

Shabbat Shalom,

My name is Danielle Fink and I am currently serving a one year term as an AmeriCorps member in Minneapolis for two organizations called Crossing Home and Amicus. As an AmeriCorps member, we live and serve in some of our nation's poorest urban and rural areas. With passion, commitment, hard work, and innovative solutions, we build capacity by creating and expanding programs designed to bring individuals and communities out of poverty.

My year of service is focused on a population that often gets pushed to the outskirts of society. I work with people transitioning from prison to community. I did not think that incarceration affected me as a Jewish girl from a middle class family growing up in St. Louis Park. I went to the Jewish Day School, Camp Ramah in Wisconsin, and Talmud Torah of Minneapolis and we never talked about the mass incarceration rate in the United States. Also, I never knew anyone who had been incarcerated. I have come to realize incarceration affects me in multiple ways but most importantly as a Jew.

In this week's Torah portion, Naso, G-d speaks to Moses addressing the issue of what to do with those suspected of adultery, those who commit harm or wrong towards another and repentant individuals.

G-d tells Moses to address the Israelite people and inform them when a man or woman commits any wrong towards another human that they break their trust with G-d. In addition, they are commanded to send the individual away if they are ritually unclean.

Once the individual takes ownership of their guilt, one should confess. The verbal confession of guilt proves an indication that the individual honestly believes that all of their wrongs have been revealed to G-d. By verbally admitting to the sin and regretting it, the individual will hopefully be more considerate and careful in the future.

Furthermore, the individual must make restitution in the amount they had taken and an additional one fifth of it, then giving it to the person they had wronged. If there is no person in which restitution can be made, then the amount will go to G-d.

By admitting their guilt and making restitution, they are able to reconcile with G-d.

When an individual commits a crime in the United States today, it is a little different than biblical times. Although an individual may pay and do the time for their crime, that does not equal to having reconciled with society. The stigma of having a criminal background will affect many aspects of their day to day life for the rest of their life.

Individuals coming out of incarceration and returning to community have many barriers with the two biggest ones being housing and employment. Many employers will turn them down because they have a felony on their background and many landlords will not rent to them because of their conviction. This is not an issue that is far off in the distance. This is affecting *our* community. Currently, 1 in 26 Minnesotans are in either prison, jail, on probation or parole. While in 1982, 1 in 98 Minnesotans were under correctional control. Today, there are currently 47,000 Minnesotans that are unable to vote because they are on probation or parole. That is taxation without representation. Black men will be disproportionately targeted by law enforcement and one in three black males will be incarcerated throughout their lifetime. One in four Minnesotans have a criminal record. I am going to say that again, one in four.

About 7,000 people will be released back into community every year in Minnesota. What do we do, as a society, to help reintegrate people into community?

First, I believe if we are going to continue to increase our prison population like we have in the last twenty years, employers and landlords are going to have to change their policies on accepting people with criminal backgrounds. I strongly encourage you to go back to work and find out what your hiring practices are for people with criminal backgrounds.

Second, I believe the most important and crucial act we can do is simply be their friend. This is exactly what Amicus and Crossing Home have done.

Amicus, now part of Volunteers of America Minnesota and Wisconsin, has been a leader in the mentoring field since 1967.

Amicus started with a friendship between Judge Neil Riley and Ted Herman who was a lawyer prior to his incarceration. Riley, a corporate lawyer who became a Hennepin County Judge, started visiting inmates in prison where he met Herman and really started to understand the prison system was a revolving door for many. Throughout countless visits, Riley and Herman developed a program that would hopefully help people stay out of prison. The goal was to connect volunteers in the community with inmates in hopes of building positive and lasting friendships.

We do exactly what the initial goal was, we match up volunteers in the community to visit someone incarcerated. Through writing and visiting, Amicus has matched thousands of inmates to friends in the community. By extending the hand of friendship, the inmates feel cared about and are able to learn how to develop trust.

One participant said, "I've been incarcerated for 13 years and had begun to lose touch with people and society. Amicus has changed all that. I see the good I thought no longer existed. Thank you for making me feel like a person again."

Since then, Amicus has created programs to support inmates and the recently released as they develop positive relationships and become active and productive members of society. We offer tons of different resources and programs including an employment readiness class where individuals learn how to talk about their criminal convictions in an interview. We have a program called Reconnect where the client can come in on a walk-in basis and receive help with transportation, housing, employment, clothing, and hygiene products.

With the help of the mentors, the mentees have been able to successfully transition back into society with the help of other Amicus resources. The guidance and support the mentors offer encourage the mentees to stay out of prison and live a healthy life. In general, almost half of the people released from a Minnesota Correctional Facility will return to prison within three years. Twenty-three percent of new releases will re-offend within three years. In contrast, the Amicus One-to-One mentoring program has had 25% of mentees return to prison for any reason and less than 7% have been convicted of a new felony.

The statistics and research shows that if an inmate has a mentor, they are more likely to re-enter into society and not return to prison on a probation violation or a new felony. Society pushes people with criminal backgrounds to the periphery not paying attention to them. We label them as “felons,” “criminals,” and “ex-offenders,” which pushes them even further to be outcasts of society. If we continue to cast them out of our communities, they will have less of a stake in the community. How can we expect them to pay back their debt to community if we do not allow them to be apart of it?

I urge you to think about this issue and get involved as a volunteer or a mentor for people transitioning out of incarceration because it is affecting our community.

Thank you.