

TAKE ACTION

# Start Inside Your Community

Change you effect inside your walls will seep out into the world in ways small and larger, obvious and unexpected. It doesn't replace efforts made in the larger arenas of neighborhood, city, state, and nation, but it can be a parallel track, part of a study-action-reflection group's focus, or a preparatory stage. Here are some of the topics you might consider:

- What does your community do to support members who have an incarcerated family member? Often, Jews who have an incarcerated family member feel significant shame and may avoid mentioning the situation. This adds a heavy emotional burden of secrecy on top of all the others that person is carrying. How do we shift our communal culture so that Mom coming home from prison or a son being incarcerated for four years elicits a response more like when Grandma is in the hospital or a new baby is born?
- What can your community do to support returning citizens themselves, both inside the community and in the surrounding area? Are returning citizens welcome at services? (See facing page.) When there is a job opening, could you consider hiring a returning citizen? Reach out to a local nonprofit that helps returning citizens find jobs to see how they can help. Even if you don't end up hiring a returning citizen, being public about an honest willingness to hire one sends an important signal. How else might your community utilize its skill base to support or mentor returning citizens? They may value help with everything from writing a resume to filing a tax return to simply being included in community events. Again, contact a local nonprofit to learn about how you can help meet their particular needs.
- What does your community do to support members who have been the victims of crime? How do you help them recover and heal? Our interest, learning, and activism to end mass incarceration must include caring for those who suffer harm. Read more on p. 44.

- How sophisticated is the community's discourse about race and racism? Are people on the same page about language, goals, and understandings? Workshops, study sessions, and facilitated discussions on race, privilege, whiteness, and diversity can unclog some of the channels of communication. Congregations where these issues are clearly on the table for discussion can grow to be stronger, more vibrant, more welcoming communities. Word of that will spread, with the potential to bring in both new congregants and partners from other communities.
- When does the community hire police to guard the building? What kinds of attack are the leadership concerned about—for instance, anti-Semitic incidents, domestic gun violence, foreign terrorism? (The lines between these can be blurry, showcasing how 21st century policing slips seamlessly into the War on Terror.) Are there members of the community who might feel less safe, rather than safer, with police around? Think about black congregants, people who were the victims of serious crimes and may still be traumatized, and people who have experienced jail and prison—either themselves or close family and friends. Consider a community conversation about the risks and benefits of hiring police. Regardless of the decision, communicating it publicly with some sensitivity—instead of taking it as a given that police make everyone feel safer—can help the people who feel less safe at least not feel invisible. For a first-person take on this issue, read this blog post by Rafael Lev, a black Jew in the Twin Cities: <http://www.reformjudaism.org/blog/2014/09/23/sin-prejudice-growing-jewish-person-color>

## WHERE DOES A JEWISH RETURNING CITIZEN DAVEN?

**“One of the questions I get asked most as a prison chaplain is what Jewish community the men I serve can join when they get out. So many of them will leave jail with few connections and no support system. Religious communities are an obvious choice to help reduce recidivism and reintegrate people who have been incarcerated into life and community. However, so many Jewish communities have strict unspoken assumptions about who is Jewish and who “we” are that most people coming out of prison would not be welcome, either implicitly or explicitly, in many liberal synagogues. And so, as a result, I often refer people to the ever-welcoming Chabad. But I am hearing more and more about Jewish communities that are reflecting seriously on their relationship to race and working to increase their vision of “audacious hospitality.” Change is underway. I would love to see congregations connect directly with their local jails and prisons and offer themselves as places for people to go when they get out—for prayer, for holiday observances, for friendship, for pastoral support, for social services. One way to facilitate this connection is for synagogues to start a volunteer visitation or pen pal program, which can serve as a pipeline for formerly incarcerated people when they are released. Prison erases community. Synagogues have tremendous potential to be a network for healing and resiliency.”**

**– Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, prison chaplain**



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