Resolution on the Study and Development of Reparations for Slavery and Systemic Racism in the U.S.

Submitted by the Commission on Social Action

In the Talmud, we learn that all people are descended from a single person so that no person can say, "my ancestor is greater than yours." (Sanhedrin 37a) “God created humanity from the four corners of the earth - yellow clay, and white sand, black loam, and red soil. Therefore, the earth can declare to no part of humanity that it does not belong here, that this soil is not their rightful home.” (Yalkut Shimoni 1:1) These passages have inspired decades of resolutions expressing our commitment to civil rights and pursuit of racial justice including Civil Rights (1950), Commitment to Racial Justice (1963), Race and the U.S. Criminal Justice System (1999), the Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in the U.S. (2014), and Our Community’s Pursuit of Racial Justice (2017), among others.

Systemic racial oppression in the United States began four hundred years ago with the institution of slavery. Black families were ripped apart, Black individuals were subjected to sexual and other forms of violence, and Black children were kept deliberately uneducated and illiterate. Some early Jewish Americans were among slave traders and owners.

Though the practice of slavery was ultimately restricted to southern states, it was inextricably intertwined with the development of the American economy and of the nation overall.¹ Northern state residents provided southern slave owners with the tools needed to keep people enslaved, were instrumental in returning slaves to their owners, and relied heavily on cotton, according to a 2014 New York Times article.

tobacco and sugar crops harvested by slaves. After the adoption of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that abolished slavery in the U.S., systemic oppression, violence, and racial discrimination against Black Americans continued. Jim Crow laws, lynchings, policies such as “separate but equal,” restricted access to the ballot box for Black Americans, an unjust criminal justice system have led to drastically higher incarceration rates of Black men, redlining, and denied economic, educational and social opportunities for Black Americans, among a litany of injustices persisted through the generations. These many forms of violence and discrimination have generated ongoing generational and historic trauma for Black Americans.

Today, racial inequity is present in virtually every aspect of American life: Seventy-three percent of white households own their homes, compared to only 43 percent of Black households. Black students are expelled from school at disproportionately high rates, and the 2013 total college enrollment rate for white students was 42 percent, while rates for their Black peers was only 34 percent. The employment rate for Black men has been 11 to 15 percentage points lower than that for whites in every month since January 2000. Black women experience maternal deaths at three to four times that of white women. Black infants are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday compared to white babies. Blacks are incarcerated at a rate 5.1 times higher than that of whites. The ongoing wounds of slavery and centuries of entrenched

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5 Significant racial and ethnic disparities still exist, according to Stanford report. Stanford. June 16th 2017
7 National Center for Vital Statistics: IMR B:W = 11.11 v 4.82
racial discrimination continue to fester and impact every part of American society. Such injustices will endure unless proactive steps are taken to acknowledge and eliminate them.\textsuperscript{9}

One means of addressing centuries of entrenched racial discrimination is through reparations. Reparations can take many forms including expressions of remorse, education, monetary compensation, and more.\textsuperscript{10} According to the United Nations, several conditions must be met for full reparations: These are cessation of injury and a guarantee of non-repetition; compensation from the injuring state, institution or individual for the damages done; restitution and repatriation, restoring identity, culture, livelihood, and humanity; satisfaction, including apologies; and rehabilitation, including legal, medical, psychological, and other care and services.\textsuperscript{11} In practice, these measures may manifest as congressional hearings, a national apology, the institution of government programs, creation of tax incentives for Black-owned businesses, educational stipends to Black Americans, individual or community compensation, or other approaches. Legislation has been introduced in the House of Representatives to establish a commission to study slavery and its ongoing effects (including other forms of race-based discrimination), recommend ways to educate the public, and recommend remedies for these injustices.\textsuperscript{12}

Our Jewish texts are clear on the importance of restitution for wrongs committed. The rabbis understood that the victim of a crime was made whole by financial repayment for damages

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{9} Race and Ethnicity in America: Turning a Blind Eye to Injustice. ACLU. December 2007
\textsuperscript{10} What Do 2020 Candidates Mean When They Say “Reparations.” The Atlantic. June 5th 2015
\textsuperscript{12} H.R. 40-116th Congress. US Congress. June 19th 2019
\end{footnotesize}
done. Maimonides went one step further, linking the payment of damages to the concept of 
*t’shuvah*, noting that repentance must accompany the financial commitment (Mishnah Torah, 
Hilchot Teshuvah 1.1).

In 2008, the U.S. House of Representatives adopted a formal resolution that “apologizes to 
African Americans on behalf of the people of the United States, for the wrongs committed 
against them and their ancestors who suffered under slavery and Jim Crow.”13 Today, there are 
growing calls for reparations to be made to the descendants of slaves.

Some argue that today’s generation should not bear the burdens of wrongs committed by their 
ancestors. Yet as scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates said in his June 19, 2019 testimony before a 
congressional committee, “We honor treaties that date back some 200 years, despite no one 
being alive who signed those treaties. Many of us would love to be taxed for the things we are 
solely and individually responsible for. But we are American citizens, and thus bound to a 
collective enterprise that extends beyond our individual and personal reach.”14

Recent examples of reparations to wronged communities and individuals offer some guidance. 
Since 1952, the German government has paid more than $70 billion in reparations to more than 
800,000 Holocaust survivors. In 1988, the U.S. formally apologized to more than 100,000 people 
of Japanese heritage who were subjected to internment during World War II and provided 
$20,000 to each survivor.

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The history of slavery and the ills that have succeeded it are collective American issues that have affected the Black community broadly, in addition to those individuals who are direct descendants of slaves. Racial healing can only begin to be achieved when this systemic oppression is recognized and accounted for. As an institution striving to be antiracist, we seek to address the harms of those who came before us, and the injustices that continue to surround us, so that we do what we can to make our institutions, communities, and nation more just for future generations. As Jews, we know from Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, (2:21) that we are not required to finish the task, but neither are we free to desist from it.

THEREFORE, the Union for Reform Judaism resolves to:

1. Advocate for the creation of a federal commission to study and develop proposals for reparations to redress the historic and continuing effects of slavery and subsequent systemic racial, societal, and economic discrimination against Black Americans;

2. Urge our congregations and their members to take active steps to redress the destructive effects of historic and ongoing systemic racism, including through education and conversations within our congregations and communities using resources such as the RAC’s Reflect, Relate, Reform toolkit and other nationally recognized resources;

3. Commit to ongoing assessment and evaluation to strengthen our own institutions’ efforts to combat implicit and explicit bias and promote racial equity.

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15 Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism: Racial Justice