

## Mass incarceration: A Complicated and Dangerous System

Today, the United States incarcerates more people—both per capita and total—than any other country in the world. This reality has major negative consequences for all of us. Those who are locked up do not participate in economic and communal life, and often have few options upon being released from prison.

Prisons do little to help people develop life or career skills. Since prisons tend to be far away from the places that incarcerated people call home, family members often can't visit, and the relationships that would facilitate a transition back to society fray. Nor does prison end when someone is released. Parole systems, restrictions on returning citizens receiving certain public benefits (like food stamps and housing), and the stigma of admitting to jail time on a job application all conspire to prevent the formerly incarcerated from returning to normal life. Finally, prisons are expensive. We, as taxpayers, pay billions of dollars to keep people locked up, instead of investing in education and opportunity.

This deeply-entrenched situation results from a series of interlocking systems, including police practices that treat predominantly white communities differently than communities of color, the drug war, the lack of opportunity in low-income communities, the rise of for-profit prisons, and rhetoric that emphasizes being “tough on crime” and that exploits our deepest fears. Transforming this complicated system of mass incarceration will require changes in laws and

policies, conditions of imprisonment, and public opinion, as well as major improvements in educational and economic opportunity, and an unlearning of the systemic racism that pervades every aspect of our society.

### Rabbi Hayyim David Halevy: Punishment of Incarceration in *Halakhah*

**“By all opinions, punishment is not a goal unto itself. Rather, it is intended to return the criminal to doing right or “so that they will listen and fear”. What benefit is prison from this perspective? . . .**

**In addition to this, it also causes further harm after his release from prison, after he has completely cut off ties with his community—economic ties, social ties and the like—behold, he is abandoned and neglected in his community, and until he manages to reintegrate himself in the life from which he was cut off, there is serious concern that additional crimes will become his way, in the absence of any other choice. For this reason, the Torah established either banishment to the cities of refuge, or preservation of his life by his own powers, but either way, he can continue his life without disconnecting from his community.”**

**- *Aseh L'kha Rav* 3:57. Rabbi Halevy lived from 1924-1998 and served as Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Tel Aviv from 1973 until his death.**

This all can feel overwhelming! But don't give up. We believe that together—as Jewish community members, rabbis, cantors, and professional leadership—and in partnership with other faith communities, community groups, legal organizations, and the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated themselves, we can begin to make significant change in this system. Thank you for taking a step toward being part of this transformation.

Part I of this handbook gives background on some of the major issues that we encounter when we talk about issues like prisons or the police. This is the place

to turn to understand the basics at a glance, and to know where to look for more information or to find partners.

Part II offers a wealth of Jewish resources that will help you and your community learn from millennia of Jewish wisdom on how we respond to crime and to criminals, to find inspiration in the texts of our tradition, and to mobilize Jewish communities around incarceration as a Jewish issue. Part III presents suggestions for concrete ways you, your family, your friends, and your community can take action to change our system of mass incarceration.