

**BARD PRISON INITIATIVE /  
A PROGRAM OF BARD COLLEGE**

# STILL BEHIND BARS: EDUCATION AND THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

**A PASSOVER HAGGADAH SUPPLEMENT**

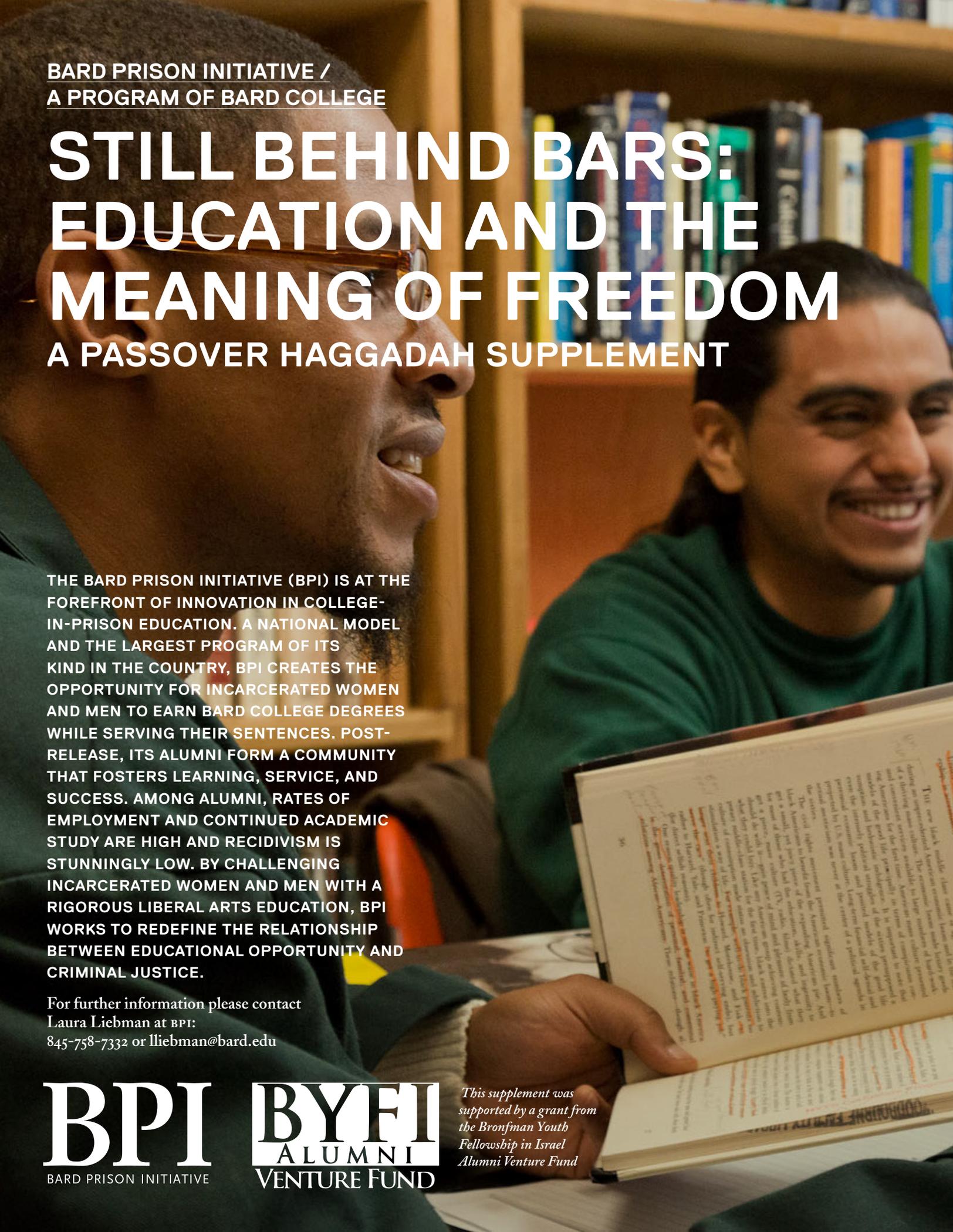
THE BARD PRISON INITIATIVE (BPI) IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF INNOVATION IN COLLEGE-IN-PRISON EDUCATION. A NATIONAL MODEL AND THE LARGEST PROGRAM OF ITS KIND IN THE COUNTRY, BPI CREATES THE OPPORTUNITY FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN AND MEN TO EARN BARD COLLEGE DEGREES WHILE SERVING THEIR SENTENCES. POST-RELEASE, ITS ALUMNI FORM A COMMUNITY THAT FOSTERS LEARNING, SERVICE, AND SUCCESS. AMONG ALUMNI, RATES OF EMPLOYMENT AND CONTINUED ACADEMIC STUDY ARE HIGH AND RECIDIVISM IS STUNNINGLY LOW. BY CHALLENGING INCARCERATED WOMEN AND MEN WITH A RIGOROUS LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION, BPI WORKS TO REDEFINE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE.

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## WHAT IS MASS INCARCERATION?

The United States has the world's largest prison population. One in every hundred Americans is incarcerated. One in ten African-American men, ages 25 to 29, are in prison. A third of black men can expect to be incarcerated in their lifetime. Black people are sent to prison at six times the rate of white people. What is "Mass Incarceration?" Too often, it is racial, and racist.

Incarceration rates don't necessarily correlate with crime, but rather with color. As but one example, in Mississippi there is a fairly low crime rate but an especially high incarceration rate, particularly of African Americans. You see similar patterns across the North and South.

Mass incarceration breaks apart black communities and lives, it destroys the sense of family and community, and it creates a cycle of poverty. At the same time, schools in poor urban areas are decaying, providing inadequate education and preparation for jobs in the 21st century. Many turn to crime not because they are evil, but because they need to survive or see no alternative. Prisons offer no hope, no educational opportunities, and encourage more criminal behavior, leading to recidivism and a revolving door.

When I spent time with the students at the Bard Prison Initiative, I met exceptional individuals who, when given the opportunity, demonstrate their intellectual potential and promise. They have the determination and capacity to do something different. When you deny people opportunities by incarcerating them and then provide no education — how can you send them back to the world and expect anything different? What happened to our belief in rehabilitation? America cannot continue to lock up the problem; jailing it won't make it go away: let the horns sound and the doors to our jails open, JUBLIEE!

REV. DR. CALVIN O. BUTTS III  
*Pastor, Abyssinian Baptist Church in the City of New York  
President, SUNY College at Old Westbury*

## WHAT DOES PASSOVER TEACH US ABOUT THIS ISSUE?

This holiday is about two things: *Cherut*, freedom, and *Aggadab*, telling the tale.

*Cherut* is an active freedom. It's the freedom that comes with responsibility. *Aggadab* means asking and listening, learning and teaching, passing the story on to the next generation.

We learn from the Rabbis of the Talmud that study is greater than action because it leads to action.

How can this be? Does study truly free us? How can telling the same tale, year after year, reveal anew that all of us are slaves until all of us are free? How can it move us toward freeing others?

Maybe it's not just by telling the story, but by asking questions that change the story. We learn from the actions of the mothers, like Miriam, Shifrah and Puah, that asking what's right is more important than listening to the words of powerful men.

The Ramban says that one of the twelve tribes of Israel was never enslaved at all. These were the Levites, the priestly class. When the Pharaoh enslaved the Jews, he first made it sound like a choice, *Hey, come work for me!* The Levites refused to toil for the Pharaoh. Instead they established schools in Egypt and kept alive the knowledge of Torah and Mitzvot, passed down from Abraham. Their brothers and sisters supported them and fed them from their slaves' portions. Aaron and Moses, liberators of their people, were Levites.

Learning facilitates freedom. All of us are slaves until everyone can learn.

ANYA KAMENETZ  
*Education author and '97 Bronfman Fellowship alumna*

## **WHY DO WE NEED HIGHER EDUCATION IN PRISON?**

Because it is our best chance to make good out of so much that is not.

Ten years ago I visited Graterford State Prison in Pennsylvania to witness a performance by a group called “Lifers,” an ensemble composed of men of color, sentenced to life in prison. A young man gave a recitation apologizing to those he had left behind. It contained a haunting refrain: *It's all my fault.*

I cringed each time I heard it. In a society where young black men are more likely to go to prison than attend college, it couldn't be *all* his fault.

Incarcerated Americans were expelled from higher education in 1994. Politically, that was purely a means of punishing them, and us, further. The harrows of prison weren't enough: this policy sought to ensure that people in prison would leave less prepared for life—and more likely to commit crime—afterwards.

Education in prison reduces crime, saves money, and transforms prisons into places where lives can be rebuilt, not just destroyed.

Since Sophia Auld, a slave master's wife, disobeyed the law and taught young Frederick Douglass to read, we have known that education is the most effective tool of empowerment. And, that denying it is the most effective tool for keeping people in captivity.

We must leave mass incarceration behind. To do so, let's remember Douglass leaving slavery. Let's find the courage to allow all people to learn meaningfully so they, and we, can discover real freedom.

REV. VIVIAN NIXON

*Executive Director, College and Community Fellowship*

## **WHAT DOES THIS ISSUE MEAN TO ME AS A JEW?**

In the Talmud, a story is told about a question posed one evening to Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiba. The question was: Which is greater—learning and studying, or practice and action? Although Rabbi Tarfon at first replied that practice and action are greater, Rabbi Akiba convinced him and those who were listening that learning and studying are greater. Rabbi Akiba argued learning and study are greater because learning and study lead to action.

Our fellow citizens who are prisoners are incarcerated because of crimes they committed mostly as young men and women. They are individuals who did not have the privilege to learn and study. We Jews believe that learning is a form of prayer and that learning and studying are the foundation of judgment. It is our human capacity to form judgment, in words, that leads us to act well and with justice in the world. It is the process of study and learning that prepares individuals for the choices and judgments they will make.

The Talmud tells of a prisoner who is consoled by being told that his reward upon release will be money. But he responds that the only reward he seeks is his freedom—his release from incarceration. Cherishing and retaining freedom in the conduct of everyday life require the capacity to use judgment in a manner that accords with ethics and the rule of law. Judgment and action are contingent on studying and learning. The more learning and study we offer, the less crime there will be and the more widely the blessing of freedom will be shared. That is why offering a college education to prisoners matters to me as a Jew.

LEON BOTSTEIN

*President, Bard College*