

# Jewish Perspectives on Reparations

## How do we reckon with the ways our holy texts both limit and countenance slavery?

Scholar Jonathan Crane uses Jewish texts to understand the moral imperative for reparations for Black enslaved people in the United States and their descendants. This session introduces a number of key concepts for this discussion through a Jewish lens, including generational wealth and the implications of acquiring wealth in unethical ways.

### GOALS

- Participants will understand historical reasons why there are wealth disparities in the U.S.
- Participants will begin to explore generational wealth.
- Participants will discuss Jewish texts and concepts that support reparations as U.S. policy.

### MATERIALS

- 3 small pieces of paper or sticky notes for half of the participants.
- Pens/pencils
- “Explained Racial Wealth Gap” video, Vox Media and Netflix  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqrhn8khGLM>
- Appendix A: Text handouts

### LESSON

*Framing 2 minutes:*

Over the past 10 years, the question of what is owed to the descendants of Black enslaved people in the United States has gained greater national attention. This lesson draws on ancient Jewish teachings to make a Jewish ethical argument about reparations. Before we think about what our Jewish response might be, let’s first take a look at the impact slavery and discrimination has had on people in the United States.

# Race, Religion & American Judaism

*Warm-up: 5 minutes*

Divide the participants into four groups. When possible, make two groups with adults and two groups with youth. The second group for each should have fewer people. The groups will represent the generational wealth gap in the U.S. between a marginalized group and a privileged group.

The four groups called Gen 1A and Gen 1B (for adults) and Gen 2A and Gen 2B (for youth) are provided 3 pieces of paper. Direct everyone in Gen 1 to draw a house on one sheet, money on another and clothes on a third.

*Background Lesson: 7 minutes*

Watch “Explained Racial Wealth Gap,” Vox Media and Netflix  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mqrhn8khGLM>

:00- 4:08 STOP after “across generations.” The next sentence contains explicit language. Continue at 4:27 and end at 7:40.

- What was new or thought provoking for you in this video?

Instruct Gen 1B to hand over the paper with the house and money to Gen 1A.

*Text Study: 30 minutes*

Keep in mind the history of BOTH slavery and racism within institutions from the 1600s until now. The institution part is key, we aren’t talking about racism between people but policies that provide advantages to White people that were and are built into government policies and laws.

We will now turn to the framework scholar Jonathan Crane uses to think about reparations. He uses both biblical and rabbinic texts to consider moral imperatives and rationales to explore reparations for slavery. Imperatives are what should or should not be done while rationales are the reasons why we should or should not do something.

This lesson explores the imperative that enslaved people or their descendants are owed reparations for their forced back-breaking work and two rationales that Crane puts forward. The rationales come from biblical and rabbinic Jewish texts. Each offers an opportunity to discuss a Jewish ethical framework for the moral imperative to make reparations for slavery.

Who can give us the quick version of the Exodus story that we tell at Passover? [Fill in any necessary gaps of the story. If short on time, the facilitator may tell the quick version of the story.]

After the Passover retelling, ask someone familiar with the song “Dayeinu” which appears in most haggadot, to explain what it’s about.

- Read Text 1, Appendix A.
  - What does it mean to you to sing of wealth taken from the Egyptians as a form of reparations for the Israelites’ slavery?
  - What does it mean for the core mythic story of the Jewish people to be grounded in reparations?
  - SAY: The giving of money comes from the Torah. It is well documented that the Israelites took wealth from the Egyptians.
- Read Text 2, Appendix A, together.
  - What is the meaning of the last phrase, “and you will despoil Egypt”? What is going on there?
  - Why do you think the Torah includes the taking of spoils as an element of the Exodus story?
  - How can this text provide a rationale for reparations?
  - What can we take from this text in our learning and thinking about U.S. slavery, the racial wealth gap, and possibilities for repair? If the reparations of 40 acres and mule had actually been provided, would that have satisfied the moral imperative to seek repair? How is that complicated when we think of the land as stolen from the indigenous peoples?

# Race, Religion & American Judaism

For our last text study, we are considering a portion of the Talmud, a work that reflects the discussions of Rabbis who lived during the first to sixth centuries CE. While the passage is not speaking about reparations, it has been applied to this issue by many current rabbis. The following text is drawn from an ancient rabbinic conversation about how to understand the situation of the house built from a stolen beam.

- Read Text 3, Appendix A.
- How would you explain this situation in your own words?
- What do the students of Beit Shammai and the students of Beit Hillel agree about? What do they disagree about? Which of the two views do you find most convincing, and why?
- How could this text be used as a rationale for a policy of reparations for descendants of Black enslaved people in the United States?
- How does this text address the moral responsibilities of many American Jews whose ancestors immigrated here after slavery? Of young people who were born in this century?

*Closing Activity: 10 minutes*

Instruct Gen 1B to hand what they have to Gen 2B. Have Gen 1A give their paper to Gen 2A.

- Group Gen 2A, what did you all do to get what you were just given?
- For those of you who have houses, would you keep both or use the money you can gain from them for something else?
- In this scenario, how did you benefit from ill-gotten gains? What did each step in our activity symbolize?

[Make sure to convey the idea that one set of adults handed over all the wealth they had and then had nothing to pass down to their children, which is what happened prior to the civil war to enslaved people and through post-civil war federal and local policy.]

# Race, Religion & American Judaism

*Close: 5 minutes*

Thank everyone for being engaged during the time together.

Ask each person to imagine the United States as a place where reparations would be a government policy in a more just world and to share one sentence about how that might look or feel.

## Texts on Reparations

### Text 1

Echoes of Reparations in Jewish Religious Practice

Pesach Haggadah: Dayeinu

How many good steps did the One-Who-is-Every-Place take for us!  
 If God had taken us out of Egypt and not made judgments on them, *Dayeinu!*  
 If God had made judgments on them and had not done so on their gods, *Dayeinu!*  
 If God had done so on their gods and not killed their firstborn, *Dayeinu!*  
 If God had killed their firstborn and **not given us their money, *Dayeinu!***  
 If God had given us their money and not split the Sea for us, *Dayeinu!*...

כמה מעלות טובות למקום עלינו!  
 אלו הוציאנו ממצרים ולא עשה בהם שפטים, דינו.  
 אלו עשה בהם שפטים, ולא עשה באלהיהם, דינו.  
 אלו עשה באלהיהם, ולא הרג את בכוריהם, דינו.  
 אלו הרג את בכוריהם ולא נתן לנו את ממונם, דינו.  
 אלו נתן לנו את ממונם ולא קרע לנו את הים, דינו....

### Text 2

“We Were Slaves in Egypt” - and we left with resources

God to Moshe at the Burning Bush: Sh’mot/Exodus 3:19-22

*(God responds to Moshe’s reluctance to accept his assignment to go back to liberate his people.)*

“And I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. So I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders that I will do among them, and after that he will let you go. And I will put this people’s favor in Egypt’s eyes, and it will be that when you go you will not go empty-handed. Each woman will ask for silver objects and gold objects from her neighbor and from anyone lodging in her house, and you will put them on your sons and your daughters, and you will despoil Egypt.”

ואני ידעתי כי לא יתן אתכם מלך מצרים להלך ולא ביד חזקה: ושלחתי את ידי והכיתי את מצרים בכל נפלאתי אשר אעשה בקרבם ואחרי כן ישלח אתכם: ונתתי את חן העם הזה בעיני מצרים והיה כי תלכו לא תלכו ריקם: ושאלה אשה משכנתה ומגרת ביתה כלי כסף וכלי זהב ושמלת ושמתם על בניכם ועל בנותיכם ונצלתם את מצרים:

Appendix A

## Texts on Reparations

### Text 3

When a House is Built on a Stolen Foundation

Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55a

<p>About a stolen beam that was already built into a building: The Sages taught: If one robbed another of a beam and built it into a building,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beit Shammai* says: One must destroy the entire building and return the beam to its owners.</li><li>• And Beit Hillel** says: The injured party receives only the value of the beam but not the beam itself, due to an ordinance instituted for the sake of the penitent.***</li></ul>	<p>ועל המריש הגזול שבנאו: תנו רבנן גזל מריש ובנאו בבירה ב"ש אומרים מקעקע כל הבירה כולה ומחזיר מריש לבעליו וב"ה אומרים אין לו אלא דמי מריש בלבד משום תקנת השבין:</p>
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\* This refers to the students of the ancient sage Shammai.

\*\* This refers to the students of the ancient sage Hillel.

\*\*\* The medieval commentator Rashi explains that this ordinance exists to encourage a person to confess their wrongdoings. If the potential penitent doesn't think they could ever redress the harm they have done, they might not be moved to repent.