Silverstein)*

**משנה סנהדרין ד':ה'**

לְפִיכֹה נִבְרָא אָדָם יְחִידִי, לְלַמְדָּהּ, שְׁפָל  
הַמְאֵבֵד נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו  
הַכְּתוּב כְּאֵלוֹ אֵבֵד עוֹלָם מְלֵא. וְכֹל הַמְקַיֵּם  
נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל, מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכְּתוּב  
כְּאֵלוֹ קַיֵּם עוֹלָם מְלֵא. וּמִפְּנֵי שְׁלוֹם  
הַבְּרִיּוֹת, שְׁלֵא יֵאמֶר אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ אָבָא גְדוֹל  
מֵאַבְיָה... וְלִהְגִיד גְּדֻלָּתוֹ שֶׁל הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ  
הוּא, שְׁאָדָם טוֹבֵעַ כְּמָה מְטַבְּעוֹת בְּחוֹתָם  
אֶחָד וְכֵלֶן דּוֹמִין זֶה לְזֶה, וּמְלֵךְ מְלֵכֵי  
הַמְּלָכִים הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא טַבֵּעַ כָּל אָדָם  
בְּחוֹתָמוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָרֵאשׁוֹן וְאֵין אֶחָד מֵהֶן  
דּוֹמֵה לְחֵבְרוֹ. לְפִיכֹה כָּל אֶחָד וְאֶחָד חַיֵּב  
לוֹמֵר, בְּנִשְׁבִּילִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם.

## On Teshuvah & Rachamim — Repentance and Mercy

### Isaiah 1:18

(18) “Come, let us reach an understanding,  
—says GOD.  
Be your sins like crimson,  
They can turn snow-white;  
Be they red as dyed wool,  
They can become like fleece.”

### ישעיהו א':י"ח

(יח) לכו־נא וְנִזְכְּרָה יִאמַר יְהוָה אֶם־יְהִי־ו  
חַטָּאֵיכֶם כַּשָּׁנִים כַּשֶּׁלֶג יִלְפִינוּ אֶם־יֵאָדְמוּ  
כַתּוֹלָע כַּצֹּמֶר יְהִי־ו:

"**Olam Hadash: Towards a Jewish Theology of Abolition,**" by Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari  
<https://www.kol-tzedek.org/olam-hadash.html>

At the heart of a Jewish theology of abolition is the knowing that *teshuvah* is always possible. In the years when I worked as a prison chaplain, the most common longing of the men I had the privilege to study Torah with was to change, was to be given a chance to do things differently. Which is nearly impossible in prison.

What the path of *teshuvah* makes clear is that real change requires human relationship. Not solitary confinement, not being cut off from your children, your family, your friends. Not being moved around from state to state.

*Teshuvah* offers a radically different model of justice because of its insistent emphasis on restoring both relationship and property whenever possible. The Path of *Teshuvah* is fundamentally a path of restorative justice rather than punishment.

*Teshuva, the opportunity to atone for and to learn and grow from our missteps, is foundational to how the world was created.*

### Pesachim 54a:8

Wasn't it taught in a *baraita*: Seven phenomena were created before the world was created, and they are: Torah, and **repentance**, and the Garden of Eden, and Gehenna, and the Throne of Glory, and the Temple, and the name of Messiah.

### פסחים נ"ד א:ח'

וְהָא תְּנִינָא: שְׁבַע דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ קוּדְם  
שֶׁנִּבְרָא הָעוֹלָם, וְאֵלוּ הֵן: תּוֹרָה, וּתְשׁוּבָה, וְגַן  
עֵדֶן, וְגֵיהֶנָם, וְכֶסֶף הַכְּבוֹד, וּבֵית הַמְּקֻדָּשׁ,  
וְשֵׁמוֹ שֶׁל מְשִׁיחַ.

*Teshuva, as a process, deepens a person's experience of being human.*

**Berakhot 34b:22**

**As Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where penitents stand, even the full-fledged righteous do not stand.** In other words, a person who has done *teshuvah* is even more righteous than a righteous person who did not err to begin with!

**ברכות ל"ד ב:כ"ב**

דאמר רבי אבהו: מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין — צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין

***On Rachamim, or clemency:*** God's potential as ultimate authority figure to forgive, which we shouldn't undermine, and which our elected officials can emulate

**Psalms 32:1**

(1) Of David. A *maskil*.  
Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered over.

**תהילים ל"ב:א'**

(א) לְדָוִד מְשֻׁכָּל אֲשֶׁרִי גָשׁוּי־פָּנָשׁ עַכְסוּי חֲטָאָה:

**Psalms 79:8**

(8) Do not hold our former iniquities against us; let Your compassion come swiftly toward us, for we have sunk very low.

**תהילים ע"ט:ח'**

(ח) אַל־תִּזְכְּרֵנוּ לְנוֹ עֲוֹנוֹת רַאשֵׁינוּ מִהָרַק יִקְדְּמוּנוּ רַחֲמֶיךָ כִּי דָלּוּנוּ מְאֹד:

## **Kavod HaB'riyot (human dignity) text sources for Jewish decarceration advocacy**

*Upholding human dignity is so important that we do so even if doing so means overturning the very core of our values system (Torah)*

**Berakhot 19b:9**

**Come and hear: Great is human dignity, as it overrides a prohibition in the Torah.**

**ברכות י"ט ב:ט'**

**תא שמע: גדול כבוד הבריות שדוחה [את]  
לא תעשה שבתורה.**

## Guidance and prompts for inviting personal reflection and testimony

Hearing and sharing personal testimony about the experience and effects of incarceration can be powerful as you and your community discuss decarceration and teshuvah, and explore the #NoNewWomen'sPrison campaign.

**Proceed with respect and caution:** Incarceration is a trauma in the life of an individual and their family. People may additionally feel deep shame about personal histories of incarceration, because of social attitudes towards incarceration and because of its traumatic effects in the lives of current or previously incarcerated people and their loved ones, including but not limited to decreased employment and housing opportunities, adverse health effects, and negative social stigma. Community discussions of incarceration and decarceration may bring up experiences that directly affected people are not comfortable sharing; community discussions may also open opportunities for them to share, privately or publicly, for the first time. Be ready to support any choice about communication that a currently or previously incarcerated person or their loved one makes.

If you make an invitation for public sharing, also include invitations for private reflection and 1:1 confidential sharing with you, as their clergy. Remind folks to share only their own story (or stories that they have permission to share). If you invite people to share in real time in a group, where anonymity is not possible, establish confidentiality and other ground rules for vulnerable conversations. Consider also naming explicitly common societal biases about justice-affected people: societal messaging often portrays justice-affected people as criminals, dishonest, unreliable, unstable, or generally “bad”. Lastly, remind people that language matters: use “formerly incarcerated” or “incarcerated people,” not “criminals” or “inmates”.

Consider creating opportunities for anonymous sharing (public or private) such as

- An online GoogleDoc or jamboard where folks can post their stories
- A physical poster board (placed where folks can access it privately) with markers, post-its, &tc
- An old-fashioned letterbox in your building for anonymous testimonies, with the option to have them shared or not shared with the community



**Questions and prompts:**

- Do you personally know someone who is currently or formerly incarcerated? (Do not identify the person without their permission)
  - What led to their incarceration?
  - What words do they use to describe their experience of incarceration?
  - What effect has the experience of incarceration had on their life?
  - How has it affected their family and community?
- What assumptions do/might you make about why a person is or was incarcerated?
- If you have not been incarcerated, do you think you might ever experience incarceration? Why or why not? What assumptions underlie your answer?
- Have you ever had a time in your life when you were prevented from contacting your loved ones? When you were unable to see them in person? What did that feel like? How did it affect you?

**Additional Resources:**

- [Handbook for Jewish Communities Fighting Mass Incarceration](#)
- [“A Torah Perspective on Incarceration as a Modality of Punishment and Rehabilitation”](#) by Rabbi Sholom D. Lipskar
- [Prison moratorium one-pager](#)
- [Moratorium Policy Memo](#)
- [Jail and Prison Construction Moratorium Bill - Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Two-pager about the Elder Parole Legislation](#)
- [Creating Meaningful Public Safety: A Briefing on the Massachusetts Department of Correction](#)
- [Alternatives to Incarceration Graphic](#)
- [From Incarceration to Community: Alternatives for Women - Event hosted by Congregation Dorshei Tzedek](#). The panel included Angie Jefferson, who was incarcerated for 31 years and persevered through immense challenges (and completed every program available to her at MCI Framingham); her daughter Shanita Jefferson, who helped Ms. Angie earn release and who continues to work with [New Beginnings Reentry Services](#); and [Families for Justice as Healing](#) (FJAH)'s Director of Reimagining Communities, Sashi James, who talked about FJAH's work to reimagine and build community beyond incarceration. All three women are part of the [National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls](#).