

## **A Response to the Grand Jury's Failure to do Justice in the Case of the Killing of Breonna Taylor from Rabbi Wirtschafter**

With so many others in the commonwealth today we stand in solidarity with those feeling the frustration and outrage of yet another injustice in the case of Breonna Taylor's death at the hands of Louisville police. Assurances that the letter of the law was observed is hardly comforting when the law has been written, manipulated, and used to deny justice to persons of color in too many times and places. And once again, the opportunity to promote healing and community reconciliation has been passed over. We deplore the injuries endured by protestors and police alike, and hold in our prayers the healing of their bodies, minds, and spirits as we pray for the very soul of our nation.

For Breonna Taylor's family and for many other individuals the long delay in the investigation has already been trauma upon trauma. That the grand jury saw fit to charge no one with any crime in the unjust death of Ms. Taylor but only for the wanton endangerment of her white neighbors is a chilling testament to the inadequacies of our legal and law enforcement procedures as currently construed. Black lives matter. But in the areas of our laws and practice, not as much as white lives.

This must change. Ms. Taylor's death is but one of countless, disproportionate acts of violence suffered by persons of color. Those acts have been perpetrated and perpetuated by a system of police practices and laws rooted in systemic preservation of white-skinned power and privilege. It is yet another failure to live up to the Torah's command for neighbors to love each other as we love ourselves.

Amos reminds us that a nation without justice shall fall. The prophetic tradition which calls for comforting those who mourn, also reminds us that blessing comes to those hungering and thirsting for righteousness; This is the heart of God's yearning for us and the source of any ethical or moral standing we might seek with the Almighty.

The Hebrew word we use for sin, cheyt, that we use in the High Holy Day confessional is derived from an archery term for missing the mark. In ethical and moral standing, our society has woefully missed the mark. While some may be just now coming to awareness, others have known for generations the need for both repentance and action. Let the disappointments and disillusionment of this day demand that we work tirelessly toward the day when our justice systems, our economic systems, our educational systems, our voting systems, and all other aspects of our life together reflect the value of black and brown skinned people. We cannot stop or rest until we have become "repairers of the breach, restorer of streets to live in."

**We join with Reform congregations and Progressive Leaders of all Faiths in calling for...**

- The immediate improvements in police procedures and for continuing, transparent, community-based review of those procedures with appropriate and timely consequences for those who endanger human life or well-being. Police review boards at both state and city level should comprise citizens representing the diverse neighborhoods they serve.

- The removal of military equipment from our neighborhoods as tools for policing and the end of the “1033 Program,” whereby Congress transfers excess military equipment to local police agencies for use in counter-drug activities.
- Prohibitions to the hiring or retaining of any law enforcement officer who has a history of excessive force and misconduct.
- Reform and improvement of the broken practices that result in little or no repercussions for aggressive officers. So called “internal policing,” and unchecked police union contracts, powerless civil arbitration boards, and ineffective external (non-police) review boards contribute to the culture and practice of uncalled-for police violence and inappropriate exoneration of offending officers.
- An end to the standard of “reasonableness” that allows police officers to shoot to kill black and other racial minority citizens on the officer’s assertion that they feared for their life.
- Support for initiatives that help inform and educate journalists, police departments, and other civic entities about the culture, history and religious conceptualizations of black, indigenous, and other persons of color. Ignorance, unsubstantiated biases and “white-skinned norming” have contributed to poor understanding, poor policy, and poor community involvement.
- The commitment of all persons, parties, protest movements, and departments to engage passionately and non-violently, respecting the dignity and worth of each human soul, even as we relentlessly address the injustices too long endured. We cannot advance the cause of peace and justice by becoming the very evil we deplore and hope to eradicate.

**We urge all Kentuckians and Americans of all religions to join us in prayers and action:**

- For understanding the system of racial bias we all participate in, and for dismantling it in our hearts, homes, and congregations.
- To hold leadership accountable at every level, in every municipal and state office, that a higher regard for racial justice may prevail.
- To participate meaningfully and effectively through voting and a commitment to voting rights.

Let us adhere to the challenge of the prophet Micah: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God toward that day where no parent must fear for their child’s life in their own bed.

*This statement was adapted for a Jewish context with the express permission of the Kentucky Council of Churches.*