

GENERAL RESOURCES

# High Holiday Sermon Sparks

The essential theme of the High Holidays is the shift from justice to mercy. On Rosh Hashanah (*Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment), we blow shofar to awaken our own sleeping selves and to convince God to leave the throne of strict justice and take up the throne of mercy. During the season of repentance, we ask forgiveness of each other and try to set aside our own harsh interpersonal judgments in favor of extending the mercy we hope, in turn, to receive. This process reaches its climax on Yom Kippur, when we recall how God forgave the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf and pray to be forgiven in the same way.

The move from strict justice to mercy offers a paradigm for ending mass incarceration. We need national *teshuvah*—a process of replacing systems of discrimination and oppression with systems of accountability and good governance that fairly ensure the safety of all the people in this country.

Within this broad framework, you have leeway to focus on any particular piece of the mass incarceration system, depending on current events, pressing issues on the local scene, and the priorities and interests of your community. The approach can be personal and spiritual, neighborhood-oriented, theological, policy-based—you as the spiritual leader know your own people and how best to reach them.

Many of the Jewish resources in the following pages can serve as the building blocks of a sermon. For instance:

- The essay and accompanying text study on policing can be the basis of a sermon about what ideal policing would look like. You have the opportunity to honor the police leadership you know and trust while calling for change to the damaging structures of policing that lead to violence and mistrust.

- The idea of *tzelem Elohim*, which flows so naturally from the themes of Rosh Hashanah, calls for everyone to be treated equally. Rabbi Michael Rothbaum’s text study on race and policing shows how, both in the ancient past and today, this

has not been the case. How do we account for racialized differences in how society treats us, and how do we move towards healing?

- The essay and accompanying text study

on incarceration in Jewish law, along with Rabbi Nancy Wiener’s sources on the Cities of Refuge, offer an opportunity to reflect on prisons and the purpose of incarceration. How can we transform not just our physical and legal structures but our very manner of thinking to a more Jewish, more redemptive paradigm? How does Rabbi Avi Killip’s interpretation of Jonah help us understand the need for a change?

- What is the role of *teshuvah* in a justice system? What are our responsibilities to each other as members of a community—whether that is defined by a synagogue, a city, a nation, or a species? The text study “Justice Among Brothers” offers a variety of sources for exploration.

## Genesis Rabbah 12:15

**If I create the world with mercy (*rachamim*), its sins will be numerous; with judgment (*din*), how will the world stand? Rather, I will create it with judgment and with mercy, and oh! That the world might stand!**

אם בורא אני את  
 העולם במדת הרחמים  
 הוי חטייה סגיאין, במדת  
 הדין היאך העולם יכול  
 לעמוד, אלא הרי אני בורא  
 אותו במדת הדין ובמדת  
 הרחמים, והלואי יעמוד.