

TESHUVA CAMPAIGN: SUPPORTING THE EVANSTON REPARATIONS COMMUNITY FUND

In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.

– Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

In 2021, Evanston became the first city in the United States to fund a reparations program—a meaningful step toward restitution for Black residents—both past and present—based on the documented wrongs and accumulated losses incurred by generations of segregation and racism.

It is in this historic context that members of Beth Emet seek to collectively participate in *teshuva* by inviting congregants to engage in the process of reparations. By making contributions to the Evanston Reparations Community Fund (ERCF), we join in an unprecedented community-wide interfaith campaign to raise funds

from at least 15 local congregations to collectively assure the availability of reparations to Black Evanstonians and in so doing acknowledging harms caused by generations of racism. Our campaign will culminate on Martin Luther King Day 2023 at which time faith leaders from across the city will announce and celebrate the results of our shared effort.

The eyes of the country are looking to Evanston as a model for addressing racial discrimination at the local level. Municipalities large and small, urban and rural, across the nation—from Sacramento, CA to High Point, NC—are now part of a groundswell that may one day inspire federal action. By supporting and amplifying local efforts and lending our voices and dollars to the movement for reparations, we, like Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel marching alongside civil rights leaders at Selma, can be a community that prays with our feet.

The **Evanston Reparations Community Fund**, administered by the Evanston Community Foundation, benefits Evanston’s Black community, by helping to heal racism and addressing the harm caused by discriminatory practices. The Fund ensures long-term support for reparations when the City of Evanston's tax revenues, held in a separate fund, are no longer available. The Fund will be overseen by the Reparations Stakeholders Authority of Evanston—made up of members of Evanston’s Black community—to accept contributions and distribute reparations in such areas as home retention and ownership, education, business development, health, and cultural awareness.

What are reparations?

In the 20th Century Holocaust victims and Japanese Americans benefited from reparations. Despite 400 years of slavery and discriminatory racism, Black Americans have not. The intention of reparations for our Black neighbors is twofold: (1) to acknowledge and compensate for the harm that pervasive structural racism has caused to our society and to individuals; and (2) to move forward by reconciling ourselves with our community’s past and current wrongs. Reparations also calls for a return—a reversal of the wrongful acts committed. These concepts resonate deeply with the Jewish values of *Tikkun Olam*—the sacred obligation to repair the world—and *Teshuva*—a return to the path of righteousness.

What is *teshuva*?

Teshuva, which is often translated as repentance, is a process of repairing and healing the harm we have caused. It comes from the word, *shuv*, return. When we do *teshuva*, we bring our lives into alignment with how God expects us to live. Maimonides, the great medieval scholar, teaches that the harm we inflict on others can only be repaired by making restitution and asking for forgiveness. Complete *teshuva* also includes acting differently in the future so as not to perpetuate suffering and injury.

A HOUSE BUILT ON A STOLEN BEAM

In the Talmud (Gittin 55a), there is a dispute between Beit Shammai and Beit Hillel: what ought we do if a house or palace is built on the foundation of a stolen beam? While Shammai argues the whole structure be torn down and the beam returned to its rightful owner, Hillel argues that rather than demolish the palace, the thief should pay the full value of the beam. Neither rabbi suggests that subsequent generations can pretend that the beam was not stolen or that time rights the wrong. Both rabbis agree that the wrong, unless rectified, makes the entire structure illegitimate.

As Isabel Wilkerson writes in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*: “Not one of us was here when this house was built. Our immediate ancestors may have had nothing to do with it, but here we are, the current occupants of a property with stress cracks and bowed walls and fissures built into the foundation...we did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now.” Like those generations living in a beautiful house with a stolen beam in the foundation, we are called to rectify the wrong of racism in America by supporting reparations.

JOIN US

At the local level, reparations are less about addressing the harms committed against Black Americans during slavery and more about addressing the harms experienced by our Black neighbors here in Evanston in the past and today through housing discrimination, law enforcement, access to health care, and education and job opportunities. These injustices will persist unless we as individuals and as a Jewish community act to acknowledge and eliminate them.

As a congregation founded on the principle of free speech and deeply rooted in the Evanston community, Beth Emet has a long history of social justice and civil rights activism. As members, we are convinced that supporting reparations with other Beth Emet congregants is both morally right and religiously grounded. And we hope our doing so will encourage others to do likewise.

Why reparations?

While our community has long supported racial justice movements and causes, we have yet to make amends for the racism and oppression Black people have suffered. The funds we contribute under reparations are a means to acknowledge past wrongdoing and attempt to reverse its effects in the present, even if we know we cannot reverse all the harm that has been done. Pastor Michael Nabors of Evanston’s Second Baptist Church has described the process of reparations as “a thousand-mile journey.” Contributing financially to sustain reparations in our community is a meaningful first step. In contrast to a charitable donation, making a reparatory payment is a commitment to hold ourselves as a community accountable for past harm, work to repair it, and learn from our transgressions.

HOW TO PARTICIPATE

Visit bethemet.org/teshuvah where you can find:

- 1) Resources to learn more about Evanston reparations as well as the Jewish case for reparations.
- 2) Answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs).
- 3) A space to share your personal motivations for contributing if you are moved to do so.
- 4) A [link to the Evanston Reparations Community Fund](#) donation page where you can make your contribution. Please write “Beth Emet for Reparations” in the “Special Notes or Instructions” section so that we can appropriately acknowledge your contribution and track the total amount raised by our congregation.

It's overdue. It's justice. And it's the only path forward.

– Robin Rue Simmons, Founder,
FirstRepair and architect of Evanston's
reparations program