



# GAMALIEL

*Facing Race and Power*

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“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

—James Baldwin

## ***Theological Statement on Mass Supervision and Call to Action***

Gamaliel Religious Leaders' Caucus

### Definitions, Statistics, and Consequences

*Mass Supervision*, which Michelle Alexander has called “The Newest Jim Crow,” refers to the huge increase in the number of people around the country who are on probation, parole or “extended supervision.” In 1980, the number of people on Supervision in the US was about 1.25 million. By 2016, that number was about 5 million.

Supervision has not generally been used as an alternative to incarceration, as was originally envisioned in the 1960's and before. The numbers have increased even as jail and prison populations have skyrocketed. And, like mass incarceration, mass supervision falls disproportionately upon people of color. People on Supervision are deprived of some basic rights, such as the right to vote and the right to due process before being punished, often being re-imprisoned for technical rule violations, or “crimeless revocations.” Those under Supervision are asked to pay greater and greater fees – to, in reality, pay for their own Supervision. Fees for things like electronic monitoring often go straight to private companies, who are increasingly finding ways to profit from Mass Supervision.

Mass supervision is a mostly hidden problem of our criminal justice system. People on supervision are not “free”, but rather subject to the intrusive power of the State over their lives. Further, the purpose of probation and parole has tended to be punitive in nature, rather than preparing persons who have already paid their debt to society for individual freedom.

### Democratic Assertions

**Freedom is a fundamental expression of American democracy.** When persons lack freedom to make their own decisions and determine their own future, it serves as a threat to the very foundation of our society. The goal of incarceration and supervision must be to return the person back to society as a fully functioning, contributing citizen. The Declaration of Independence states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" Long term supervision, after the serving of penalties, interferes with these rights.

**Supervision not only limits the individual's freedom, but it also seriously impacts the freedom of that person's extended family.** Thus, many more thousands of citizens are restricted by extended state supervision.

### Theological Assertions

**Freedom is a high priority for persons from Abrahamic and other faiths,** based upon God's call to each of us. The sacred texts of the Quran, the Jewish scriptures, the Christian New Testament, and the Unitarian Universalist core principles all share the intrinsic value and right of each person to make decisions, take actions, and shape their future. These faiths recognize that all persons are capable of making mistakes and must be held accountable for their mistakes. But forgiveness and second chances are also integral to these faith traditions. Opportunities for those who have been convicted to restart their lives in responsible and healthy directions should be emphasized over punishment.

**Exploitation of the most vulnerable in society by those with wealth and power is condemned in all of our faith traditions.** Methods of supervision that reap benefits for private corporations at the expense of those under supervised control represent a further assault upon our faith values and upon the individuals and families that suffer these abuses.

In the Jewish tradition, there is the concept of *teshuvah*, which is translated as "repentance," or a return to the path of righteousness. *Teshuvah* is always possible, no matter what has drawn one away. When one returns through *teshuvah*, God provides *shalom*, or wholeness.

Similarly, in the Quran, we find: "Whoever does good [regardless of past sins], whether male or female, and is a believer, We will revive them with a fresh start, giving them a good life, and We will certainly [from there] reward them according to the best of their deeds." (Quran, 16:97, The Bees, Verse 97)

In the Jewish Mishnah we read, "The sword comes into the world, because of justice delayed and justice denied." (Pirke Avot 5:7) Martin Luther King, Jr. used the phrase in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail, saying, "Justice too long delayed is justice denied."

Jesus, in his first recorded public reading of scripture, repeated the mandate found in Isaiah (61) as his personal ministry statement: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free." ([Luke 4:18](#) | [NIV](#))

From the prophet Amos we read: "Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals: The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds" (Amos 8:4, 6-7 NRV).

Unitarian Universalism affirms: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and that the words and deeds of prophetic people

challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

### Call to Action

We therefore join with the ancient prophets, with Jesus, and with contemporary prophets in proclaiming freedom for prisoners who have paid their debt to society and need advocates to support them as they re-enter society in liberating yet responsible ways.

### **We call upon:**

- A. Our Gamaliel Affiliates to **lift up the issue of Mass Supervision** and begin to address it in their own local contexts, acting and speaking as advocates for those who have languished with punishment rather than preparation to resume healthy roles in society;
- B. Religious Leaders to **raise awareness of Mass Supervision** in their congregations and associations, to teach, preach and mobilize opposition to these practices;
- C. Our Gamaliel Affiliates to recognize that words such as “mass supervision” reinforce the idea of domination and control by the State over individuals on probation or parole. “Community Re-Entry” emphasizes empowering individuals to re-enter society as responsible citizens. By **changing language**, we introduce a more egalitarian approach;
- D. Government leaders and criminal justice leaders to **pursue alternative practices** to prolonged supervision and instead **focus on healthy reintegration** into society in place of extended punishment and limitation of personal freedom.

### **Further, we pledge to support actions such as the following and others that local affiliates may choose to adopt:**

- A. Work for **the right to vote** to all persons immediately and automatically upon release from jail or prison including periods of probation, parole or extended supervision;
- B. Work with local communities and organizations to enable formerly incarcerated individuals to compete for employment and other opportunities based on their merits instead of on the stigma of their incarceration history, through initiatives such as **Ban the Box**.
- C. Invest in **peer support programs** that value the experience of people with conviction histories and recognize their unique ability to provide guidance to others who have been in the justice system;
- D. Work for the **redirection of funding** away from Departments of Corrections and into community-based programs that provide positive assistance to people who are returning from incarceration;
- E. Work toward the **de-commercialization of supervision** so that the cost is not incurred by formerly incarcerated individuals or their families;
- F. Work toward **a new vision of what appropriate supervision looks like**, using the language of “community re-entry.”