

June 18, 2018

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer  
Minority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
Washington DC 20510

Dear Majority Leader McConnell and Leader Schumer,

CC: Members of Congress

On behalf of the Union for Reform Judaism, whose 900 congregations across North America include 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, whose membership includes more than 2,000 Reform rabbis, **I urge you to support the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S.1917) and oppose attempts to pursue prison reform without sentencing reform.**

The Reform Jewish Movement is dedicated to the pursuit of racial justice, recognizing that our vision of dignity, equity and safety for all people is fundamental to our identity as a multiracial Reform Jewish community. This includes a deep commitment to advancing public policies that will dismantle the mass incarceration of people of color and eliminate racial disparities within the criminal justice system. Demonstrating our resolve, the Reform Jewish Movement has launched a nationwide “Urgency of Now” campaign to work with Reform clergy and lay leaders to mobilize congregations around reform of our nation’s criminal justice system.

Since the start of the war on drugs and the “tough on crime” policies that followed in the 1980s, harsh sentencing policies, including mandatory minimums and three strike laws, have significantly raised incarceration rates in the United States. With over 2.2 million Americans in prison or jail, the United States now has the largest incarcerated population in the world. These policies have been particularly devastating for communities of color. Black men are now incarcerated nearly six times as often as white men, and black people are jailed on drug charges 10 times more often than white people, despite the fact that white and black people use drugs at similar rates.

As Jews, we are inspired by the book of Deuteronomy, in which we are commanded, ‘Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof – justice, justice you shall pursue.’ The sages explain that the word tzedek is repeated not only for emphasis but to teach us that in our pursuit of justice, our means must be as just as our ends. As long as, on average, one in three black men, as opposed to one in seventeen white men, in America will serve time in prison at some point in their life, it is clear that our justice system is not operating in accordance with our deeply held Jewish beliefs about the just application of justice.

Comprehensive criminal justice reform, which must include meaningful sentencing reform, is the only way to stem the tide of mass incarceration. Although misguided attempts to solely reform the prison system will not accomplish this goal, securing the passage of the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act will reduce mandatory minimums for nonviolent drug offenses, grant judges greater discretion in



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sentencing decisions, offer rehabilitated prisoners new opportunities to reduce their sentences, ban solitary confinement for juveniles and retroactively apply the Fair Sentencing Act of 2010.

Any serious effort to repair our nation's broken criminal justice system must include robust sentencing reforms. The Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act will remedy unfair sentencing laws, improve prison practices, and encourage successful reentry for formerly incarcerated individuals across the country.

**Please cosponsor the Sentencing Reform and Corrections Act (S.1917) to begin the vital work of dismantling mass incarceration and eliminating racial disparities in the criminal justice system.**

Sincerely,

Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner