

A Jewish Call to Action: Ending Mass Incarceration and Criminalization

The National Jewish Network on Criminal Justice Reform

We, as American Jews, believe in a United States that lives up to its ideals of justice, equity, and dignity for all. We remain committed to actualizing those ideals, which are at the very core of Judaism. We are proud of the American Jewish community's history of fighting for civil rights and an end to racism, but the work is unfinished.

The suffering of millions at the hands of our unjust criminal legal system is one of the most pressing civil rights crises of our time. The United States has become the leading incarcerator in the world and our criminal justice system disproportionately targets and impacts people of color – Black people are five times as likely as whites to be incarcerated. Our punitive system ensnares and disenfranchises many individuals for their entire lives, compounding racial disparities and challenging our country's identity as a multiracial democracy. Mass incarceration harms individuals, the social fabric of communities, and the well-being of democratic society at large.

As American Jews, we are called to action at this critical juncture in American history to confront mass incarceration and mass criminalization. Our Jewish commitments to empathy, mercy, and restorative justice demand that we join in solidarity with our most impacted neighbors to transform our criminal justice system, end systemic racism, and ensure universal access to a life lived in dignity.

We must build upon our legacy by ending today's injustices, including racial injustice, not just in principle but in action.

We must address the systemic racism and racial disparities that manifest in rates of incarceration and all aspects of our criminal justice system.

We must reorient our society toward a preventive, rehabilitative, and restorative justice approach to public safety that respects and protects the humanity of all people.

We must stop criminalizing race, poverty, mental illness, and substance abuse.

We must make our communities safer and more equitable by investing in non-carceral programs and social services, including education, housing, employment, health care, and other public benefits.

We believe that reimagining public safety is essential to creating a just society.

Our Advocacy is Based on Jewish Values

We are guided by our Jewish values and history to center the ethic of restorative justice in matters of wrongdoing and its response, as well as in the governance of a society more broadly. Our Jewish advocacy to advance criminal justice reform is built upon the following principles:

- **Teshuva: Return, Repentance, and Restorative Justice:** Teshuva is the process of redemption by which a person who has committed a wrong returns to the path of righteousness. This process guides us to seek the best solution for everyone involved through the restoration of the individual, meaningful reparation for wrongdoing, and the return of the individual to the community, itself made stronger in the process.
- **B'tzelem Elohim: Everyone is made in the Divine image (Genesis 1:26–27):** Approaches to justice must reflect the Biblical principle that each of us emerged from a common root and a common creator.

- **Destroying a life destroys a world: “When we destroy one person, we destroy an entire universe”** (Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5): Destroying even a single life through the overly punitive criminal justice system as it exists today diminishes a spark of the Divine in our world, and it diminishes the humanity both of those who administer punishment and those who stand idly by. Punishment that destroys life, either literally or through the degradation of human dignity, destroys not just one world, but the worlds of all those whose lives they touched. No human being is disposable.
- **Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof: “Justice, justice you shall pursue”** (Deuteronomy 16:20): The term “justice” (*tzedek*) is repeated to remind us to pursue justice in a just manner. True “justice” cannot be achieved without compassion, mercy, and empathy.
- **Hesed: Balancing justice with kindness:** (Micah 6:8): Generosity of spirit or empathic kindness guides our pursuit of justice. Rather than impose long sentences, and even death penalties, we must remember that walking humbly and ensuring that every human is treated with compassion undergirds our call, as Jews, for justice.
- **V’ahavta L’re’echa Kamocha: “Love your neighbor as yourself”** (Leviticus 19:18): Our society must be built on fairness, justice, love, and respect for not just ourselves but for all people. All aspects of our society and criminal justice system should be based on human dignity.
- **Shtika K’hod’a’ah Dami: “Silence is akin to complicity”** (Talmud Yevamot 87b): Silence in the face of injustice is an active choice—a tacit consent. Allowing injustice to continue unchallenged is, in essence, committing an injustice as well.

We cannot be silent as these values we hold dear are threatened by the inhumanity of mass incarceration and criminalization. As a Jewish community, we must act in accordance with our history, teachings, and traditions to transform our criminal justice systems. Now is the time to act!

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