

Acknowledgements

What is forgiveness? It is a reckoning with what has happened, so that the person who is harmed feels healed and that those who caused the harm are held accountable. For we who have strayed, it is a process of making right and contending with the harm we have done. As Jews, we struggle—especially on the High Holidays — with making whole that which we have broken. We begin Yom Kippur with the declaration after we recite *Kol Nidrei: VaYomer Adonai, Salakhti kidivarecha*, And God said, I have forgiven you as I said I would. Faced with the choice between justice and mercy, God chooses mercy for us every year, no matter how we have strayed. And in our interactions with our fellow human beings, we mirror God’s choice: we have an obligation to forgive others. An obligation to be merciful.

The United States today faces a deficit of *rachamim*, mercy. Our system of mass incarceration is deeply punitive (with no emphasis on rehabilitation), violent, and racially biased at its core. We have chosen strict justice, leaving families torn apart and communities decimated. Our system of justice is failing so many of us, and so we have an obligation to speak out in favor of mercy and of change. Now is a critical time for us to demand *rachamim* from the country we live in. We are obligated to speak about what is going wrong with our prison system and collectively pledge to take action to make it right.

In pursuit of this goal, T’ruah is honored to share our **Handbook for Jewish Communities Fighting Mass Incarceration**. It contains sermon sparks, Jewish sources, and critical background material on the facts and figures of the American system of mass incarceration, as well as concrete action steps for congregations and individuals. We are challenging rabbis and Jewish activists across the United States to speak out about ending mass incarceration from their pulpits, to call their public officials about pending legislation in their states, to volunteer with incarcerated persons and returning citizens, and to pursue restorative justice and healing for victims of crime.

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Thank you for joining us in the pursuit of human rights and justice,



Rabbi Rachel Kahn-Troster
Director of Programs