Sacred Healing in Prison

Michael Lezak

"Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.”
– Bryan Stevenson, Just Mercy

“Who is honored? The one who honors others (creatures), as it says, ‘For those who honor Me, I will honor.”
– Mishna Avot 4:1

The tachrichim, white linen burial shrouds, lie flat against the green linoleum floor in the prison chapel. I’m seated in a circle around these shrouds with 20 incarcerated men who run the prison hospice program at the Solano County Prison, 60 miles northeast of San Francisco. Next to me is Susan Barnes, who helped us build the chevrah kadisha, burial society, at my former synagogue. These incarcerated men (two of whom are Jewish, and a disproportionate number of whom are men of color) invited us to teach them about Jewish rituals around death and mourning.

I look around the room, and I’m aware that I don’t know any of these men’s stories. I don’t know why they’re here or for how long. I don’t know the pain that they’ve caused their victims and their families, let alone their own families or themselves. I do know that these prison hospice workers are engaged in what Jewish tradition considers to be the most venerated work: Midrash teaches us that “the highest act of gemilut hasidim is that which is done for the dead.” (Tanchuma Vayehi 107a)

We are told to honor all of life’s creation, kavod ha-briyot, so I draw on Rav Abraham Isaac Kook’s teaching to recognize that “the precious nature of [a] person’s worth is more essential to him than the lower characteristics that have developed through his circumstances.” (Middot HaRa’ayah, Ahavah 9) In this room, many men feel as though society has given up on them. But I see that this holy hospice work not only honors the dying in their final days but has also restored a sense of honor and purpose to the men doing the work. These rituals around death have ushered in so much life.

As we reflect on the vidui, the death-bed prayer, the men share painful stories from their lives. It becomes clear that this hospice work has empowered them to take serious inventory of their journeys and has summoned many of them to a path of teshuvah (soul repair).

When we’re done, they take us on a tour of the prison’s hospice wing. My rabbi, Les Bronstein, once described the hospice workers who cared for his beloved father as Angels of Death who lovingly and compassionately tended to every need of a dying man who could no longer take care of himself. As I look around the room in this prison hospice, I don’t see inmates or criminals. I see able-bodied angels spoon-feeding and giving sponge baths to dying inmates. I can’t help but think that this is one of many desperately needed models for how we might honor God’s creation and in so doing heal prisoners and reform prisons in America. Here, in this tiny corner of what is our nation’s vast and seldomly rehabilitative prison complex, these men have carved out a sacred healing space where they not only bring dignity to the dying but have also claimed a sense of honor and respect for themselves and an enviable insight as to what really matters in life.

Michael Lezak is the rabbi at GLIDE, a radically inclusive, just, and loving community mobilized to alleviate suffering and break the cycles of poverty and marginalization. He is board co-chair of Truah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights. He and his wife, Rabbi Noa Kushner, are parents to three daughters and live in San Francisco.
On this page, four current or past inmates examine a teaching of Rabbi Haim David HaLevy, the former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Yafo. Our commentators explore how the obligation to be concerned about the welfare of the criminal reflects on the dignity of humanity. Rabbi Paul Shleffar, the Jewish chaplain at San Quentin State Prison, helped me locate and work with these prisoner-authors. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.

Michael Flinner: Unfortunately, human emotion routinely acts without the mitigating benefit of intellect, and so, in the blink of an eye, our conduct, resolve, and good nature evaporate. Trust me, it can happen to anyone. From within the walls of California’s infamous death row at San Quentin, as a Jew of 51 years, I am responding to Rabbi Haim David HaLevy’s writing about “obligations.” In God’s Creation, man is created last, along with a set of laws of human conduct. We live with the knowledge that we are inherently capable of wrongdoing (sin). I’m in prison for murder. Rabbi HaLevy asserts that it is “our” obligation to be concerned with just law, the criminal himself, and the dignity of humanity.

In equal measure, we need a well-functioning justice system whose policies focus on protecting public safety while also providing criminal justice reforms that offer prisoners real-time opportunities for redemption as well as mandatory recidivism and rehabilitation programs that promise second-chance ladders to our futures. It’s time to dispel the myth that prisoners are without redeeming value. After all, just is, in part, making something great from something altogether terrible.

Jose Rivera: When Rabbi HaLevy spoke of a just law combined with concern for the criminal and the dignity of humanity, he referred to a system of justice. This is not to be confused with the current “justice system.” Rabbi HaLevy’s quote — written more than 20 years ago — speaks more to the restorative justice movement now gaining a foothold among prison reform advocates than the experience I’ve had in prison. Restorative justice gives offenders opportunities to understand the true impact of their actions; it gives victims a role in the process that keeps the focus on the victim’s loss and allows for an outcome of healing. Why, then, are offenders confined for as long as possible, with little opportunity to regain a place in society? Today, offenders are rarely able to change their status as felons. Where is the dignity if one is marked for life?

Brittany Richardson: This passage speaks powerfully to me because, during my incarceration, I came to wholeheartedly trust the inherent holiness of our souls and the human capacity for growth and change. Because of the incredible compassion, love, and empathy I experienced from the women I was incarcerated with, I came to see that prisons aren’t filled with monsters and evil people but with human beings who have made mistakes. The prison system itself is deeply flawed; most of its regulations and much of the attitude shown toward inmates are designed to rob people of humanity and individuality.

When I first arrived, an inmate of nearly 30 years told me that I could use my time away from my loved ones and society to explore insights into my darker parts and perhaps heal some wounds so long as I didn’t allow the conditions of incarceration — such as the brutal summer heat without even a fan or outdated and inadequate medical care — to deter me. As well, I had to ignore efforts at dehumanization, the use only of my booking number rather than my name and the group strip searches that were not only embarrassing but were done with a robotic detachment that made me feel like an animal. Eventually, I learned to trust other women I met in prison who were struggling with the same issues any mother, friend, or daughter might be wrestling with: guilt, remorse, missing children, and wishing for change.

Since re-entering society on October 17th 2017, I feel commanded by both my faith and my experience to speak up for those women and remind the world that their humanity is still very much intact and deserving of respect.

Evie Litwok: I am a formerly incarcerated Jewish lesbian who spent a total of 20 months at two different federal prisons — partly in solitary confinement. Prior to my arrest for tax evasion, I had a large community of extended family (including many Holocaust survivors) and friends. Upon hearing of my arrest, people who had known me for decades disappeared. My mother told me people said to her, “where there is smoke, there is fire.”

The night before I left for prison, my mother said, “prison will be harder for you than concentration camp was for me.” She was correct. At 60 years old, I suffered continuous physical, mental, and emotional abuse. In prison, I found no humanity from the guards or administration. Even when my first conviction was overturned, the officer preparing my release papers said, “you’re being released, you fucked up my dinner plans.”

There are 2.2 million people in American prisons, and 6 million more are under supervised release. It is our obligation to be concerned with their suffering. We are commanded to advocate for prisoner’s human rights.

When I left prison, I was homeless, without a job or supportive community. I struggled to regain my dignity and recover from the injustices done to me. I began to tell my story in synagogues and at university Hillels. Though I saw that people were disturbed, I have yet to see people outside of the formerly incarcerated population develop strong alliances to lobby for systemic change to the abuse and cruelty to which prisoners are subjected.

Brittany Richardson is 27 years old and spent two and a half years at the California Institution for Women in Chino, Calif. She currently lives in Los Angeles and is pursuing work as a drug and alcohol counselor.
Jewish sensibilities are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life’s challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses. This month, *Sh’mah Now* explores the implications of treating all humanity as God’s creatures, *kavod ha-briyot.* We use this frame to explore what Jewish wisdom teaches us regarding the treatment of prisoners, the American system of incarceration, and the advocacy for prison reform.

**Where Are the Jews?**

*Margo Schlanger*

I walked into a prison for the first time in 1995, in Montana. I was part of a U.S. Department of Justice civil rights team suing over unconstitutional prison conditions: medical and mental health care were grossly inadequate, and prisoners particularly vulnerable to abuse by other prisoners went unprotected.

I never met a Jewish prisoner in Montana. Jews are, of course, a small American minority — perhaps 2 percent of the population — and most American Jews are white, so, given the stark overrepresentation of racial minorities in prison, we should not be surprised to find only 20,000–30,000 Jewish prisoners nationwide, scattered among 1,800 federal and state prisons and 3,200 local jails. It may be that this relatively small number of Jewish prisoners is why I entered those prison gates without any insight drawn from my religious life. Whereas Christians and Muslims have a long and robust tradition of ministry in prison, Jewish institutions have not taken a large role in promoting reform. Compare that to Jewish leadership on immigration justice, or on labor, food, or civil liberties. I had never heard anyone voice concern in my *shul* about any issue of criminal justice policy or propose a mitzvah project or social action related to prisoners or former prisoners.

But my attention was captured by that first prison in Montana. I spent much of the next two years there, as well as in jails in Alabama, Maryland, and Kentucky, learning how criminal justice organizations work and trying to understand and help solve their systemic problems. When I became a law professor, I left jails and prisons for a year or two, but I found myself drawn back. Some law reformers are motivated by the ever-present possibility of error — the innocent prisoner, the miscarriage of justice.

For me, the moral claim of prisoners is different: It is a claim shared by guilty and innocent alike to treatment that respects their humanity, that acknowledges them as redeemable and valuable. To push for prison and jail reform is to try to shift the system to implement that claim. When reform is attempted through litigation, the prisoners (who are the plaintiffs) make claims as of right, as their jailers’ legal equals.

Yet, while this underlying principle was clear to me, I did not think of my prison work as religious at all.

During one Yom Kippur sermon many years ago, I recall my rabbi talking about how financial crimes — such as bribery or insider trading — were crimes and transgressions but also shandas (community embarrassments). However, to my mind, the true shanda is that, outside of a small but admirable group of prisoners’ rights advocates, American Jews have not embraced work against American over-incarceration and dire prison conditions, or helped prisoners after release.

Jewish tradition does support these three aspects of reform. First, against overincarceration. Our tradition acknowledges, through repeated ritual, that moral error (*chet*) is part of life and that return (*teshuvah*) is always possible. The Yom Kippur liturgy frames error as a shared experience and offers as the solution to error not banishment from the community but community repair. Imprisonment therefore should be used only when separation from the community is truly necessary. America’s current 2.2 million prisoners — up in my lifetime from 300,000 — miserably fails this test.

Second, for humane prison conditions. The key is the principle of *kavod ha-briyot* (honoring God’s creatures) and the notion that all humankind is created *b’tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God). Both are powerful acknowledgments of equality and calls to struggle against dehumanizing conditions such as solitary confinement, enforced idleness, untreated illness, and abusive force. The 19th-century Turkish rabbi Chaim Palachi wrote that Jewish prisons should be uncrowded and clean, not because their prisoners are innocent of wrongdoing but because prisoners remain full members of their communities, responsible for fulfilling the commandments, and entitled to conditions that allow this to happen.

And third, for reentry. The Talmud teaches that it is wrong to take restitution even from a repentant thief because that would encumber his or her *teshuvah* (self-reflection and change). Likewise, a basic insight of modern reentry reform is that we need to frame our criminal justice institutions to facilitate, not obstruct, righteous living.

Prisoners are the most disempowered of all Americans. They cannot vote, and they are overwhelmingly poor and largely nonwhite, out-of-sight, and out-of-mind. It’s been my privilege to work with current and former prisoners to try to improve their situations, and it’s been my good fortune in recent years to draw on Jewish resources in support of that work. Join us.

*Margo Schlanger* is the Wade H. and Dores M. McCree Collegiate Professor of Law at the University of Michigan Law School and a former board president of the Ann Arbor Reconstructionist Congregation.

**The Inherent Bias of Bail**

*Alex Sherman*

In the summer of 2001, when I was 19 years old, some friends and I were on our way to a tiny old synagogue in Greenwich Village for a concert called “Music of the Jewish Mystics.” With an hour before curtains, I suggested we make our way down to the Hudson River, partake in a shanda (shameful act), and smoke the little joint one of us had in our pockets.

Unbeknownst to us, there was a squad of undercover police officers close by, and they had other plans for us. We were arrested and taken to the Manhattan Detention Complex, known as “The Tombs,” where we sat and waited in an overcrowded jail cell for 24 hours, until a judge saw us, a few Jewish boys from the suburbs, and ordered our release.

Seventeen years have gone by, but I think about that night often, trying to reconcile myself with the unfairness that exists in the criminal justice system. Not the unfairness that rested on me, but with the vast majority of people I shared a jail cell with. Today, a black male age 18–19 is 11.8 times more likely to be imprisoned than a white male of that age (the age of my arrest), according to the U.S. Department of Justice. And the median annual income for incarcerated individuals before their incarceration is less than half of their counterparts, also based on DOJ data.

In the early 1980s, the number of people confined to our nation’s county jails were split fairly evenly between people serving shorter sentences for relatively minor crimes and people being held for pretrial detention. But in 1987, the Supreme Court held that a person can be incarcerated before their trial when, according to a judge, they have
a potential for “future dangerousness.” (U.S. v. Salerno, 481 U.S. 739). The Court provided no guidance for how long such confinement might last. Ever since, the number of people incarcerated before having a trial has rapidly grown, causing erosion to a bedrock principle of justice, the presumption of innocence.

Because it is difficult to square these two contradictory presumptions — that someone can be presumed innocent of a past crime while presumed guilty of a hypothetical future crime — courts have increasingly relied on cash bail to determine whether a person should be released from jail before trial. Between 1990 and 2009, the share of people required to post money bail grew from 37 to 61 percent, according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

After a person is arrested, a judge will set a bail amount based on the criminal charge, giving that person the option of enjoying the right to liberty before trial. But, in many states, these amounts are set so high that most people cannot afford to pay them. They can either purchase a commercial bail bond for a fee or languish in jail until trial.

It’s a legal fiction that pretrial detention is not considered punishment. Even a short time in jail can cause lasting harms: loss of a job, loss of income, loss of transportation, eviction, inordinate stress on the family, and even episodes of emotional decompensation that can aggravate psychological disorders. It is a harrowing fact that suicide is the leading cause of death in jails, and it’s most often committed by people who have been arrested for nonviolent offenses, who have not been tried and convicted, and who were in jail for less than a week.

So why do we hold onto this system? Primarily, the commercial bail bonds industry has pandered to our fears about crime. It will say bail is necessary to protect public safety while ignoring the fact that, in many jurisdictions, people who have been accused of murder can bail themselves out if they have enough money.

Without dismissing the fears of those who are fearful, I sometimes wonder if we have forgotten some basic lessons from the Torah. Ayin tachat ayin, an eye for an eye, it says in the Torah — not also an arm and a leg. Righteous justice balances the retributive desire to blame others with communal needs for proportionality, truth, and reconciliation.

We have two justice systems in this country — one for people who can afford first-class treatment, and one for everyone else — and it’s important to consider the deeper consequences of our action or inaction. During a time when many of us are concerned about the implications of the insistent attacks on the rule of law, reforming the bail system is one positive step we can take to restore our commitment to the integrity of the justice system for all. Bend the Arc Jewish Action has been at the forefront of the campaign for bail reform in states across the nation and needs your help to pressure, lobby, and hold elected officials accountable.

Alex Sherman is a lawyer in Los Angeles and a leader with Bend the Arc: Jewish Action’s Criminal Justice Committee in Southern California.

My Father’s Mugshot
Anonymous

“I have to talk to you about your dad.” My heart dropped when I heard those words. The way my mother spoke alerted me that something was terribly wrong. Panicked, I couldn’t imagine what she would say. An accident? Illness? But what she ultimately explained, that my father had been arrested, would forever change my life.

Heavy tears welled up in my eyes, questions rambled everywhere in my brain. I felt physically ill, my body aching because I didn’t know how much more pain I could handle. I saw my father’s face in the newspapers and online, a mugshot I would never recognize as the caring, supportive, and loving dad who raised me. Soon after being arrested and charged with burglary, he returned home to await his court date.

People in my neighborhood don’t commit burglaries. Often, my upscale community talked in quiet whispers about white-collar crimes, tax evasion, and DUs. But news of my father’s arrest traveled fast, humiliating all of us, destroying his name and reputation. All I could think about was how my friends would react when I told them about my dad. I felt fearful of how their parents would handle the news and how the rumors and innuendo would hurt my mother and brothers. I even questioned the loyalty of people close to my family, wondering if my father’s mistake would cause them to judge me or my mother. When school restarted in August, I imagined my classmates and teachers only seeing me as the daughter of a criminal.

But these initial worries would eventually seem relatively trivial. In September, he was arrested again.

Seeing my father return home after posting bail for the second time hurt so much. He looked innocent to me, and I could not reconcile the face in the paper with the father I knew. I felt guilty worrying about what people thought of me while my father fought to stay out of prison. And, for the first time, I imagined how broken he felt and the pain he suffered. His humiliation seemed unsurmountable. I watched him maintain his otherwise lovable personality, covering the devastation of what really happened. I never wanted to see my father hurt.

The weeks that followed seemed better. But then, a third arrest. My mother and aunt sat me down one day after school. I knew immediately. My father would not be coming back home.

The emotional turmoil at home weighed so heavily. I felt so vulnerable and scared for my mother. I worried about my brothers. In school, I didn’t focus; I felt depressed and asked for extensions. I put my work aside, feeling the loneliness of missing my father while I watched my mother hold us together. I knew she worried about our pain, our finances, and our emotional health.

Handling the burden of my life resulted in lost opportunity. Finally, after several months, my mom told me to pick myself up and get my act together. I took the time I needed to hurt, but I also tried to come to terms with my father’s ongoing absence. My mom’s attitude and perspective inspired me to accept our new “normal.” I caught up on my work and began to take school seriously again.

I did not see my father for a very long time. I tried not to let his mistakes define me. My father never meant to hurt my family; he acted irrationally in order to support us, never imagining the consequences of his actions. I realized a mistake does not define a person, but the way we handle our mistakes always will.

The writer chose to not share any details of her identity. She wrote this reflection while in high school.
Consider & Converse
A Guide to ‘Kavod ha-briyot’ — ‘Honoring God’s Creation’

Introduction

Sh’ma Now curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of Sh’ma Now is the Jewish sensibility of “kavod ha-briyot — Honoring God’s Creation.” Sh’ma Now uses this frame to explore what Jewish wisdom teaches us regarding the treatment of prisoners, the American system of incarceration, and how — as Jews — we might address prison reform.

How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal can be used, please contact Susan Berrin, Sh’ma Now editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at http://forward.com/shma-now/.

Sh’ma Now has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That’s why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

• Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.

• Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other’s comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.

• For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.

• Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.
Interpretive Questions

* can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.*

- Rabbi [Michael Lezak](page 1) shares some poignant stories about his teaching in prisons. He has spent several years working with prisoners who are learning the skills and compassion to care for other inmates in the final weeks of life. He notices that “this holy hospice work not only honors the dying in their final days but has also restored a sense of honor and purpose to the men doing the work. These rituals around death have ushered in so much life.” He shares these stories as a way to understand the complicated lives of prison inmates—and how all of us are to be treated as God’s creation. Michael continues: “As I look around the room in this prison hospice, I don’t see inmates or criminals. I see able-bodied angels spoon-feeding and giving sponge baths to dying inmates. I can’t help but think that this is one of many desperately needed models for how we might honor God’s creation.”

What does Jewish wisdom teach us about honoring all of creation? What are the intricacies of that honoring? Is there a time to not honor one of God’s creation — and for what sorts of reasons?

- [Alex Sherman](page 3) writes about bail reform. He explains the inconsistencies and injustice of current the bail system. After arrest, the “courts have increasingly relied on cash bail to determine whether a person should be released from jail before trial. Between 1990 and 2009, the share of people required to post money bail grew from 37 percent to 61 percent, according to the ACLU and the nonprofit Color of Change. … After a person is arrested, a judge will set a bail amount based on the criminal charge, giving that person the option of enjoying the right to liberty before trial. But, in many states, these amounts are set so high that most people cannot afford to pay them, leaving them with no good option at all. They can either purchase a commercial bail bond for a fee or languish in jail until trial.” Alex goes on to write that even a short, pretrial detention can cause lasting and severe harm to an individual, including loss of income and inordinate family and emotional stress. “It’s a harrowing fact that suicide is the leading cause of death in jails, and it’s most often committed by people who have been arrested for nonviolent offenses, who have not been tried and convicted, and who were in jail for less than a week.” Who is most hurt by the current bail system and what are the obstacles to bail reform? How is the bail system an indication of the disparity between various segments of American society? How do you understand the underlying issues of the bail system as they relate to larger issues of race in America?

- [Margo Schlanger](page 3) suggests three reasons Jews should be involved with prison reform. First, Jews believe that *teshuvah* is possible, so we should work on behalf of prisoners to have opportunities in prison and beyond to rehabilitate themselves and find opportunities for change. Second, fundamental to Judaism “is the principle of k’vod ha-bri’ot (honoring God’s creatures) and the notion that all humankind is created b’tzelem Elohim (in the image of God). Both are powerful acknowledgements of equality and calls to struggle against dehumanizing conditions such as solitary confinement, enforced idleness, untreated illness, and abusive force.” And third, the Talmud teaches we mustn’t take “restitution even from a repentant thief because that would encumber his or her teshuvah. Likewise, a basic insight of modern reentry reform is that we need to frame our criminal justice institutions to facilitate, not obstruct, righteous living.” Given that Jewish wisdom offers such clear teachings about *teshuvah*, why have Jewish communities and institutions been so slow at embracing prison reform? Why does immigration reform resonate more closely with the passions of Jews? How might you lay a framework for thinking about issues around incarceration — overcrowding of prisons, biases in courts, recidivism, etc?
Consider & Converse

A Guide to ‘Kavod ha-briyot’ — ‘Honoring God’s Creation’

Reflective Questions

can help one to integrate the ideas in these articles with one’s own sense of self.

• Tali’s [page 4] father was arrested a few times when she was a teenager. She understood that his criminal behavior was, at least in part, based on his desire to protect his family from need. A swirl of emotions surrounded her: “He looked innocent to me, and I could not reconcile the face in the paper with the father I knew. I felt guilty worrying about what people thought of me while my father fought to stay out of prison. And, for the first time, I imagined how broken he felt and the pain he suffered. His humiliation seemed unsurmountable. I watched him maintain his otherwise lovable personality, covering the devastation of what really happened. I never wanted to see my father hurt.” How does the pain of one family member ripple through an entire family? How might we reach out to friends who are suffering, even when they put up obstacles to our solicitations? How deep are our friendships when we are vulnerable—what helps you in those moments?

• In NiSh’mā [page 2], our simulated Talmud page, four current or former inmates serve as this month’s commentators. In examining a teaching of Rabbi Haim David HaLevy, the former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Yafo, our commentators explore how the obligation to be concerned about the welfare of the criminal reflects on the dignity of humanity. “It is our obligation to be concerned about just law; more than that, it is our obligation to be concerned about the criminal himself; more than that, it is our obligation to be concerned with the dignity of humanity.” Michael Flinner, who is on death row at San Quentin State Prison, writes to dispel the myth “that prisoners are without redeeming value.” He urges that society “offer prisoners realtime opportunities for redemption as well as mandatory recidivism and rehabilitation programs that promise second-chance ladders to our futures.” Brittany Richardson is 27 years old and experienced great compassion and empathy from her fellow inmates during her two and a half years in the California Institution for Women. The experience put her on a path of teshuvah as she “came to see that prisons aren’t filled with monsters and evil people but with human beings who have made mistakes.” Evie Litwok spent almost two years in prison when she was in her sixties. She writes, “There are 2.2 million people in American prisons, and 6 million more are under supervised release. It is our obligation to be concerned with their suffering. We are commanded to advocate for prisoner’s human rights.” Since her release, she has advocated for prison reform. What do you learn from reading these prisoners’ stories? Are people capable of making transformative change? How does the Jewish community welcome and embrace people who are trying to make change and reenter society? What can you do to help former prisoners regain their sense of self-worth?
Resources
Below are resources for further reading and organizations that work on behalf of prison reform:

- Fact sheet on criminal justice from the NAACP: https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/
- Bend the Arc Jewish Action organizes around bail reform: https://www.bendthearc.us/about
- The Appeal is a relatively new news organization focused on mass incarceration, and produces a number of excellent podcasts about criminal justice issues https://theappeal.org/topics/podcasts/
- Witness to Mass Incarceration (WMI) is a storytelling and organizing archival project that documents the stories and experiences of formerly incarcerated and criminalized women and LGBTQ and gender non-conforming people. These interviews work to challenge gender, racial, and ethnic inequity and to end mass incarceration.