

TAKE ACTION

## Education That Leads To Action

Forming a study-action-reflection (or study-action-support) group can be a powerful way to start and maintain a community that learns together, takes effective action, and grows. Here we offer two models from the field showcasing different approaches but common themes.

In the Bay Area, Rabbi Michael Lezak started by collecting a group of congregants to read and discuss Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* together. After laying the groundwork for a year of programming, Rabbi Lezak used his Rosh Hashanah sermon to announce a year-long project of learning and action. He invited people to join him most Tuesday nights for a working group on ending mass incarceration. Since then, the working group has discussed issues of white privilege and power, and has studied Jewish texts on liberation and responsibility. It has taken field trips together—to visit congregants at the local San

Quentin State Prison, to witness restorative justice programs in action, and to lead Torah study and Shabbat services in jails. Some members of the group have gotten involved in legislative advocacy, others in direct service. Rabbi Lezak says he is already envisioning how the second year of the program moves further into action and broadens the network to include more partners outside the synagogue. "It's singing in beautiful ways," he says. "I can see the arc continue to move over the next few years."

In Philadelphia, lay leader Lynne Iser attended an event at her synagogue that included the screening of a documentary on mass incarceration that had been produced by a member of the congregation. Drawing on the energy of that evening, she and a few other lay leaders began to organize a monthly, Sunday afternoon group of about two dozen people. Half came from the synagogue and half came from other religious communities in the neighborhood. They, too, started with

*The New Jim Crow*, and then they moved on to learning how local organizations are addressing incarceration. At each meeting, a speaker from a local group talks about their service or advocacy work. Key to the group's flourishing, in Lynne's view, is the time set aside at each meeting for facilitated conversation. This gives members a chance to articulate why they are there, and what they are struggling with. "Once you've made a statement, declared something publicly, it's not passive anymore," says Lynne. "It's not as easy to walk away and say, 'That was interesting,' and not do anything. The group is a way to keep us from just backing

away in shame or repulsion or fear or overwhelm." As opportunities to take action arise, group members take them up in small subgroups, according to each person's interest and ability. (For a list of events the group has put on, visit: <https://mishkan.org/mlk-full-weekend-of-programs-january-17-20-2014>.)



San Quentin State Prison, on San Francisco Bay. Photo by Jitze Couperus, Creative Commons license.

Whether your group is mobilized and led by a professional or organized from the bottom up, a few lessons emerge on how to maximize the chances for success:

1. Create volunteer opportunities, which can inspire long-term commitment to the effort.
2. Balance accountability with flexibility. Allow each person to participate as s/he is able, while maintaining accountability through regular gatherings, an emphasis on building relationships, and space for honest conversation.
3. Make time to celebrate. Ending mass incarceration is a marathon, not a sprint, and if people come to see activism as a chore or a box to be checked off, no one will stick with this holy endeavor. Celebrate even your small successes or anniversaries of your work together.