

shavuot4blacklives

שילומים



JEWS FOR RACIAL &
ECONOMIC JUSTICE

May 2018
Jews for Racial and Economic Justice
New York City, NY



On Shavuot, we celebrate the revelation of Torah, the revelation of a vision of a different world.

Work for justice and liberation must be guided by revelation. Revelation we can understand as that flash we feel when we know something is true, that we have encountered something that will shake us up and push us on into a new world. At Shavuot we wrestle with our most meaningful texts. Sometimes these texts are ones that affirm a vision of the world that should be. Sometimes they

are texts that make us wrestle with the challenges of this world. We turn Torah around and round again to understand how it illuminates our lives, and at where our texts prompt us to go. **That is the aim of the *Vision for Black Lives*. To get us, all, to engage with what Black liberation could look like, what changes it demands, what new world is possible if we transform this world into one that truly cherishes Black lives. For Black Jews, this engagement is long overdue.**

When the ***Vision for Black Lives*** was released in 2016, many members of Jewish communities had strong reactions to the way that Israel was characterized in the document. Many never read the platform in its entirety. This reaction sparked a Jewish national public debate that left out the voices of Black Jews, furthering the oppression experienced at the intersection of Judaism and Blackness. Black Jews in our community called on all of us to remain committed to the Movement For Black Lives, to racial justice, and by extension, to Black Jews, no matter what. Since 2016, many of us have had opportunities to reflect, learn and wrestle as individuals and as a community—like our ancestor Jacob, we are a people who wrestle, with God, with text, with each other.

Today, our call is to nurture a nuanced reading that can hold multiple truths and, most importantly, center the experiences and demands of Black people in the US and Black Jews. At the same time, many of our non-Jewish partners have deepened their understanding of our community in all of its complexity and diversity, and of the import of resisting antisemitism. We all know that nobody's free 'til everybody's free, and that we need to work together for justice. JFREJ has supported all of that development with our *Understanding Antisemitism* resource and events. We are ready to return to the text of the ***Vision For Black Lives*** and explore it with integrity, curiosity and respect.

*From the second day of Passover until Shavuot many Jews count the Omer. This daily counting practice brings us from our break for freedom in the Exodus into revelation at Mt. Sinai at Shavuot. There is a link here, in our Jewish calendar, between liberation and revelation, receiving texts that challenge and inspire us, directing us towards building a world rooted in justice and liberation. This year at JFREJ, we add Juneteenth to this arc, to lead us from **liberation** at Exodus (Passover) to **revelation** at Shavuot, to the continued demand for **reparations** at Juneteenth. This is an arc that bends towards justice.*

Our goal is to focus on this study of the *Vision for Black Lives*, and to provide a strategy for engaging that text Jewishly.



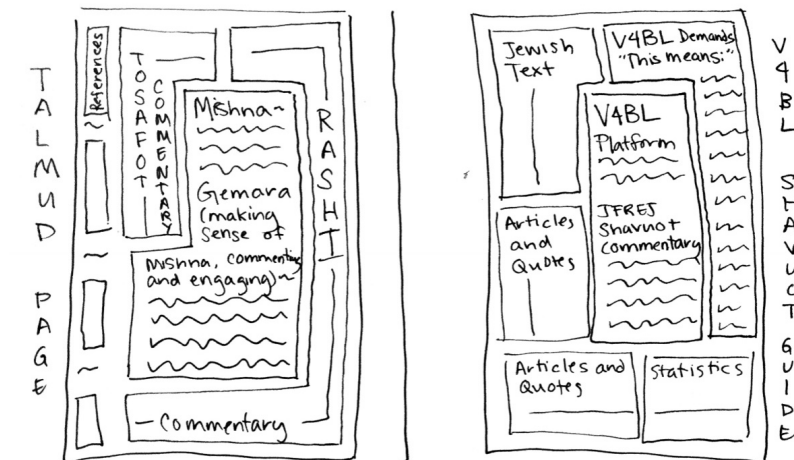
Some communities might find that in order to engage deeply with the **Vision for Black Lives**, they will also need to have a conversation about antisemitism and the left. We encourage you to take stock of your community and what it needs to be able to study the Vision for Black Lives on its own terms. Coming out of our *Understanding Antisemitism* resource, we have developed some questions to help frame these conversations about antisemitism for this Shavuot study and directed at engaging the **Vision for Black Lives**. On Shavuot, it is tradition to stay up all night studying. We encourage you to give these conversations the time they need, and also to structure your study so that you can focus your community in the learning and exploration most needed.

How to Read This Guide

The Shavuot for Black Lives Guide is laid out like a page of Talmud. Around the Mishnah (the "Oral Torah," the first major compilation of rabbinic traditions), and the Gemara (a later rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah), which are in the center of the Talmud page, there are a number of commentaries and other sources that illuminate and give additional meaning to the central text. The

texts are in conversation, fighting, declaring, clarifying, and exploring. They range from law to analysis to commentary to midrash (a kind of creative writing based on biblical text). It all shines in on the Mishnah and Gemara.

Our layout places the main policy platform for the Reparations and Invest-Divest sections of the Vision for Black Lives in the middle, in the position of the Mishnah, surrounded to the right by the platform demands and background. We have added



our own commentary on how we are in conversation with these ideas, in the position of Gemara. Around it, you will find supplementary text, including Jewish text, sections from recent writings that look at reparations, divestment, and transformative justice. Not all types of text are on every page.

Where to use this text

We invite you to bring your friends and community together to study in a home, or at a cafe or community center. To use this in your synagogue, havurah, or minyan; to bring it to people you organize with and to study it with them. **If it is in keeping with your practice, take photos of your study and share/tweet using the hashtag #Shavuot4BlackLives.** There are also traditions to eat dairy dishes and sweet treats. Take time to wrestle, engage, find the sweetness and vision, to find the sharp edges, and to celebrate the possibilities that emerge. **What world can we create if we follow the path this vision reveals?**



You Will Need

If your Shavuot study will focus solely on the ***Vision for Black Lives***, you will need:

- This Shavuot for Black Lives Guide
- A few full copies of the ***Vision for Black Lives*** (policy.m4bl.org). The Movement for Black Lives website has many additional resources about each of the platform areas.
- At least one copy of the Center for Popular Democracy, BYP100, and Law for Black Lives report, ***Freedom to Thrive: Reimagining Safety and Security in Our Communities*** (populardemocracy.org; the report contains information and infographics about the budgets of major US cities, as well as examples of how invest-divest for Black Lives could work), and
- A copy of Rabbi Sharon Brous' Op-Ed "***Why Jews should support reparations for slavery***" (LA Times, 7 March 2018).

If you find that your community needs to have a conversation about antisemitism before moving fully and openly into this Shavuot for Black Lives study, please also see our *Understanding Antisemitism Shavuot Supplement* and have on hand a copy of our *Understanding Antisemitism* resource (jfrej.org/understanding-antisemitism).

We recognize that not all of our collective needs and visions can be translated into policy, but we understand that policy change is one of many tactics necessary to move us towards the world we envision. We have come together now because we believe it is time to forge a new covenant. We are dreamers and doers and this platform is meant to articulate some of our vision...This agenda continues the legacy of our ancestors who pushed for reparations, Black self-determination and community control; and also propels new iterations of movements such as efforts for reproductive justice, holistic healing and reconciliation, and ending violence against Black cis, queer, and trans people. - Vision for Black Lives

Discussion Questions

- How do you see these texts in conversation with each other? How do they illuminate the ***Vision for Black Lives***?
- When you wrestle with the text, what vision unfolds? What is powerful about the breadth of this vision? What is challenging? What opportunities does it lead us to?
- What would have to change about your life and our society in order to realize this vision?
- What is your way forward in this work? How does your own racial identity impact/shape your role?
- What repair is needed in our own Jewish communities to attend to the work of reparations? What role must our Jewish communities play in:
 - Ending the wars against Black people?
 - Moving the state to repair the harms that have been done to Black communities in the form of reparations and targeted long-term investments?
 - Defunding of the systems and institutions that criminalize and cage Black people?



About the Authors

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About JFREJ

For 27 years, Jews For Racial & Economic Justice (JFREJ) has pursued racial and economic justice in New York City by advancing systemic changes that result in concrete improvements in people's everyday lives. We are inspired by Jewish tradition to fight for a sustainable world with an equitable distribution of economic and cultural resources and political power.

The movement to dismantle racism and economic exploitation will be led by those most directly targeted by oppression. We believe that Jews have a vital role to play in this movement. The future we hope for depends on Jews forging deep and lasting ties with our partners in struggle.

For more information and to join JFREJ, go to jfrej.org.



אין התשובה ולא יום הכפורים מכפרין אלא על עבירות שבין אדם למקום... וכיוצא בזה. אבל עבירות שבין אדם לחברו כגון החובל את חברו או המקלל חברו או גזלו וכיוצא בזה, אינו נמחל לו לעולם עד שיתן לחברו מה שהוא חייב לו וירצהו. אף על פי שהחזיר לו ממון שהוא חייב לו צריך לרצותו ולשאל ממנו שימחל לו. אפילו לא הקניט את חברו אלא בדברים צריך לפייסו ולפגוע בו עד שימחל לו. לא רצה חברו למחל לו מביא לו שורה של שלשה בני אדם מרעיו ופוגעין בו ומבקשין ממנו. לא נתרצה להן מביא לו שניה ושלישית. לא רצה מניחו והולך לו וזה

שלא מחל הוא החוטא. ואם היה רבו הולך ובא אפילו אלה פעמים עד שימחל לו. משנה תורה ב:

There is no repentance or atonement on Yom Kippur except for transgressions a person commits against God...But for transgressions a person commits against another person, like if one injures, curses, steals from their neighbor, etc, that person is never absolved until they make restitution for what is owed to that person and begs for forgiveness from them. Even if they made restitution, they are obligated to pacify and beg forgiveness. Even if one only harmed another by words, they are obligated to pacify the person and ask for forgiveness. If they don't want to forgive, bring them to a committee of three people and implore of them and beg for forgiveness. If they still do not want to

forgive, bring them to a second and third committee. If they remain obstinate, leave them alone and go on, the transgression is no longer theirs. And if [the one asking forgiveness] is their master, that person should come, even a thousand times, until they forgive them. - Mishnah Torah 2:10

This includes [5 policy demands including]:

1. Reparations for the systemic denial of access to high quality educational opportunities in the form of full and free access for all Black people (including undocumented and currently and formerly incarcerated people) to lifetime education including: free access and open admissions to public community colleges and universities, technical education (technology, trade and agricultural), educational support programs, retroactive forgiveness of student loans, and support for lifetime learning programs.

2. Reparations for the continued divestment from, discrimination toward and exploitation of our communities in the form of a guaranteed minimum livable income for all Black people...

REPARATIONS: We demand reparations for past and continuing harms. The government, responsible corporations and other institutions that have profited off of the harm they have inflicted on Black people—from colonialism to slavery through food and housing redlining, mass incarceration, and surveillance—must repair the harm done.

GBH: There is so much ongoing conversation about black fear under a white supremacist structure and white fear that supports that structure (fear of black bodies in particular) that reparations often feels off the table. It seems like the fear is that by owning the generational trauma and pain inflicted upon black folx (and indigenous folx & others) in the name of white manifest destiny, then black folx will turn around and inflict that kind of pain on white folx. It's striking that the sages provide such a roadmap for navigating questions of reclaiming what is stolen. We as black folx were a stolen people who are now woven deeply into the fabric of this United States--how do we reclaim what is stolen from us without

5. Legislation at the federal and state level that requires the US to acknowledge the lasting impacts of slavery...

What is the problem?

- Education in the U.S. has always been a subversive act for Black people. During enslavement we were legally barred from the most basic forms of education including literacy. Post-Civil War, and even after the Brown v. Board of Education (1954) decision, Black people have been locked into segregated institutions that are underfunded, under resourced and often face severe health risk because of the decrepit conditions of their school buildings.

- The current racial equity gap in education has roots that date back to enslavement. [A recent study] suggests that racial educational inequalities may be the most (measurable) enduring

legacy of slavery. The same study also verified ongoing income inequality correlated to counties where slavery was prevalent.

- ...Black students are less likely to attend schools that offer advanced coursework, less likely to be placed in gifted and talented programs, more likely to attend schools with less qualified educators, and employ law enforcement officers but no counselors.

Transformative Justice: (1) Acknowledges the reality of state harm; (2) Looks for alternative ways to address/interrupt harm, which do not rely on the state; (3) Relies on organic, creative strategies that are community created & sustained; (4) Transforms the root causes of violence, not only the individual experience.

- Shira Hassan

Won't reparations divide us? Not any more than we are already divided...What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt. What I'm talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I'm talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal. Reparations would mean the end of scarfing hot dogs on the Fourth of July while denying the facts of our heritage.

Reparations would mean the end of yelling "patriotism" while waving a Confederate flag. Reparations would mean a revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as the great democratizer with the facts of our history.

- Ta-Nahisi Coates, *The Case for*

Reparations, *The Atlantic* (June 2014)

From HR 40 - Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African

Americans Act: (3.7)...the Commission shall address...(A) How such recommendations comport with international standards of remedy for wrongs and injuries caused by the State [including full reparations]; (B) How the Government ...will offer a formal apology on behalf of the people of the [US] for the perpetration of gross human rights violations and crimes against humanity on African slaves and their descendants; (C) How Federal laws and policies that continue to disproportionately and negatively affect African-Americans as a group...can be eliminated; (D) How the injuries resulting from matters described...can be reversed and provide appropriate policies, programs, projects and recommendations for the purpose of reversing the injuries; (E) How, in consideration of the Commission's findings, any form of compensation...is calculated; (F) What form of compensation should be awarded, through what instrumentalities and who should be eligible for such compensation; (G) How...any other forms of rehabilitation or restitution to African descendants is warranted and what the form and scope of those measures should take.

One 11th century midrashic commentary (Lekah Tov Teruma 25:3) does state explicitly that the thirteen different gifts incumbent on the Israelites to bring to the Mishkan correspond to the thirteen types of spoils God enabled them to take out of Egypt, as spelled out in a poetic reference by the prophet Ezekiel (16:11–19). The Torah states that it is construction of the Mishkan which enabled God to dwell among the Israelites in the desert (Exodus 25:8). From the perspective of Exodus, then,

taking on the sins of our captors? The sages teach (Gittin 55a) that we are to reclaim what is owed and allow room for the penitence of the thief. Is White America ready for penitence? **KBF:** To be clear, if we were to eliminate all of the economic injustice, we still have people who have been psychologically and spiritually traumatized. **MR:** If there's no attention to the emotional and spiritual pain and damage, then it is like an incomplete *t'shuvah*. **KBF:** Right, Maimonides gives us guidance: First you have to stop doing it. America hasn't stopped enslaving black people. The 2nd step is to actually apologize, it also hasn't done that. The 3rd step is that you have to actually feel sorry for what you did. And the 4th is that when the same situation comes again, you have to decide to do something different. America hasn't done that either. None of the process has happened. There's never been *t'shuvah*, America has never said I'm going to stop enslaving humans.

intimacy with God for the Israelites was enabled by reparations...G*d insisted, even absent a sustainable procedure for reparations, that receiving reparations was essential, regardless of whether that context would produce a Golden Calf. That is how disastrous it is, from the Torah's viewpoint, to deny reparations to people victimized by slavery. No rabbinic source ever claimed that the Golden Calf episode teaches that reparations were unwarranted. The lesson is that the justice of reparations is so clear that if they are not disbursed in an organized way, plundered people are urged by G*d to take them anyway, and if the ensuing chaos produces

calamity, such as the Golden Calf, alongside great achievement, such as the Mishkan, then so be it; G*d shares the fault. - Aryeh Bernstein, *The Torah Case for Reparations*, *Medium* (March 2018)

מושיבין מלמדי תינוקות בכל מדינה ומדינה ובכל פלך ופלך ובכל עיר ועיר. וכל עיר שאין בה תינוקות של בית רבן מחרמין את אנשי העיר עד שמושיבין מלמדי תינוקות. ואם לא הושיבו מחרמין את העיר. שאין העולם מתקיים אלא בהכל פיהם של תינוקות של בית רבן: מכניסין את התינוקות להתלמד כבן שש כבן שבע לפי כח הבן ובגן גופו. ופחות מכן שש אין מכניסים אותו. ... ואין מבטלין התינוקות ואפלו לבגן בית המקדש. משנה תורה ב:א-ב

School teachers shall be placed in every province, district, and city. In any city where there's no place for children to learn, the people of the city are placed under a ban until they place teachers for the children. And if they still don't [place teachers], the city is undone. The world is maintained only by the breath of school children. Send children to be taught at 6 or 7 years old, according to the strength and development of the child. But don't send children less than 6 years old to school...We don't stop children [from going to school] even to rebuild the Temple. - *Mishneh Torah 2:1-2*

There is abundant evidence that police and jails do not make communities safe, and in many cases actually undermine safety. Yet at the local, state, and national levels, significant portions of public money are dedicated to policing and incarceration, while comparatively miniscule amounts are dedicated to the services, resources, and infrastructure needed to keep communities healthy and safe...community members and organizers around the country are fighting for investments in the type of critical resources that truly make communities safe: healthcare, mental health services and treatment, educational opportunities, affordable housing, transit access, and investments in youth. - *CPD, Freedom to Thrive*

This includes [7 policy demands including]:

1. A reallocation of funds at the federal, state and local level from policing and incarceration (JAG, COPS, VOCA) to long-term safety strategies such as education, local restorative justice services, and employment programs.
2. The retroactive decriminalization, immediate release and record expungement of all drug related offenses and prostitution, and reparations for the devastating impact of the "war on drugs" and criminalization of prostitution, including a reinvestment of the resulting savings and

DIVEST-INVEST: *We demand investments in the education, health and safety of Black people, instead of investments in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people. We want investments in Black communities, determined by Black communities, and divestment from exploitative forces including prisons, fossil fuels, police, surveillance and exploitative corporations.*

GBH: I read recently that by the middle of century black wealth will be zero - generations out of bondage and a handful of generations from the civil rights movement and we'll hit a cliff. The government that enslaved black people and profited from our forced labor continues to not only exist but grow its economy. The corporations and universities and institutions that invested in and profited from our enslavement continue to exist and grow profits. I want what is owed to black people because for hundreds of years black people were only black

revenue into restorative services, mental health services, job programs and other programs...

What is the problem?

- Drugs and prostitution laws have consistently served as vehicles for criminalizing Black people and communities, and have been used as tools of racial profiling, discriminatory enforcement, violence, extortion and abuse, and mass incarceration of Black people. They have also consistently been used to exclude and deny Black people access to housing, employment, education, family, and community, while simultaneously failing to address the needs of people struggling with addiction and survival.
- ...The federal government [is] quickly expanding police forces and jails...the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) alone has given between \$30 billion

and \$40 billion in direct grants to state and local law enforcement [since 2001]...These funds are given with little or no oversight and there is no accountability mechanism.

- ...There is no evidence that the massive spending on incarceration reduces crime rates or keeps communities safer. Studies do show that jobs and education make communities stronger and keep them safer. Investments in community based drug and mental health treatment, education, universal pre-K, and other social institutions can make communities safer while improving life outcomes for all.

We need to transform all of the energy we currently put into war and punishment into creating solutions for how to continue on this planet. The time, the energy, the money--- we actually have all of that in abundance. What we lack is will. - *adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy*

Since slavery, but especially in the age of mass

incarceration...[there has been an] incredible increase in the amount of spending that goes to police departments—to cages, prisons and jails, corrections offices, military equipment, and surveillance equipment. At the same time, [there has been] divestment from the social safety net, from social services and education to affordable housing. What makes our communities safe is not more guns, more police, or more cages, but employment opportunities, safe housing, jobs, education, restorative justice. - *Marbre Stahly-Butts, in Liza Bayless "Divest From Prisons, Invest in People" Yes! (Oct. 2016)*

In 2015 [Communities United

for Police Reform (NYC)] worked with their diverse member groups to develop a set of priorities for how to better invest \$100M (the cost associated with hiring a proposed 1000 new police officers) to reflect the real needs of New Yorkers: **Youth programs & services:** Summer youth programming (>\$100M); Free lunch programs for all public school students (\$24M); After school programs (\$13.6M); Parental engagement (\$7.1M); **Housing, Human, & Social Services:** Beds for runaway and homeless youth (\$4.5M); Legal representation for housing court tenants and immigrants in deportation proceedings (>\$100M); Public housing repairs (\$300M); Alternatives to incarceration programs (\$6.8M); **Higher Education:** Invest in City University of New York (\$150M); **Community & Economic Development:** Social work outreach for elderly (\$34M); Adult literacy programming (\$5M) - *CPD Freedom to Thrive*

A truly perverse aspect of this story is that just as past public policies created the racial wealth gap, current policy continues to widen it. The federal government spends a fortune subsidizing wealth-building activities like paying for college, saving for retirement or buying a home, but most of those dollars go to people who already have wealth. Since 1994, government spending on wealth-building has more than tripled—from \$200 billion in 1994 to \$660 billion last year...The costliest of those subsidies is the home-mortgage tax deduction, and a 2013 study by the National Priorities Project found that 77 percent of those benefits go to households with annual incomes between \$75,000 and \$500,000. Similarly, an estimated two-thirds of all public subsidies for retirement savings go to those with incomes in the top 20 percent of the distribution. We're spending a fortune on wealth building, but

bodies and black bodies were only black property. I want black people to be able to be whole people in America. I want what is owed to black people because I live in a tradition of Judaism that says that it is right for oppressed people to be free, it is right for a thief to return the value of what is stolen, and it is right to be penitent when I am a thief. **KBF:** To invest is to allocate resources in the expectation that it will benefit you in the future. America has indeed benefited from its investment in the exploitation of black bodies through slavery, indentured servitude and life long imprisonment. Leviticus 25 gives us a blueprint for divestment. We count 49 years, like we count 49 days between Pesach and Shavuot, and at the 50th year, it will be jubilee. The slave must be freed. The land must be returned. America must divest from exploitation and actually invest in the health, wealth and wellbeing of the people it has exploited.

very little of it ends up bolstering the net worths of poor people and people of color. - *Joshua Holland, "The Average Black Family Would Need 228 Years to Build the Wealth of a White Family Today," The Nation (Aug. 2016)*

Between 1983 and 2013, the wealth of median Black and Latino

households decreased by 75% (from \$6,800 to \$1,700) and 50% (from \$4,000 to \$2,000), respectively, while median White household wealth rose by 14% (from \$102,200 to \$116,800). If current trends continue, by 2020 median Black and Latino households stand to lose nearly 18% and 12%, respectively, of the wealth they held in 2013. In that same timeframe, median White household wealth would see an increase of 3%...in just under four years from now, median White households are projected to own 86 and 68 times more wealth than Black and Latino households, respectively.

- *Erik Sherman, "Median Wealth Of Black And Latino Families Could Hit Zero By The Middle Of The Century," Forbes (Sept. 2017)*

Housing, Human, & Social Services: Beds for runaway and homeless youth (\$4.5M); Legal representation for housing court tenants and immigrants in deportation proceedings (>\$100M); Public housing repairs (\$300M); Alternatives to incarceration programs (\$6.8M); **Higher Education:** Invest in City University of New York (\$150M); **Community & Economic Development:** Social work outreach for elderly (\$34M); Adult literacy programming (\$5M) - *CPD Freedom to Thrive*