

Resolution on the Study and Development of Reparations for Slavery and Systemic Racism in the U.S. – Q and A

What was the impetus for this resolution?

This resolution was drafted in response to efforts to address the historic wrong of slavery and ongoing systemic racial injustices in the United States. Reparations for these injustices, which could take many forms from formal apologies to financial compensation, have been discussed and debated for generations. At this moment, the conversations have taken on a new urgency as the nation grapples with the ongoing impacts of slavery and systemic racism. This year alone, reparations have been the focus of congressional hearings that drew national attention.¹

What is the Jewish basis for this resolution?

In the Talmud, we learn that all people are descended from a single person so that no person can say, "my ancestor is greater than yours." (Sanhedrin 37a) "God created humanity from the four corners of the earth - yellow clay, and white sand, black loam, and red soil. Therefore, the earth can declare to no part of humanity that it does not belong here, that this soil is not their rightful home." (Yalkut Shimoni 1:1)

The rabbis understood that the victim of a crime was made whole by financial repayment for damages done. Maimonides went one step further, linking the payment of damages to the concept of *t'shuvah*, noting that repentance must accompany the financial commitment (Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 1.1).

What are reparations? Must reparations for slavery include financial compensation?

Reparations can take many forms, including: expressions of remorse, education, congressional hearings, a national apology, the institution of relevant government programs, creation of tax incentives for Black-owned businesses, educational stipends to Black Americans, individual or community compensation, monetary compensation, or other approaches. Reparations can, but need not be, exclusively financial.

What would the leading congressional proposal on reparations, H.R. 40, achieve?

"H.R. 40, the 'Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act,' would create a commission to study the history of slavery in the United States and in the

¹ [At historic hearing, House panel explores reparations. The New York Times. June 19, 2019.](#)

American colonies from 1619 to 1865; the role of the federal and state governments in supporting slavery; federal and state laws that discriminated against the descendants of African slaves; other forms of discrimination against the descendants of African slaves; and the lingering effects of slavery on African Americans. The commission would also make recommendations as to appropriate ways to educate the American public about its findings.”²

The bill was introduced by Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (D-TX) and has 118 co-sponsors. The House Judiciary Committee Subcommittee on Constitution and Civil Justice held a hearing on the bill in June 2019.

What precedents are there for reparations?

While there is no direct historical corollary for reparations for slavery and ongoing systemic racism, the United States, and the Jewish community, has prior experience with reparations for wrongs committed.

Precedents for reparations include—but are not limited to—[Holocaust Restitution provided to victims of the Holocaust and to the state of Israel](#), the [Civil Liberties Act of 1988 that formally apologized and provided compensation for the internment of people of Japanese descent in the U.S. during World War II](#), and [The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act that applied to aboriginal land claims](#).

What are some of the arguments against reparations?

Opponents of reparations often [question the cost](#), the [practicality of determining who should receive reparations](#), and the [justness of current generations providing reparations for the actions of prior generations](#).

What have past URJ resolutions said about related issues?

- [Achieving Equality Under the Law \(1961\)](#)
- [Commitment to Racial Justice \(1963\)](#)
- [No Color Barriers in UAHC \(1965\)](#)
- [Resolution on the Crisis of Racial and Structural Inequality in the United States \(2014\)](#)
- [Resolution on Our Community’s Pursuit of Racial Justice \(2017\)](#)

Additional Resources

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, The Atlantic, June 2014 [The Case for Reparations](#)

² [House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution and Civil Liberties. Hearing Announcement. June 13, 2019.](#)

- Julia Craven, HuffPost, February 23, 2016 [We Absolutely Could Give Reparations To Black People. Here's How.](#)
- David Brooks The New York Times, March 7, 2019 [The Case for Reparations](#)