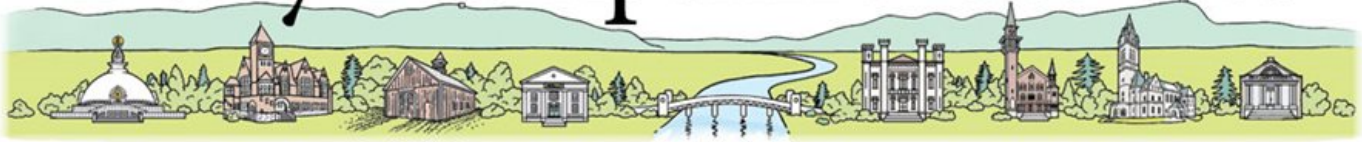


Daily Hampshire Gazette



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Guest columnists Devorah Jacobson and Jeff Gold: A national conversation on reparations is long overdue



Past Amherst area residents Henry Jackson, center, Lt. Frazar Stearns, left, and Anna Reed Goodwin, right, are featured on the Amherst Community History Mural, as seen through the adjacent West Cemetery fence in Amherst. AP

By [Devorah Jacobson and Jeff Gold \(/byline?byline=By Devorah Jacobson and Jeff Gold\)](#).

Published: 8/17/2021 3:00:09 PM

Reparations activism in the Pioneer Valley is ongoing and passionate as evidenced by, among other things, a number of articles in the Gazette these past few months.

Many articles have described the yeoman efforts of Michele Miller and Matthew Andrews who last year initiated Reparations for Amherst. They continue to work tirelessly with Amherst town representatives and Black stakeholders and leadership, to move the idea of reparations from words and pledges to meaningful reality. Other articles have described reparations work being done elsewhere in the Valley.

We wanted to highlight the work of a group of activists at the Jewish Community of Amherst (JCA), who since last June have also taken up the issue of reparations with great focus and energy. The JCA (which is a Reconstructionist Congregation, the largest such synagogue in New England) responded to the death of George Floyd with the creation of a multi-pronged effort called Tzedek: A Racial Justice Initiative. (Tzedek means “Justice”.)

Several committees formed and continue to work on various aspects of racial justice, including the committee we co-chair, the Reparations Committee.

Our committee's efforts have largely focused on education, both within our own community and eventually extending beyond. We began by engaging in months of study and discussion among our 16-member committee, reading mostly African American thought leaders on reparations, U.S. history, post-Holocaust history, and contemporary Jewish moral philosophy.

What many of us discovered, painfully, is that however well-educated we thought we were, we were woefully mis-educated when it came to understanding the true history of this country, especially the centuries of racism and white supremacy. To quote Clint Smith from his new book, "How the Word is Passed," "It's a feeling of discovered ignorance."

Our process of ongoing education also included various community presentations and open forums with the larger JCA community on the topic of reparations. Our rabbi, Benjamin Weiner, skillfully helped to build consensus within the community. We also created and sponsored an educational series called "The Stolen Beam series," a five-week class exploring reparations, in which some 60 participants from the JCA and Congregation B'nai Israel participated.

The Stolen Beam series was so successful that other congregations and community institutions, Jewish and non-Jewish, have either expressed an interest in replicating it or have made plans to do so. Two courses will be offered in the fall, in Northampton and Longmeadow, and we welcome interest from any other civic or religious organizations that might want to engage in this series. We are also writing a comprehensive Facilitation Manual to accompany the series for those who are seeking to use it in their communities.

In June 2021, the JCA board of directors unanimously endorsed a resolution from its national affiliate, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. That resolution supports reparations for slavery and Indigenous genocide, the need to work "in solidarity with local African Americans and Indigenous-led groups to repair harm that has been done, and the need to actively support HR 40, the Reparations bill introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, and any sibling legislation brought before the U.S. Senate to explore and further the cause of reparations."

We feel proud of these decisions and hope that these actions outlined above might be a model for other religious and civic communities.

The concept of reparations is not about individual guilt. It is about a society recognizing the harms it has committed and engaging in what Jewish spiritual tradition calls Teshuvah: a sustained, sincere and meaningful effort to acknowledge and tangibly redress the harms done, with a resolve to commit no such further harms.

Opponents of reparations often argue that slavery was abolished long ago and therefore has nothing to do with the present. We take issue with such attempts to continue to ignore all the ways that slavery and its legacy — including lynching and convict leasing, Jim Crow/legal discrimination in housing, education, banking, voting rights and incarceration, — still shape the world we live in today.

Despite the landmark civil rights legislation of 1964-65, a huge racial wealth gap looms large in this country, with the median net worth of Black families being about one-tenth of white families. Centuries of anti-Black racism have left their devastating mark. Many Black families and communities continue to face real and deep structural inequity and poverty.

Our country and our community is in profound need of reparations education, dialogue and tangible action. There are a number of educational and religious institutions that have engaged in this work of restorative justice. The city of Evanston, Illinois, has taken leadership in reparations work, inspiring other places, like Asheville, North Carolina, and Providence, Rhode Island, and the state of California.

Our own town of Amherst has now successfully established a Reparations Fund and is in the process of establishing a committee to oversee that fund, whose purpose is to provide reparations to those who have experienced anti-Black racism in Amherst.

What else can we do? We hope all residents of Amherst will support the local reparations effort. And, as we heard from Black and white leaders in Amherst this past year, and as affirmed by the JCA community, we can raise awareness about and become strong advocates for the passage of HR40.

This bill, introduced over 30 years ago by Rep. John Conyers and more recently by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, seeks to establish a National Commission to study the effects of slavery and its aftermath and make recommendations for repair. HR40 deserves our support. A national conversation is long overdue.

We also strongly believe that religious and civic organizations should engage in their own study of reparations. Lest we continue to procrastinate, we do well to heed the sage advice of Rabbi Tarfon who taught many centuries ago: "It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it."

Deborah Jacobson and Jeff Gold are co-chairs of the JCA Reparations Committee. Inquiries about the Stolen Beam educational series can be made to stolenbeam@gmail.com

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