Racial Justice Shabbat
February 16, 2024

Toward Repair (Tikkun)

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Good Shabbes. This week's parashah, that is, the Torah portion that we read this week, is from the book of Exodus. It's called T'rumah, and it helps us understand a central issue that has been a focus of the Racial Justice Committee. T'rumah describes how God told Moses that the Israelites were to build the Mishkan, a portable tabernacle in which God may dwell among the people.

The necessary materials were to come from the riches that the Hebrews had received from the Egyptians on their way leaving Egypt. The people of Egypt were in essence paying a debt to the Israelites for the work of 600,000 Hebrew workers over 430 years of forced labor.

The building of the Mishkan was an important part of the Israelites' liberation process. When asked to contribute, the people were overwhelmingly generous, giving everything they had, to create this communal gathering place. It was an act in which they began to shed the identity forged by oppression and enslavement and to construct a new one. An act of liberated individuals coming together in a collective spirit to establish their values as a community and to build a better future.

The payment of this debt is foretold in Genesis where God tells Abraham that his offspring would be strangers in a strange land, enslaved and oppressed for 400 years, but that in the end God would judge the nation they served, and Abraham's people would go free with great wealth. It comes up again in Exodus when God tells Moses at the Burning Bush to bring his people out of Egypt and promises that they will not come out empty-handed. God specifically tells Moses that the Israelite women are to collect the riches from their neighbors, stripping Egypt of its considerable wealth.

The payment, then, is a longstanding promise and an integral part of the overall plan for liberation. It is a necessary ingredient in the redemption of the formerly enslaved as they learn to become a free people.

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We retell the story of our liberation every year at Passover, but it lands differently today than it did even a year ago. Now, there's a public conversation about reparations for slavery in the United States that has some parallels in the story of the Exodus—enslavement, liberation, a promise of reparations to complete the liberation process, even a twentieth century Moses figure standing up to the ruling power and leading the people out of the wilderness. However, in the United States the promise of reparations came from persons,

not God, and that promise was broken. Worse, it was initially kept—which offered hope—and then undone.

Toward the end of the Civil War, the Union's Quaker secretary of war, Edwin Stanton, suggested that General Sherman ask 20 Black pastors who had gathered to meet with him, "What do you want for your own people?" The government asking Black people what they wanted for themselves was unheard of.

The meeting took place in Savannah, GA in January 1865. The ministers explained that they did not want to live among white people. They could not possibly feel safe among the enslavers who had for 250 years owned and oppressed them, stolen their children, and relentlessly abused and killed them. They wished to live in their own communities. They wanted to get access to land and turn it and till it by their own labor until they were able to buy it and make it their own. This would entail redistributing the property of Southern plantation owners.

Within four days of General Sherman's meeting with those ministers, President Lincoln approved this plan and the general drew up Field Order 15, reserving 400,000 acres of Confederate land for members of the formerly enslaved population. It was a strip of coastline stretching from South Carolina to Florida. Sherman estimated that when the land was evenly redistributed, each family would have 40 acres of tillable ground. Aside from the order, he directed the army to lend mules to the new settlers, hence the promise of 40 acres and a mule.

The formerly enslaved, known as freedmen, quickly moved to take advantage of the offer. One of the ministers almost immediately led 1,000 freedmen to Skidaway Island in Georgia where they set up a self-governing community. Within four to five months, 40,000 had settled the entire 400,000 acres, which was by then known as "Sherman's Land."

Can you imagine how profoundly different the history of race relations in the United States would be if this had been allowed to stand? If freedmen had gained access to the ownership of property and a chance to be self-sufficient economically, to build, accrue and pass on wealth? A chance to live under the protection of the United States and the local government of their choosing?

As we know, it did not stand. President Lincoln was assassinated that spring. His vice president, the white supremacist Andrew Johnson took over and rescinded the order by fall. All the land was returned to the confederate planters who had previously owned it, and the formerly enslaved people—freedmen!—were forced to work as sharecroppers. Their newly granted rights and opportunities were systematically rescinded. Enslavement was replaced by

segregation, Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and other types of legalized discrimination in the post-Civil War era, many of which persist in some form to this day.

So there remains an unfulfilled promise, and incomplete redemption from slavery. In other words, there is still a responsibility to repair, and work to be done.

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In that spirit, members of the Racial Justice Committee have been meeting for several years to better understand the ongoing harms of anti-Black racism, especially the ways that it works, sometimes invisibly, through our social systems and public and private institutions. Even in California, even in Sacramento. You can find recordings of some of our educational programs on the Racial Justice pages of CBI's website. There you'll see that we've studied housing, health, and education inequities, how and why they persist, and what local advocates are doing to address them. We've read books and watched films together, offered workshops on working through uncomfortable moments around race, and organized a civil rights tour of the South for B'nai Israel members. We've learned that this history has left a legacy of structural racism and massive inequities that persist to this day.

We have learned that we need to expand our awareness and move from foundational knowledge to action. We need to bring in a lens of empathy to begin to understand the Black experience, outside of our bubble.

The Racial Justice Committee is currently studying recommendations for reparations to Black Californians from the state's reparations task force. We are exploring why California may have a debt to pay and how the proposals align with our Jewish texts, history, and values. The overwhelming majority of the recommendations are for policy changes to stop ongoing harms and improve outcomes for Black Californians. In all, there are more than 100 recommendations. Taken as a whole, the proposals appear to be a serious attempt to continue the process of liberation and redemption.

As we carry out this exploration, there will be a series of study opportunities including a conversation at the CBI retreat coming up soon. We will have programs with guest speakers, and discussions about the relevant history and specific proposals for some of these policy changes. We hope that you will join us in learning about and talking through these recommendations. We might be able to weigh in as a congregation as some of the proposals make their way into legislation.

Racial Justice Committee members will be available at the Oneg for individual conversations. You can recognize us by our colorful name tags. Shabbat Shalom.