

RAC Reads Guide
***Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson**
Prepared by the Religious Action Center and Rabbi Erica Asch

Introduction:

The following guide is intended to facilitate conversations about *Just Mercy*, by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson is the founder and director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit organization based in Montgomery, AL, that provides free legal assistance to individuals who have been treated unfairly by the justice system and who are unable to pay for their own legal representation. He has successfully freed dozens of people wrongly imprisoned and has won numerous awards, including the MacArthur Foundation “Genius Grant.”

RAC Reads is a program by the Religious Action Center to encourage reading groups that explore contemporary social justice topics in the context of Jewish teachings and values. The discussion guides are designed for families, congregations and communities. As such, not all of the facilitation tips and discussion questions may be applicable in all cases. Feel free to take from and adapt the information provided here as you structure your own conversations.

We hope that this guide will spark engaging and challenging discussions among Reform Jews about race and racism within our communities and in the United States. For more information about the RAC’s current work on racial justice, visit our website at www.rac.org.

Facilitation Tips:

Conversations about race, racism, whiteness and privilege can often be uncomfortable. It is important to create a discussion space in which participants are made to feel safe and their perspectives respected. Below are some tips for facilitating conversations about difficult topics.

1. Set group goals for the conversation before it begins. Discuss why participants are in the room, what they hope to learn and what they believe constitutes a productive and successful discussion.
2. Establish community guidelines prior to the start of the conversation. These communally-created rules ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate. They can be formally written down and displayed somewhere in the room, or informally discussed and agreed upon. The facilitator can also model some of these behaviors for the group. Some common community guidelines are:
 - a. “I” statements – always speak from a personal place, using “I” rather than “we,” “you” or generalities
 - i. Remind participants that, although this is a Jewish space, that does not mean that there is not a diversity of identities (race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, age, ability, etc.) represented in the room
 - ii. Ex: “*In my experience*, I have found that society perceives me as white.” vs. “*Everyone* knows that *all* Jews are white.”
 - b. Trust intent – trust that no one in the group intends to harm or to offend

- c. Name impact – inform the group when someone has said something that offends you, and explain why
 - . Ex: “I found that last statement difficult to hear because my personal experience has been different.”
 - d. Step up, step back – be mindful of how much you and others in the room are speaking and try to take a step back when you find yourself speaking too often
3. Provide participants with a paper copy of the discussion questions when they arrive and include space between each question to draft ideas for answers. Give participants several minutes before launching into discussion to organize their thoughts.
 4. If you find that a participant seems distressed during the group conversation, ask the others in the group to break off into one-on-one discussions about a particular question and then approach that person individually.
 5. Actively facilitate. Don’t be afraid to reroute the conversation if it strays too far off track, or to solicit answers from those who have not spoken often.
 6. At the same time, encourage participants to explore difficult subjects and to push personal boundaries, even if it means making mistakes. Within reason, allow participants to steer the conversation towards topics that are relevant and important to them.
 7. Debrief after the discussion is finished. Ask participants what went well and what did not. Talk about ways to potentially improve future conversations.

Questions for Discussion:

1. When Bryan Stevenson was growing up, his grandmother told him, “you can't understand most of the important things from a distance, Bryan. You have to get close (p. 14).” In what ways has this book allowed you to “get close” to issues of racial justice in America? In what ways do you still keep your distance?
2. Jewish values teach us to uphold the sanctity of human life. In Ezekiel 33:11, for example, it is said: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” How does this passage relate to *Just Mercy’s* examination of the death penalty? Can we reconcile capital punishment with the value the Jewish tradition places on life and rehabilitation?
3. “Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: *Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done* (p. 18).” As it says in Ecclesiastes, “There is none on earth so righteous as to only do good and never sin (7:20).” Imagine if others judged you on the worst thing you have ever done. In what ways does the current criminal justice system in America judge people based on their worst? How might our criminal justice system (sentencing, incarceration, release) encourage and support people to be their best?
4. When Mr. Stevenson is coming home late one night, he stays in his car, listening to the radio. A SWAT team approaches him, threatens him with a gun and illegally searches the car. Neighbors accuse him of being behind recent burglaries in the neighborhood (pp. 38-44). Stevenson writes that he thought about running, and if he was younger, he probably would have run. Share your reactions to this passage. How does reading it relate to your understanding of recent examples of excessive force used by law

enforcement and accusations that these shootings were motivated by race? In the book, we read about metal detectors and German shepherds being used at Walter McMillian's hearings (pp. 174-177). What powerful message did this send to McMillian's supporters? In what other ways can supposedly 'race neutral' efforts actually negatively affect one racial or ethnic community?

5. Mr. Stevenson's description of the pride and joy he feels in witnessing McMillian's supporters fill the courtroom presents a powerful case for showing up in the struggle for justice (pp. 166-167). How can you as an individual "show up" for racial justice? How can the Jewish community "show up"?
6. Herbert Richardson was abused as a child and was a Vietnam veteran who suffered from severe PTSD (Read his story on pp. 72-91). On the date of his execution, he tells Mr. Stevenson, "More people have asked me what they can do to help me in the last fourteen hours of my life than ever asked me in the years when I was coming up (p. 89)." What balance does our society currently strike between helping people early in life to avoid mistakes and punishing criminal behavior later in life? Can we be doing better?
7. After his release from prison, Walter McMillian struggles. His time in prison and on death row traumatized him and he was never the same again. In a particularly heartbreaking episode, he thinks he is still on death row although he is in a hospital (p. 279). In what ways does our current system of incarceration inflict lasting trauma on the imprisoned? What responsibility, if any, does our society have to make sure that prisoners are rehabilitated and that they have the support and opportunities necessary to succeed once they are released?
8. In Deuteronomy 16:20, it is instructed: "*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*" ("Justice, justice you shall pursue"). Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Pzhysha taught that *tzedek* is repeated to emphasize that just ends must be attained only through just means. Based on your reading of *Just Mercy* and your own experiences, does the criminal justice system reflect this passage and its interpretation? Are the ends of our criminal justice system just? Are its means just?
9. Re-read Mr. Stevenson's summary of the rise of the prison population on pages 14-16. Do you agree with Mr. Stevenson's discussion of mass incarceration and its disproportionate impact on the black community?
10. How has your thinking about race in the criminal justice system changed as a result of reading this book, if at all?
11. Which sections of the book or ideas it presents did you find most challenging to accept?
12. What is one issue related to the themes of *Just Mercy* that you would like to address in your own community or congregation? How might you take the first step?
13. What does it mean to pursue racial justice or criminal justice reform in a Jewish context? How can Jewish values be brought to bear in the struggle against persistent structural and personal racism in the United States?

Additional Resources

Suggested Books

- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *Waking Up White* by Debby Irving
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine
- *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* by Isabel Wilkerson
- *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin

Suggested Websites

- www.rac.org/civil-rights
- www.rac.org/mlk
- www.bryanstevenson.com
- www.eji.org