

The California Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism is the network of Reform congregations in our state working together on public policy campaigns for justice on issues such as housing, immigration, criminal justice, climate justice and more. In 2021, we are working for passage of legislation (SB 731) to eliminate barriers to housing, employment, education and community group participation that people with past criminal records face long after having completed their sentences, and often for the rest of their lives. Reading and discussing *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration* is part of educating ourselves about these barriers and the multi-generational impacts they have on millions of Californians' lives.

Thank you to RAC-CA leaders Ari Zwern, Rabbi Elana Rosen-Brown and Rabbi Julie Saxe-Taller for this guide.

**Preparation:**

- The first meeting engages Section One (Chapters 1-3) of the book; it will go best if participants come to the group having read these chapters.
- If you are meeting on zoom, assign someone to set up the breakout rooms and monitor the time, so the leader can focus on leading.
- Recommended: choose breakout room leaders beforehand and share the agenda with them.

Welcome (7 min including waiting a couple of minutes for people to arrive)

- Introduce RAC-CA and the Time Done (SB 731) campaign to end the ongoing punishment and exclusion of formerly incarcerated people.
- Leader: Why we are reading *Halfway Home*? In other words, why does it matter for Jewish communities to know about the lives of people who have completed their sentences and parole? **Jewish tradition teaches that every person is made in the image of the Creator.** Usually, we refer to this teaching to emphasize the equal value of every person. **The centrality of this teaching illustrates how much our image or understanding of a person matters and impacts how we treat them.** Journalist and professor Nikole Hannah-Jones teaches: "We know that it is narrative that allows us to enact really dangerous policies, it is narrative that allows citizens to accept...erosions of civil rights. It is not incidental that the same states that are introducing...anti-critical race theory... are also introducing voter suppression laws." (<https://on.msnbc.com/3xsOyBj>)
- Leader: Add your own reasons for reading the book and discussing it with your Jewish community.

Introductions: Depending on your group size, do introductions all together or in the breakout groups instead. Recommended breakout group size: 4-6 participants (6 minutes total)

- Please share your name and why you are motivated to read *Halfway Home*. (6 minutes total)

Breakout Rooms (**8 minutes** for discussing Excerpt #1 only, **or 14 minutes** for Introductions and Excerpt #1)

- Excerpt #1: (8 minutes. Ask that all have a chance to speak before anyone speaks twice.)
  - Read aloud **p 37, up to the footnote #22.**
  - How is Miller's explanation of plea deals like or different from what you thought or knew before reading this?
  - How/does this description change your understanding of our criminal legal system overall?

Whole group sharing (7 minutes)

- Invite people to share what stands out for them from the smaller groups with the full group and to continue discussion.

Breakout Room (20 minutes)

- Excerpt #2: (10 minutes) Chapter 2, "Guilt" discusses the racialized underpinnings of our criminal legal system, and the presumption of Black criminality.
  - Read **p 67 last 8 lines through the end of this paragraph on p 68.**
  - How/did this chapter deepen your understanding of the connection between racism and criminalization?
  - How have you – or how might you – share this perspective with other people who may not yet see it this way?
- Excerpt #3: (5 minutes)
  - Read **p100 the paragraph beginning with "Locked out,"** and then **p122, the paragraph beginning with "The agency was busy".**
  - What does it mean that formerly incarcerated people live in an "economy of favors"?
  - How/did these paragraphs change your perception of a formerly incarcerated person, their family, and the institutions that are supposed to protect them?
- Excerpt #4: (5 minutes)
  - **Read p74, "My brothers were gone ..." through p75, "... the first time he had been arrested".**
  - What is the social and emotional impact of a formerly incarcerated person's isolation from their families and support networks?

Whole group sharing (10 minutes)

- This time can be used for continuing the smaller group discussions in the whole group and/or to invite people to share and comment on excerpts they have noted in their reading, other than those discussed so far.
- Close: Thank everyone for participating and share information about the next two meetings.

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**Preparation:**

- This meeting engages Section Two (Chapters 4-6) of the book; it will go best if participants come to the group having read these chapters.
- If you are meeting on zoom, assign someone to set up the breakout rooms and monitor the time, so the leader can focus on leading.
- Recommended: choose breakout room leaders beforehand and share the agenda with them.

Welcome and Introductions (7 min including waiting a couple of minutes for people to arrive)

- If you have participants who did not join you for the first meeting, briefly introduce RAC-CA and the Time Done campaign/SB 731 – ending the ongoing punishment and exclusion of formerly incarcerated people.
- Leader might share Deuteronomy 16:18-20 or another Jewish source that connects with the book.

“You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes, in all the settlements that the Eternal your God is giving you, and they shall govern the people with due justice. You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes, for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just. Justice, justice shall you pursue, that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Eternal your God is giving you” (Deut. 16:18-20).

Introductions: Depending on your group size, do introductions all together or in the breakout groups instead. Recommended breakout group size: 4-6 participants (6 minutes total)

Breakout Rooms (8 minutes for discussing Excerpt #1 only, or 14 minutes for Introductions and Excerpt #1)

- Introductions: Invite people to share their names and “one word or phrase you would use to describe the book *Halfway Home* so far” (6 minutes)
- Excerpt #1: Read aloud **p 142 at the bottom from “a million families live this way” through p 143.** (8 minutes)
  - In what ways does the system of mass incarceration impact people beyond those who technically serve time in jail or prison?
  - What do you think are the short- and long-term impacts of having a parent, partner, sibling, child or other close person who is incarcerated?

Whole group sharing from the discussions (7 minutes)

- Invite people to share what stands out for them from the smaller groups with the full group, to widen the discussion.

Breakout Room (18 minutes)

- Excerpt #2: Chapter 4, “Millions of Details,” discusses the pervasive impact of a criminal record. (10 minutes)
  - Read **p 158 starting with “the very first sentence through p 159.**
  - How did this chapter deepen your understanding of how our society treats members with a criminal record (see also 174, 177, and 179)?
  - How have you – or how might you – share this with other people who may not share this perspective? OR: How might you treat someone who has a criminal record differently after having read this?
- Excerpt #3: **p196 “The hard truth...” through p198.** (8 minutes)
  - How does Daniel’s story help you to understand the impact of prison experiences on post-prison life?
  - If tzedakah is not “charity” but rather “justice,” what could justice for people who are re-entering society look like, and how can we as a community pursue that kind of justice?

Whole group sharing (12 minutes)

- This time can be used for continuing the smaller group discussions in the whole group and/or to invite people to share and comment on excerpts they have noted in their reading, other than those discussed so far.
- Close: Thank everyone for participating and share information about the next meeting.

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**Preparation:**

- This meeting engages Section Three (Chapters 7-9) of the book; it will go best if participants come to the group having read these chapters.
- If you are meeting on zoom, assign someone to set up the breakout rooms and monitor the time, so the leader can focus on leading.
- Recommended: choose breakout room leaders beforehand and share the agenda with them.

Welcome (7 min including waiting a couple of minutes for people to arrive)

- If you have participants who did not join you for earlier meetings, briefly introduce RAC-CA and the Time Done campaign/SB 731 – ending the ongoing punishment and exclusion of formerly incarcerated people;
- Leader might share a Jewish source connected with the book, or open with this teaching:  
Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, former Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, wrote, "Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise." (<https://www.algemeiner.com/2020/01/28/why-storytelling-is-essential-to-jews-and-judaism/>) By learning and discussing the stories of formerly incarcerated people in *Halfway Home*, stories that are so often silenced and ignored, we help to *reshape* our own culture.

Introductions: Depending on your group size, do introductions all together or in the breakout groups instead.  
Recommended breakout group size: 4-6 participants (6 minutes total)

Breakout Rooms (10 minutes for discussing Excerpt #1 only, or 16 minutes for Introductions and Excerpt #1)

- Introductions: invite people to share briefly: Your name and one thing you have been thinking about from reading *Halfway Home*? (6 minutes)
- Excerpt #1: (10 minutes)
  - Read aloud **p 228 the main paragraph, beginning with "Reentry programs"**.
  - How does the current structure of re-entry programs shape our image of formerly incarcerated individuals?
  - What would re-entry support look like if the focus were not on improving individuals' "soft skills" but on challenging the pervasive social barriers faced by formerly incarcerated people?

### Whole group sharing (7 minutes)

- Invite people to share what stands out for them from the smaller groups and to continue discussion.

### Breakout Room (15 minutes)

- Excerpt #2: (10 minutes)
  - Read aloud **“The problem” (bottom of 244) through “this is true” (245)**.
  - Miller realizes, through his engagement with a formerly incarcerated individual, that changing hearts and minds is as important as changing policy. Can changes in public policy lead to collective changes of heart? What are some examples? (Possible examples: school integration, suffrage for women, the ADA, marriage equality, Title IX...)
  - What has been gained, and what are some of the limits of these changes?
- For discussion: (5 minutes)
  - What are some of the most important and powerful sections of the book for you, and how might you share the insights from them with others beyond this book group?

### Whole group sharing from the discussions (10 minutes)

- Final excerpt: Near the end of the book, Reuben Jonathan Miller writes:

This too is the afterlife of mass incarceration – to be separated from your hopes and any real idea of freedom. Millions of people are unable to decide for themselves where they will work or live or spend time. Millions more can't find a job or housing at all. There is no place for them to go because no place has been made for them, not even in the public's imagination.

The problem of mass incarceration has never really been about crime. It's that the people who Americans are afraid of are subject to a separate set of rules. They live in a separate and altogether different social world... No social-service agency, no matter how well funded, can bridge the divide between these two worlds... You cannot treat or arrest or, perhaps, even reform your way out of mass incarceration because mass incarceration is about citizenship, not criminal behavior, and citizenship is about belonging” (p 269-70).

- Final Question: Despite the many things that divide us, when have you felt a sense of belonging with people with different perspectives or experiences from yours? How did it feel to be included?” Ask a few people to share.

### Closing meditation: (5 minutes)

- Miller notes that many people have nowhere to go “because no place has been made for them, not even in the public's imagination.” We will close our discussion with a few minutes of silence, inviting each of us to ***imagine some of the changes that would make room for all people to have places to live, work and belong in our society.***
- Close with sharing a phrase or image from the meditation, or a highlight from the discussion group.