

GOD FORGIVES: CAN WE?

RABBI ANGELA WARNICK BUCHDAHL, YOM KIPPUR 5780

In her sermon, Rabbi Buchdahl talks about the 70 million people in the United States who are or were incarcerated; 2.2 million of them are currently behind bars. Roughly 1 in 5 Americans have criminal records. Because of the immense scale of incarceration in this country, she also humanizes those individuals our society locks up by sharing the stories of Terrance Coffie and Evie Litwock.

Rabbi Buchdahl tells the story of Terrance Coffie in his own words:

My Dad was a pimp and my Mom was a prostitute.
I was born a seed of failure and never given the chance to grow up anything but that.
My life was saturated with poverty.
I was put in dysfunctional schools and bounced around in foster homes.
I believed in God as a child, but I knew that there were people who God loved and people like me, who He didn't.
As a young black man without a high school degree, I couldn't get access to a job.
But I could get access to drugs.
By 20 I was in prison.

The first time I was in prison I got my GED.
Finally! When someone asked me if I had a high school diploma, I could say YES.
But they didn't ask me that when I got out.
They asked if I was formerly incarcerated.
This is what we do to people like me:
You take a child of poverty, you put me in a cage. You release me right back into poverty. Only now, on top of that, I am also formerly incarcerated.
There is no way out.
I was in and out of prison 6 times.
19 years of my life.

When I was 39, I was finally given a break.
The Doe Fund changed the course of my life.
It wasn't just a second chance. It was my first opportunity.

Those living with convictions are ineligible for certain professions, are legally discriminated against in employment, and in many states are permanently disenfranchised (i.e., are never again allowed to vote). They cannot receive government assistance in housing, food, or education. This is what Rabbi Buchdahl says, in telling Evie Litwock's story:

Is it a surprise that nearly 80% of the formerly incarcerated go back to jail within 5 years of release? Without giving them the support they need succeed, every sentence becomes a life sentence.

Evie Litwok knows this truth firsthand. She is the daughter of two Holocaust survivors. She committed a non-violent offense and was sentenced to two years in prison. When Evie was released, they handed her a Greyhound bus ticket and \$30. She applied for 200 jobs, and while she had a thirty year work history, she could not get even an entry level job. She was homeless and destitute for 16 months.

Evie was able to turn her life around only because an old friend stepped forward and helped her find an apartment and sent her money each month. Evie founded Witness to Mass Incarceration which gives voice to formerly incarcerated women and helps them find resources for reentry. Evie wanted me to point out that she looks like your typical Jewish grandmother. Because she wants you to know that this happens in the Jewish community.

This happens in families across the country, including our own.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) What do you think or feel when you hear the story of Terrance Coffie, an African American man now in his 40s?
- (b) What do you think or feel when you hear the story of Evie Litwock, a Jewish woman now in her 70s?
- (c) Do you experience these two stories differently? Do these two people's ages, races, religions, or convictions make you think of them in different ways?
- (d) How do these two stories help us understand the huge numbers of people trapped in the carceral system?

One of the themes Rabbi Buchdahl introduces, in relation to how we think about incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, is retribution vs. redemption. The texts of Yom Kippur highlight this dichotomy, in particular the haftarah portion.

In this prophetic reading, Jonah raises his voice against sinners who are forgiven by God, taking issue with their lack of punishment (Jonah 3:1-5; 3:10-4:4):

The word of Adonai came to Jonah a second time: "Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it what I tell you." Jonah went at once to Nineveh in accordance with Adonai's command. Nineveh was an enormously large city a three days' walk across. Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The people of

Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth.

God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. ...This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved.

He prayed to Adonai, saying, "O Adonai! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Adonai, take my life, for I would rather die than live." Adonai replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How does it feel to condemn sinners, as Jonah does? How does it feel to forgive them, as God does? Is God's ability to forgive something we humans are capable of?
- (b) How does offering or withholding forgiveness from others affect our own selves?
- (c) Can we, unlike Jonah, learn to truly forgive those who have erred, sinned, or committed crimes? How?

Forgiveness and redemption emanate from God, but Rabbi Buchdahl also asks us to consider our individual responsibilities and our communal responsibilities to make right.

One passage suggests that individual action can help redeem others (Isaiah 58:4-10):

Because you fast in strife and contention, And you strike with a wicked fist! Your fasting today is not such As to make your voice heard on high. Is such the fast I desire, A day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing the head like a bulrush And lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, A day when Adonai is favorable?

No, this is the fast I desire: To unlock fetters of wickedness, And untie the cords of the yoke To let the oppressed go free; To break off every yoke. It is to share your bread with the hungry, And to take the wretched poor into your home; When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.

Then shall your light burst through like the dawn And your healing spring up quickly; Your Vindicator shall march before you, The Presence of Adonai shall be your rear guard. Then, when you call, Adonai will answer; When you cry, God will say: Here I am. If you banish the yoke from your midst, The menacing hand, and evil speech, and you offer your compassion to the hungry And satisfy the famished creature— Then shall your light shine in darkness, And your gloom shall be like noonday.

A second passage describes the efficacy of an entire town taking communal responsibility for a crime (Deuteronomy 21:1-9):

If, in the land that Adonai your God is assigning you to possess, someone slain is found lying in the open, the identity of the slayer not being known, your elders and magistrates shall go out and measure the distances from the corpse to the nearby towns. The elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall then take a heifer which has never been worked, which has never pulled in a yoke; and the elders of that town shall bring the heifer down to an everflowing wadi, which is not tilled or sown. There, in the wadi, they shall break the heifer's neck.

The priests, sons of Levi, shall come forward; for Adonai your God has chosen them to minister to God and to pronounce blessing in the name of Adonai, and every lawsuit and case of assault is subject to their ruling. Then all the elders of the town nearest to the corpse shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the wadi. And they shall make this declaration: "Our hands did not shed this blood, nor did our eyes see it done. Absolve, O Adonai, Your people Israel whom You redeemed, and do not let guilt for the blood of the innocent remain among Your people Israel." And they will be absolved of bloodguilt.

Thus you will remove from your midst guilt for the blood of the innocent, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of Adonai.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How do these Biblical texts encourage taking individual responsibility? Communal responsibility?
- (b) These passages do not suggest that one approach is more important than the other—but do you think either an individual or a communal response is more effective?
- (c) Can you think of a time when you experienced individual or communal responsibility in action? How did it work? What was the result?

Drawing inspiration from these Biblical passages, Rabbi Buchdahl asks us to consider what individual actions and what communal responsibilities we have, to offer acceptance and opportunities to our brothers and sisters who are and were incarcerated. She says:

For the first time in 50 years, attitudes are shifting. And we have a moral opportunity to decarcerate, not incarcerate; to humanize, not criminalize. We may not agree on every detail of how to reform the system, but meaningful change can begin with each one of us. And on this holy day of repentance and forgiveness—we must forgive our brothers and sisters who have paid their time and give them a chance to return—fully—back to society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How can each of us forgive those who have been convicted of crimes?

- (b) How can we, as individuals, help these brothers and sisters fully return to society?
- (c) How can we, as a community, help them?