

Summing Up

The mass incarceration system intersects and interlocks with issues that include mental and physical health, housing, education, employment opportunities, family and community circumstances, and race. At times, it can feel like this work cannot possibly move forwards without a total reworking of American society.

And yet, Gottschalk warns us not to succumb to this thinking. She opens her conclusion as follows:

We need to resist the belief that the only way to raze the carceral state is to tackle the “root causes” of crime... If the aim is to slash the country’s incarceration rate and undo its harmful collateral consequences over the next few years, not the next few decades, the root causes approach to progressive penal reform, however well-intentioned, is shortsighted. Four decades ago, the United States had many of the same structural problems it has today—though not to the same degree—but it did not have such an expansive penal system.⁴⁸³

We can understand this focus—on specific policy issues, rather than getting bogged down in the whole morass of social ills—through the lens of Torah. Regarding the seven-year cycle of releasing debts (*shmita*), the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 15) offers us what looks like a contradiction:

⁴⁸³ Gottschalk, p. 258.

1 Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts... 4 There shall be no needy among you — since the Lord your God will bless you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion — 5 if only you heed the Lord your God and take care to keep all this Instruction that I enjoin upon you this day. 6 For the Lord your God will bless you... 7 If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your

needy kinsman. 8 Rather, you must open your hand and lend him sufficient for whatever he needs... 11 For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land.

How can it be that both “There shall be no needy among you” and “There will never cease to be needy ones in

your land”? Perhaps this text teaches that there will always be injustice of one sort or another in our society—that is simply the nature of our broken world. That, however, does not absolve us from pursuing specific advocacy goals that can reshape society in tangible, concrete ways with benefits for all of us, incarcerated and not. If we do as much as we are able to take the “mass” out of mass incarceration—to bring American policies back in line with the rest of the western world—perhaps we will earn God’s blessing and be taken the rest of the way.



Detail from “P.I.C.T.U.R.E.S PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: TYRANNY UNDERMINING RIGHTS, EDUCATION, AND SOCIETY,” 2014. www.Groundswell.nyc. Acrylic on wall, 18 x 80 ft, Brooklyn, NY. by Esteban del Valle, Jose de Jesus Rodriguez, and 16 youth artists.

There are many ways to get involved in changing our mass incarceration system, as an individual, or by involving your community. In the Take Action section of this handbook, you will find a variety of ways to jump in, including volunteering, advocacy, and more.

As clergy, rabbis and cantors can play a particular role in reframing the public discourse around mass incarceration in such a way that allows for a broad coalition of people to work toward change. Here are some of the ways in which we can draw on our Jewish wisdom to help change the narrative:

- Move the conversation away from “how do we punish” to “how can we facilitate *teshuvah*?”
- Break down the false dichotomy between victims and perpetrators; acknowledge that all of us may be both at one point or another in our lives, and that society must protect all of us.
- Have honest conversations within your communities, in interfaith groups, and in public about race and its impact on incarceration.

- If you’ve visited congregants or other people in prison, or served as a prison chaplain, talk about these experiences (without sacrificing confidentiality, of course). Help your community see incarcerated individuals as creations *b’tzelem Elohim*—in the divine image.

- Talk about the ways in which other societal issues that your community may encounter through your social action work can have an impact on imprisonment, or can be affected by imprisonment.

- Speak openly about mental illness. This will both make your community feel safer for members living with mental illness or dealing with mentally ill family members, and will also allow for conversations about the relationship between mental illness and incarceration.

- Offer a prophetic vision of what could be. Don’t let people wallow in despair—show a vision of how we can move forward.

