

All,

I write with a deep appreciation for the work of the past co-chairs of the Racial Justice Task Force (Jim Rubenstein and Tamar Ghidalia), for the board liaison (Gayle Zoffer), and for every person who has ever served on the RJTF. Thank you to those folks for their heartfelt and committed work for these last years. This letter about Shir Tikvah's work on racial justice presents a few reflections, updates, and an apology.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. often [spoke](#) of three possible assessments about the progress of racial justice in the United States. The optimist who believes we are almost there, the pessimist who believes that it will never happen, and the realist who "would agree with the optimist that we have come a long, long way in grappling with this problem, but he would balance that by agreeing with the pessimist that we have a long, long way to go before the problem is solved." Where I find myself among King's optimist, pessimist, and realist fluctuates and varies topic-by-topic and day-by-day. But I do know that our tradition, through *Pirkei Avot*, instructs us that in the great work of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) while we cannot finish the work, we are not free to abandon it.

Where are we five years into our most recent effort to bring racial justice work to the forefront of our congregational practice? It goes without saying that we have not completed the work; we can't. But I must also reassure you that we have not abandoned it either. I must acknowledge that, as an organization, we have fallen short on communication about this work. Saying that we're sorry, and we are and we do so here, is important. Critical to this racial justice work is [cheshbon hanefesh](#) (reflection) and [teshuva](#) (transforming our behaviors/learning from wrongs done).

Just about a year ago, your inbox was filled with calls to complete a racial justice assessment. Creating, collecting, analyzing, and writing up the assessment was the work of many volunteer hands. We are grateful. But after it was written, collected, and collated, what happened to it?

In the last eight months, through conversation and a review of the results of the assessment (which were shared to the board and staff), it became clear that the board needed to be more accountable and involved in supporting racial justice work in our community. The board chose to pause the to-this-point-freestanding RJTF to evaluate how best to move forward. This reflection resulted in the convening of an *ad hoc* group of five board members who have been meeting since January to envision a way forward. Thank you to Ray Anshel, Lillie Benowitz, Lyonel Norris, Abbie Shain, and Dave Snyder for that hard work.

The *ad hoc* group will be expanding, slowly at first, but with a vision that racial justice work must make claims on each of us and at every level of our community and organization.

To start, this group will be inviting a small group to support this commitment. This committee will convene a group of strategic thinkers who will (1) advise/guide the community in responding to the emerging needs of the moment; (2) create and implement a plan for the thoughtful dissemination of the 2020 RJTF Assessment and its lessons, and; (3) propose next best steps to meaningfully advance Shir Tikvah's racial justice work more broadly. Starting with High Holy Days 5782/2021, the group hopes to open the work to the community and will be inviting broader participation.

In September 1959, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed the newly minted State Legislature of Hawaii. Perhaps he was thinking of the [brutal, racist coup](#) in Hawaii by American corporate and military interests some 60 years earlier but also, perhaps, given the givens, he was thinking of the improvement from marginalized territory to full-fledged state. He presented the three possible positions I summarized above and concluded by quoting an unknown Black preacher several generations his senior. I paraphrase here: “God, we are not what we want to be; we are not what we ought to be; we are not what we are going to be, but thank you, God, that we are not what we were.”

With apologies and gratitude to you for your patience and support,  
Bruce Manning (board president)

