

The Black Panther: Changing Spaces and Lives

I am a bit of a sucker for good action movies that actually have a plot that has a message and mostly makes sense (not all do!) [Black Panther](#) had all that and more.

It's the first major motion picture about a black superhero and it was a lot of fun, with some unexpected twists and turns.

But underneath all the fast fight scenes, there was a major moral message: the immorality of stealing millions of Africans and selling them as slaves, treating them and their children as property, stealing their lives, followed by having them endure the embedding racism that is woven into the very DNA of this country.



Five years ago,
I stood at a slave
castle in Ghana,
looking through the
Door of No Return.



Africans, stolen from their homes, were forced onto ships to the new world;

a perilous journey to a new reality of unimaginable violence, violation, and labor.

In addition to the horrendous treatment of the Native American population, slavery is the original sin upon which our country was founded.

Their bondage has no parallel except for the narrative of the Jewish people, who also endured centuries of slavery in Egypt. It is no wonder that our story of freedom and redemption resonated so strongly for African-American slaves.

But, of course, there is a big difference in these stories: after our emancipation, we were led to Sinai and the Promised Land. But since the Emancipation Proclamation, blacks have endured racial segregation and the Jim Crow laws, deep racism and poverty that has been almost impossible for most African-Americans to escape. Our society still has not performed proper *teshuvah* and reparations have still not been made to the descendants of those slaves.

Today, the history of racial and economic injustice against African-Americans, and the post-civil rights era focus on “law and order” and incarceration to address a host of social problems, including deep

poverty, has had a multigenerational impact leading to the incarceration crisis of African-American men today.

Reading [Elizabeth Hinton's op-ed "Turn Prisons Into Colleges"](#) this week opened my eyes to this problem and to a possible solution.



From [Penny Postcards from Massachusetts: A USGenWeb Archives Web Site](#)

She writes: "Imagine if prisons looked like the grounds of universities. Instead of languishing in cells, incarcerated people sat in classrooms and learned about climate science or poetry – just like college students. Or even with them."

Hinton continues by describing [experiments in this type of prison](#) experience including one here in Massachusetts that was started by a Harvard alumnus in the 1920's.

Even the right-leaning [RAND Corporation](#) published a study in 2013 demonstrating “that inmates who took classes have a 43% lower likelihood of recidivism and a 13% higher likelihood of getting a job after leaving prison.”

So even if some do not agree with the history of this problem, or see this as a moral issue, maybe people will just want to save money!

But you may ask: what does this have to do with this week’s Torah reading?

Good question.

Judaism introduced many innovations into the world, but one of our most brilliant understandings was a different conception about the trajectory of our lives. Before Judaism, most people believed that they were fated to live the lives they were born into, and they did not have opportunities to change their fate.

And if they made a mistake, they were finished.

Second chances were hard to come by.

But our tradition offered a new path. Judaism imagined a world where people were afforded the opportunity to learn, to change and to grow, as well as, to be forgiven, to perform *teshuvah*.

We know this from *Yom Kippur*, our Day of Atonement, which, when combined with a serious process of introspection and asking for forgiveness, leads to a transformed person.

But we also know this from the entire sacrificial system, which at its core offered a person a way to perform *teshuvah*, to atone and change. If one brought a *korban*, a sacrifice, then forgiveness could be found readily at hand. Over time, this was combined with a process of self-transformation and healing relationships that afforded one a new lease on life.

Where were those sacrifices brought? Originally, to the *Mishkan* – to the Tabernacle, the temporary sanctuary that the Israelites utilized for forty years in the wilderness. All the materials and artistry transform this space into something holy and profound.



For an ancient Israelite, the *Mishkan* offered a way to a better tomorrow – a way to say sorry and be forgiven for a failing or a misdeed. The skins, wood, linen and wool created a new space – one that transformed the people, allowing them to live a better life.

So too, it is today.

Prisons can be reframed into spaces that not only punish, but also help people rebuild their lives and, by extension, their families and communities.

As we recite on the High Holy Days, “God does not desire the death of the sinner; but that he changes his ways and lives.”



Our tradition offered a different path for convicted criminals as well. The Torah teaches that one who has committed a crime and cannot pay back the amount he owes must work until the debt is repaid.

Instead of imprisoning the one who has committed a crime, this concept teaches the person to help right the wrong that he has done. Today, we might imagine this as a type of community service.

Rabbi Shmuel Yanklowitz¹, an Orthodox rabbi and activist, teaches that “another Jewish alternative to incarceration is the *ir ha’miklat*, ‘City of Refuge,’ in which an unintentional murderer lives in a protective community that operates like a normal city. This is



helpful, according to Yanklowitz, because these individuals are kept away from general society, but still live a normal life. This would ensure an easier transition into the regular society once the prisoner leaves the City of Refuge.

We can see this type of thinking in how our prisons can be transformed as well.

But, if we ever need a reminder of the power of forgiveness, of the power of *teshuvah*, we must merely look at the placement of this week’s reading.

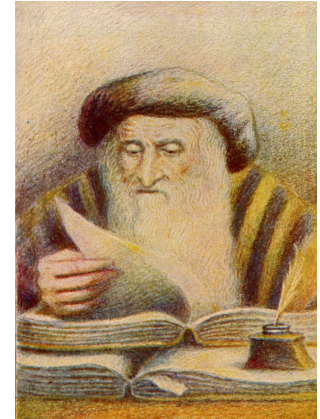
We read of the building of the *Mishkan* right after the sin of the building and worshipping of the Golden Calf. It’s noteworthy that just after this moment of deep rupture, when the newly-forged covenant has been

¹ Photo of Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklovitz by Fropals1 (Oct. 7, 2015)

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torn asunder by wrongdoing, does God forgive the Israelites inviting them to create a space for atonement and God's presence.

The great French commentator, [Rashi](#), points out that this reading occurred on the day after *Yom Kippur*, after the people had been forgiven for their sin of the Golden Calf.



Just as God forgives the Israelites for their sins, so too, should we find ways to help people transform their lives and be forgiven for some of their misdeeds, especially when we take into account the larger context of poverty, racism, drugs and the lack of opportunities.

Just as the *Mishkan* created a new space that filled the people with hope, so can our prison system be recreated in ways that will help people and our entire society.

That type of justice is what our society needs and what our Torah demands.

As the [Black Panther](#) teaches at the end of the film: "We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth, more connects us than separates us.

But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers.
We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single
tribe.”



Photo from article “‘Black Panther’: What those end-credits scenes tell us (spoilers!) about Marvel’s future” by [Brian Truitt](#), USA TODAY Published 8:01 a.m. ET Feb. 17, 2018 | Updated 12:09 a.m. ET Feb. 24, 2018