

## **Striving to Become Anti-Racist Congregations**

### **A Report of the Tikkun Olam Commission - Summer 2023**

#### **Charge**

The Supporting Congregations Working Group of the Tikkun Olam Commission were given the following charge by Shahanna McKinney Baldon and Rabbi Renée Bauer, former co-chairs of the Tikkun Olam Commission:

- Create a plan to learn from as many Reconstructionist communities as is feasible about what they've been doing, what has gone well, what hasn't, and what they most need help and support with in regard to their racial justice work. In doing so, establish an ongoing relationship and line of communication to congregations so we can more effectively stay in touch and help support their work in the future.

#### **Process**

Taking seriously the charge from the co-chairs of the Tikkun Olam Commission, the Supporting Congregations Working Group drafted a plan to gather qualitative information from Reconstructionist congregations and havurot regarding their racial justice work between Fall 2022 and Spring 2023. Adina Abramowitz acted as the lead volunteer, with support from Rabbi Micah Weiss, Assistant Director of Thriving Communities, and Kendra Watkins Saperstein, Thriving Communities Rabbinic Intern.

The Working Group developed a qualitative research questionnaire/interview guide ([Appendix A](#)), and conducted two qualitative interview trainings for Tikkun Olam Commission volunteers ([see slides linked below](#)). The goals of the interview guide were to ascertain to what extent racial justice work is or isn't a priority for the congregation, what efforts they have undertaken so far, and how the Reconstructionist Movement might effectively further support these efforts.

In order to better reflect the congregation, interviews were primarily conducted with lay leaders, though some rabbis and board members participated as well. Congregations from across the country were selected for the interview with the help of Rabbi Micah and the Thriving Communities Team. In attempting to select a representative sample, the factors taken into consideration were geography, size, as well as congregations' interest in racial equity work, made evident in their programming and relationship with the Thriving Communities Team.

Ultimately, ten Reconstructionist communities were interviewed between September 2022 and February 2023, and four did not respond (see below). During the Spring of 2023, the interviews were reviewed and documented. Key findings are recorded below.

## Findings

- **A desire for a shared communication platform between communities**
  - Virtually all participants expressed interest in connecting with other Reconstructionist communities to share experiences and resources
    - *Questions to consider: Who would manage this platform? How would it be moderated? Who can participate in it?*
- **A request to help facilitate regional relationships**
  - Communities are looking to the movement to facilitate relationships between national/regional racial justice organizations. This is especially true of communities who are looking to move from the “book-club zone” to action.
    - *Questions to consider: What connections to national racial justice organizations with chapters or statewide operations does the Reconstructionist movement have (for example SURJ, Poor People’s Campaign, etc.)? To what extent is this type of work possible considering the capacity of the Thriving Communities team?*
- **A need to strike a balance between movement-led learning and community-led learning**
  - Communities had different perspectives on things feeling too “top-down” - namely the reparations resolution.
  - Others, usually smaller in numbers and in smaller towns, expressed interest in movement-led learning opportunities as a way of communicating to members that “this is where the movement is at, it’s not just a few of us who are interested in this work”
  - Overall, communities are seeking resources/materials with more scaffolding built into them, with one participant saying, “Don’t just give me a link to something, show me how to use it so I can be most effective.”
- **Communities that do have more BIPOC members actively involved in congregational life are feeling a timely need to develop systems of accountability between and among congregants/staff/clergy/etc.**
- **There is widespread Interest in increased opportunities to connect with Thriving Communities staff in support of congregational racial justice work.**

## Recommendations

With these findings in mind, we have identified several potential next steps to recommend to the Tikkun Olam Commission and Reconstructing Judaism staff toward our goal of supporting congregations in their racial equity work. We understand these as recommendations to be considered and right-sized by the appropriate combination of staff and volunteer leaders working together.

## Highest Priorities:

1. Hire additional staff to support the on-the-ground racial equity work within our Reconstructionist communities.
  - a. We are delighted to learn that this is already in motion. Thank you!
2. Build and sustain inter-congregational communication platforms
  - a. Create and moderate an email listserv where experienced congregational racial justice leaders can be in ongoing communication with one another.
    - i. Work with the Jews of Color and Allies Advisory Group to ensure that the listserv is a space that is comfortable for Jews of Color to participate in.
  - b. Convene a monthly community of practice cohort for congregational racial justice leaders
  - c. Create an online home where shared racial justice resources can live and be easily found.
3. Strengthen lines of communication between the central movement and congregational racial justice leaders.
  - a. Develop a quarterly newsletter for racial justice work for a dedicated listserv of folks who have been engaged in the past.
4. Explore and curate congregational resources for addressing instances of racialized harm in service of building a supportive culture of accountability. Aka *teshuvah*.

#### **Additional Recommendations:**

- Curate existing resources with helpful scaffolding.
  - Interested in starting a book group? Look here.
  - Interested in building relationships with local BIPOC led organizing?
  - Interested in bringing in outside speakers and helpful programming?

#### **Congregations Interviewed:**

Columbia Jewish Congregation (Columbia, MD): Judy Vogel, Anna Rubin, Eileen Singleton  
 Dorshei Tzedek (Newton, MA): Earnest Arky-Solomon (Ed Director), Linda Kramer, Alan Epstein  
 Dorshei Derekh (Philadelphia, PA): George Stern  
 Havurah Shalom (Portland, OR): Robert Brown, Kathy Gordon  
 Kehillat Shalom (Belle Mead, NJ): Tim Kowalski, Gayle Holtzman, Heather Ciociola  
 Kehillath Shalom (Cold Spring Harbor, NY): Rabbi Lina Zerbarini, Roberta Israeloff  
 Mayim Rabim (Minneapolis, MN): Joan Hyman, Sandy Gerber, Rabbi Sharon Stiefel  
 Congregation T'Chiyah (Ferndale, MI): Eleanor Gamalski, Syma Echeandia  
 Temple Beth Israel (Eugene, OR): Rebecca Gourgey, Casey Tiemann, Judy Newman  
 Congregation Beit Haverim (Atlanta, GA): Rabbi Michael Rothbaum

#### **[Qualitative interview training slides](#)**

#### **[Appendix A: Supporting Congregations Qualitative Interview Guide](#)**

- *Italics indicate notes/tips to the interviewer and are not to be read aloud*
- *Review this document before your interview, practice saying the intro and questions out loud - if anything feels clunky or unnatural, you can say it in your own voice as long as the same idea is communicated*

## **Introduction**

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. It is always a pleasure to get to connect with and learn from another Reconstructionist congregation.

*[Introduce yourself]*

Last year, Reconstructing Judaism implemented a [strategic plan](#) that contained five core goals that are central to the long-term vision for the organization and our role in the Reconstructionist movement. One of these goals is to **Join and lead Jewish efforts to dismantle systemic racism, and to advance racial diversity, equity, and inclusion within the Reconstructionist movement.**

To support this goal across the movement, we are actively working on the slow and essential work of transformational change both within Reconstructing Judaism, by striving to become an anti-racist organization, and by engaging and supporting our congregations in the work that needs to be done to build communal spaces that are both embracing and empowering of the full racial diversity of the Jewish people. We find that many of our communities are focused on learning-before-doing and are unsure what's next, or are just unsure of where to begin at all, while others are eager to jump into action and are looking for ways to be more intentional in the process.

We are grateful for the chance to learn from your community today, both in what your experience can teach other folks across the movement, and in what we can learn about how to better our efforts to serve our congregations in this goal.

**Recording:** Before we begin, I want to ask about recording. We are recording these interviews to ensure an accurate reflection of the conversation as we review transcripts and analyze the data. What you choose to share in this interview will be confidential to the members of the Tikkun Olam Commission and Thriving Communities Staff reviewing the transcripts. The results of these interviews will only be reported out thematically and anonymously with no attributions. If you have any additional questions about who will have access to this conversation, you can reach out to Rabbi Micah Weiss or Kendra Watkins. Do I have your permission to record?

***\*BEGIN RECORDING\****

**Qualitative Interview Schedule Questions:**

1. **Tell us briefly: What are you most proud of in the tikkun olam work your congregation has done in the past five years?**
2. **Describe the current conversation about racial justice in your community. How has it come up in programming? Congregational meetings? Board meetings? From the bimah/in services? [ask these questions one at a time and let them define racial justice work]**
  - Possible follow-up: In what ways has your community addressed this issue, what challenges did that raise, and what's the follow-up? What was scary?
  - *Expect 20 minutes of "we did this and that."*

*If it seems like there hasn't been much engagement go to number 3. Otherwise, skip to #4.*

3. **To what extent is addressing issues for racial justice a priority in your community?**  
**(If it is a priority) What has held you back? What would have been helpful to your community at that time to help you address the issue of increasing racial justice?**

4. **Are there Jews of Color or other BIPOC folks in your community?**

Possible follow-ups:

*If the answer is "no," ask, "are there any children of color in your community?"*

How has that changed over the time you've been involved in your community?

Are there any Jews of Color or other BIPOC folks in congregational leadership positions?

As we mentioned in the beginning, Reconstructing Judaism is working on the goal of striving to become an anti-racist organization by committing to creating a model of antiracism within our organization and to cultivating a shared commitment to this work among our staff and board...

5. **Where have you seen positive change around racism and racial justice within your community?**

6. **In what ways do you think your community has the most growing to do to become an anti-racist Jewish community?**

7. **How can Reconstructing Judaism and the RRA best support your congregation in doing this anti-racism/racial justice work?**

- *Interviewer should ask probing, follow up questions: What kind of speakers, or resources, would be helpful?*
- *Folks may ask what we offer:*
  - Reconstructing Judaism offers regular racial justice trainings and educational opportunities for our congregations. Our staff is also available for individual consultation and congregational visits. If you are interested in learning more, please contact Rabbi Micah Weiss, Assistant Director

for Thriving Communities and Tikkun Olam Specialist at [MWeiss@Reconstructingjudaism.org](mailto:MWeiss@Reconstructingjudaism.org).

- We will soon have an [updated racial justice website](#) with all of our published resources in one place. In the meantime, we encourage you to check-out the racial justice section of Evolve.
- Lastly, point them to the reparations materials (see below)

Is there something you've created that you think went really well that you'd like to share with the rest of the movement? We'd love to see that. You can send it to me at (email address.)

**8. Reparations Question:** *you should know, we have something to offer you right now!*

**The Tikkun Olam Commission is the movement-wide group that drafted a resolution on reparations for the Reconstructionist Movement. Has your congregation been using movement materials to discuss the resolution and learn about the topic of reparations? If yes, please tell us how it is going. If not, is your community planning to discuss the resolution and learn about this topic in the near future?**

**9. What would you think success would look like for your community in the arena of becoming an anti-racist community?**

**10. What else would you like to tell me on this topic?**

**11. *Question for International Affiliates:* A lot of our racial justice work has focused on history and situation in the US. What is something you would like the Movement to know and understand about your local context?**

#### **SUM UP PARAGRAPH:**

Thank you so much for your participation in this interview! We really appreciate your contribution to this project. To give you a sense of the timeline of this project, we are conducting interviews this fall and winter, and expect to have a report out early next year.

Before we go, I have two quick reminders for you.

The first is that the Plenum will be voting on the proposed movement-wide reparations resolution at their December 11th meeting. The TOC has developed a number of exciting resources to help support our communities in values-based decision making around the resolution which can all be found at [reconstructingjudaism.org/reparations](https://reconstructingjudaism.org/reparations). If you would like some guidance on your congregational process, please reach out to Rabbi Micah Weiss ([mweiss@reconstructingjudaism.org](mailto:mweiss@reconstructingjudaism.org)).

The second is that there is going to be a movement-wide trip to Atlanta, Montgomery, Birmingham and Selma March 16-19, 2023. The trip is titled, Reckoning Together: A Reconstructionist Journey Towards Racial Justice. Registration is expected to open in September but for now, save the date on your calendar. We'd love to have you join us.

**NOTE:** *If people keep giving “yes” or “no” answers, and the interview is going quickly, you can go to this question:*

- (What are other culture shifts in your congregation, what was that process like, and what were the results? And what do those experiences teach us about anti-racism work?)