TRANSCRIPT:

Season of Return and the Carcel State
September 25th, 2024 at 8PM ET
with Professor Robin Bernstein
hosted by Matir Asurim
moderated by Virginia Spatz

Virginia: So, welcome to those who have arrived on the dot of the hour. Thank you. I'm sure we will be joined by additional people. Welcome to Matir Asurim, Jewish Care Network for Incarcerated People. I am Virginia Spatz, one of the organizers for Matir Asurim, and this program is called the Season of Return and the Carceral State. It's a discussion with Professor Robin Bernstein, author of *Freeman's Challenge: The Murder that Shook America's Original Prison for Profit.*

And before I introduce myself further and Robin further, I am going to turn things over to Michaela Caplan, who is going to introduce Matir Asurim and set the stage for us that way.

Michaela Caplan: Hi, everyone. Thanks Virginia. My name is Michaela. Also welcome, folks. If you would like to put your name and location in the chat as I talk so we can see the breadth of the community we have here.

As I said, my name is Michaela. My pronouns are she/they. I am based in Somerville, Massachusetts. This is my dog behind me, Dakota. I'm a light skinned person with brown hair, wearing a red bandana.

So a little bit about Matir Asurim, which I feel very honored to be introducing because I'm relatively new. It's a grassroots collective that was formed in 2021. It's a network of chaplains, rabbis, community organizers, people with direct experience of incarceration, including currently incarcerated people, artists and people with loved ones inside. We run a penpal network. We provide spiritual resources, Jewish spiritual resources for people inside. We provide individual support for people who are incarcerated members. And we also do public political education, like events like this. So, we're committed to doing this political and spiritual education, and we believe that incarcerated people have enormous and powerful Torah to share, and that they're an integral part of our Jewish communities. So we have a lot to learn from those folks. and people who are directly impacted by incarceration.

So we usually begin all of our Matir Asurim public and organizing meetings with a blessing. I'm going to put that in the chat and read it, and invite folks to read with me, and as we do that, we invite folks to bring in and hold the memories of people who were executed by the state, this week and in the past few weeks. I'm going to name Marcellus Williams and Travis Mullis, who were executed this week. There are others scheduled to be murdered by the state this week. We are holding those folks in our minds, our hearts. So I'll read all of this, and feel free to read with me. We invoke the presence of our people inside and outside, and affirm that we are here together in spirit and solidarity.

Baruch atah Hashem Elokeinu Chei ha'olamim Matir asurim. Blessed are you, divine one, life giver of the universes, who releases the imprisoned. Thank you everyone. I'll turn it back to Virginia.

Virginia Spatz: Well, thank you. Thank you very much, Michaela. And, as I said earlier, my name is Virginia Spatz. And for a point of access, I am a gray haired woman with light colored, faintly freckled skin that in this country gets me called white. I'm located in Washington, D.C., where I have lived for about 35 years. I was born and raised in Chicago, though, and also lived in Brunswick, New Jersey and in Boston. I am a journalist and writer by both temperament and training, and a lot of my work has focused on community building and informal education, as well as alternative or varieties of readings of Jewish text and the intersection of faith and organizing.

I've been active in a range of Jewish and and interfaith groups in DC and nationally, but these days I spend a lot of my Jewish time with two communities. One is Tzedek Chicago, which is an intentional Jewish congregation focused on justice, equality and solidarity. It's based in Chicago, but has members all over the world and also Svara: The Traditionally Radical Yeshiva, which is also based in Chicago but has participants worldwide. And I've been organizing with Matir Asurim for about two years, I think, I'm kind of unstuck in time. I'm not really sure.

One of my former projects, before working with Matir Asurim so much was a radio series called Conversations Toward Repair that was on the DC-based, but national, We Act Radio. And that's how I ended up connected with Professor Bernstein. So, Robin Bernstein is a cultural historian specializing in race and racism from the 19th century to the present.

She teaches at Harvard University, where she is Dillon Professor of American History, Professor of African and African American Studies, and Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. She is author of *Freeman's Challenge*, the book that was just

released in May of this year, as well as *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights,* which was published in 2011 and won five awards, and also further back, the Jewish feminist children's book *Terrible, Terrible: A Folk Tale Retold*. She has also edited, *Cast Out: Queer Lives in Theater* and produced many other works on cultural and historical topics.

Robin is a member of Dorshei Tzedek, a Reconstructionist congregation in Newton, Massachusetts. and previously also way back belonged to Bet Mishpachah, which is based here, where I am in Washington, D.C., and one of Judaism's earliest LGBTQ+ congregations. Her recently published book, *Freeman's Challenge: The Murder That Shook America's Original Prison for Profit*, offers many insights for those of us who work in incarceration-related issues. It highlights aspects of U.S. and carceral history that might be new to many of us, and it raises serious questions, for Jews in particular, to consider as we head into the season of return.

Selichot is just a few days away, The first penitential prayers of the New Year, and Rosh Hashanah, It's hard to believe, is actually next Wednesday. So, I do want to say it's probably obvious, but this book, and our discussion tonight will have many difficult topics. There's a lot of violence, and there's some hard things which might be triggering for some people ahead, but also, I think a little bit oddly, there's hope and there's points where we can learn from the terrible things that happened to William Freeman in his life and in our history.

Also, I'm going to take a few minutes to explain why we're here, because I was so excited by this book, and I wanted to make sure that Matir Asurim and friends had a chance to really learn about the book. It helped me discover that there's a lot of things that I thought I knew about our history and about our carceral system that were just wrong or maybe lacking, and I had to really readjust things even just to read the book, and the thing I want to stress is that, all that happened without making me feel foolish or defensive. And there are many books out there about related political issues that I come away feeling like, "okay, well, I'm an idiot and I didn't know the right things," or just get angry. I really found this book and can't stress enough that everybody should go get this book and read this book, because as hard as it is, I do think it will cheer you up in some ways, because it does tell us that some things are inevitable. It helps us understand how we got to where we are. So I just want to say at the outset that just thank you to Robin for the research, for writing it, and for making it accessible in a way that I don't think everything is.

So with that, I'm going to mention a few logistics. We will keep everyone muted until later in the hour when we'll have time for people to ask questions. And either they can,

you can put them in the chat or you can come off mute later on and we'll create a queue of people to raise their hands if we get to that point where people are wanting to speak. Also, Robin and I both use she/her, we will answer to almost anything, but we use she/her. And we are so grateful to all of you for being here. I believe that Robin is going to give us a presentation that kind of encapsulates the book for those who haven't read it. And also, before you even start that, I just want to make sure if there's anything you'd like to correct in my biography or if you want to add anything I didn't say, you know, please do that as well. But I believe you're already a co-host, so you can go ahead and give us what we need to know about William Freeman and his place in our history.

Prof. Robin Bernstein: Thank you so much, Virginia, for that extremely kind introduction. I really appreciate it. I really appreciate your kind words about my book. I also want to thank Michaela and Jacob for helping to make this happen, and Shir, welcoming me and helping to make this happen. So, and thank you all for coming. I see some names among the participants that I recognize and I'm absolutely thrilled. There's one person who might choose to self-identify, who I cite in Freeman's challenge. So I'm absolutely thrilled to see you here. For anybody who is not able to see me, I am a light-skinned woman with short, reddish hair. So that is me. I thought that I would start by just telling you a little bit about Freeman's challenge, because I know not everybody has read it.

And also, I just want to say, Virginia, thank you so much for talking about how accessible it is, because that was really important to me. I wanted the book to read like a novel, and I wanted it to really touch people. So it does. It reads like a novel. It's also extremely short. It's just under 200 pages, and it has almost 50 illustrations. So it is a short book. But even though it reads like a novel, every single word in it is true. So I'm going to just share my screen. Let's see. Let's hope this works. Did it work? I'm not sure it worked. I'm trying to show my PowerPoint. There we go. There we go. And I'll just show- oops. Sorry. I'm not terribly good at this. Slideshow. There we go. From the beginning.

Okay. So, first, I thought I would just talk a little bit about the overall ideas in the book. Freeman's Challenge is about how profit-driven incarceration originated in the North, not the South, and it originated long before the Civil War. A lot of us have an idea, and I originally thought, as many people did, that profit-driven incarceration, and things like convict leasing, started in the South after the Civil War, and that it started as a way to re-enslave African-Americans after national emancipation. And kind of the keystone of this narrative is the 13th Amendment, this idea that the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution outlaws forced labor, quote, "except as a punishment for crime." And

as this story has been told, that is a loophole that enabled a new form of slavery to be created after the old form of slavery was abolished.

But there are some problems with that narrative. The most important problem is that, in fact, profit driven incarceration was not invented by the South after the Civil War. In fact, it was invented by the North, long before the Civil War, about 50 years before the Civil War. Profit-driven incarceration is slavery by another name, and it did emerge in the wake of slavery, but it emerged in the wake of Northern slavery, not Southern slavery. And since Northern slavery, specifically in New York State, ended about half a century before it ended in the South, that is partly why prison for profit emerged in the North, not the South. And the reason this is important, the reason this matters, is that when we start the story with the Civil War, when we start the story of American incarceration with the 13th Amendment, what we're doing is we're starting the story in the middle.

And the problem with starting the story in the middle is that we let the North off the hook. What I wanted to do in Freeman's Challenge is put the North back on the hook. In fact, the Southern practices of convict leasing were adapted from the North. They were adapted absolutely self-consciously from the North, and they were specifically adapted from the Auburn Prison, which is something that I'm going to be talking about a lot. So the Auburn system was consciously adapted. So when we think of the most notorious prisons in the South and also in the West, when we think of Parchman, when we think of Angola, when we think of San Quentin, these were all prisons that were made on the Auburn model, which was a New York State, Northern model.

So I wanted to tell this story and put the North back on the hook, and I wanted to tell it in a way that would be unforgettable. So the way I decided to tell the story was through one individual, and this is the one individual, his name is William Freeman, and William Freeman was born in Auburn. So the Auburn Prison was the prison that invented the idea that a prison could exist primarily, fundamentally as an economic force. Prior to the Auburn Prison, prisons existed for some combination of three reasons. Either they existed to punish people and/or they existed to reform people, to help them become better, and/or they existed to control people, that is basically to get them off the street. But what the Auburn Prison invented by a bunch of white businessmen in Auburn, New York, which is in central New York state, they came up with this radical new idea, which was that- all of those other ideas, all of those other reasons to have a prison, they were all secondary. The primary reason to have a prison was to stimulate a local economy, basically to build wealth and to integrate with capitalism. So this is what was happening in Auburn, New York.

William Freeman just happened to be born in Auburn, New York. So he grew up right near the Auburn State Prison, and he was part of the most prominent black family in town. He was both African American and Native American, specifically Stockbridge Narragansett, and he was part of a close-knit community, part of an extended family. His life was in some ways very hard, but in a lot of ways he had a good life. He certainly had a livable life. But all of that changed in 1840 when William Freeman was 15 years old. He was accused of stealing a horse. There was no evidence against him, but it didn't matter. He was tried. He was convicted, and he was sentenced to five years hard labor in the Auburn State Prison.

Now, I'm sorry, I should have shown you. This is, this is New Guinea. This is the community that William Freeman grew up in. So you can see, this is an 1834 map, and you can see where it says, "Negro settlement." That was his neighborhood, and that neighborhood was actually established by his grandparents. So that's why he was part of the most prominent black family in town. His grandparents were founders of the community. So William Freeman was convicted and sentenced to five years hard labor in the Auburn State Prison. And one of the things that made the Auburn Prison physically unique was that it had factories built right into the prison. And in fact, the prison was built on the banks of a river for the purpose of capturing water power for the purpose of powering factories. So from the very beginning, before the prison was even built, the concept was that it would house factories where prisoners would be forced to labor.

Inside the Auburn State Prison, in these factories, prisoners' labor was leased to local companies who ran the factories. The prisoners worked 12 hours a day for no pay at all, no benefits, no special privileges, no early release. Literally nothing. And, William Freeman worked specifically in the hame shop, which was a shop that built animal harnesses. So if you look where it says "State," if you look above the "S," you'll see where it says "hame shop." That is where William Freeman was forced to labor. And this next image, this shows the Auburn State Prison from the outside, and I really like this image because it shows how big the prison was. You can see, for scale, those trees. The prison is gigantic. It still exists. I've been there a number of times. I was actually inside the prison two weeks ago, and I'd love to talk to you about that. The prison is so large that to walk around it- I have walked around it several times- it takes me about 40 minutes to walk completely around it. It is huge.

So this is also a really useful image because you can see those smokestacks. Each smokestack marks the location of a factory. What you're seeing is the smoke from manufacturing. So this gives us a sense of the massiveness of the Auburn State Prison, and how it was really functioning as one giant factory.

So William Freeman, who had been born free, he had always been free, his family had been enslaved. His grandparents, when they had built Auburn, had been enslaved. They had been forced to build it. His father had been born enslaved, but had become free. His mother had always been free. And here he is at 15 years old put into this prison and put to work for no compensation at all, 12 hours a day. And he was furious. And from the very beginning he resisted. He told his jailers that he did not want to work for no pay, and he also did not want to work because he had committed no crime.

The Auburn State Prison was a very violent place, and his resistance met with terrible retribution, terrible violence, including one, the worst event, when he was beaten over the head so badly that he sustained a brain injury, and he also became deafened as a result of that beating, when William Freeman was released in 1845, he launched a legal campaign to recover what he saw as back wages that were owed to him. In his view, the state had stolen his labor, and also had robbed him of the wages that he was due. So he tried legal means to recover back wages. He was laughed at and he was dismissed.

And after he tried legal means for six months, William Freeman committed an act of violence. He committed a murder. I'm not giving away anything. The murder is in the title of the book. William *Freeman's Challenge: The Murder that Shook America's Original Prison for Profit*. So this was an act that was terrifying to the racially-diverse community of Auburn. Part of the reason it was so terrifying was not simply because it was violent, because there are lots of violent events. What was so terrifying about it was that he actually had threatened the prison. He actually had launched a successful challenge to the prison. And the reason that was so terrifying was that the prison was economically entangled with the entire town. Auburn had basically become a factory town where every single person, no matter who you were, it didn't matter. You were in one way or another, economically dependent on the prison.

And so when Freeman was challenging the system of profit-driven incarceration, he was actually threatening the entire city. And by this point in 1845, the entire state was, in certain ways, dependent on this prison, and I can talk about how that was the case. So he was threatening, first of all, this massive prison that we're seeing before us. He was threatening the entire city. He was threatening the state. So this was a very powerful challenge that he issued.

And the state fought back. Specifically, the way the state fought back was by putting him on trial for murder. Now, he did commit the murder. So the purpose of the trial was not so much to determine whether he committed it or not, because he admitted that he committed it. The purpose of the trial was really to shut him up. And this is what I argue

in the book, that the purpose of the trial was to find elaborate ways to suppress what he was actually saying. And I can talk about this more if this is of interest to folks. But both the defense and the prosecution were both heavily invested in muffling Freeman's challenge to the prison. One was defending Freeman and one was prosecuting him, but really, both sides were defending the prison. And I can talk about that a lot. The trial was nationally important. It was publicized nationally. It was reported on nationally, in part because the prosecutors were so well known. William Henry Seward was, at the time, the two-time governor of New York state. Later, he would become Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of State. And John Van Buren was the son of President Martin Van Buren. So these were titans who were going at it, and it was very sensationalistic. But actually, they were working together to shut Freeman up and to silence his challenge to the prison.

After the trial, a lot of things happened in Auburn, But one of the most important and interesting is that Auburn actually became a center for abolition. And what you can see here, this is just one example, Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* was originally published in Auburn as well as in New York City. Harriet Tubman came to Auburn and settled there for the second half of her life. So Auburn, in the wake of Freeman's challenge, to the Auburn State Prison, it actually became a center of abolition. And I can talk about that more.

But the Auburn Prison still exists, and it is now called the Auburn Correctional Facility. Like I said, I was there two weeks ago and spoke with currently incarcerated students, actually. I went there through the Cornell Prison Education Program, which is a wonderful program that I can talk about more. And so I spoke there with students who actually had read my book, which was really amazing. Today, the Auburn Prison is still based in manufacturing and factory work. Every single license plate manufactured in New York State is manufactured right there in Auburn. And you can see an illustration of that right there. Every single license plate. So if you have ever seen a New York State license plate, if you have ever owned a New York state license plate, that individual license plate was made in Auburn, and it was made in factories where the men who made that exact license plate are literally walking in the footsteps of William Freeman.

So I think I'll pause there. I would love to talk with you about anything that interests you. I have more images that we can turn to if we wish, but, I think I'll just pause there and say I'm really happy to be here and to talk to you and, just really interested in what you want to talk about.

Virginia Spatz: Well, we will open it to other participants soon, but I did have a few things that I wanted to make sure that we at least addressed. And, I know you can't-

well, we could do a whole year's class on the book, so you can't cover everything. But, one of the things that I wanted to touch on before we leave this evening is the idea that you mentioned kind of quickly that the Auburn system had nothing to do with the idea of *teshuva*, or rehabilitation or trying to prepare people to better function in society when they were out. And I want to make sure that we talk about that at some point.

But in order to give other people time to raise their questions, I want to raise one, that has to do with Matir Asurim's guiding principles, and that is that two of our guiding principles are *B'tzelem Elohim*, we want to make sure that we honor the divine image that is in every human being and *Panim El Panim*, the idea of meeting people face-to-face with some kind of dignity. And one of the things that really struck me in Freeman's Challenge is that ordinary incarceration violates both of these all the time, but the extreme ways that they isolated people and wouldn't let them look at each other and all of that, certainly does that.

And the other thing that, since you didn't talk about the whole story yet, people will have to get the book and the follow up on it, is this really complicated idea that many people- politicians, entertainers, the abolitionists themselves- were speaking for William Freeman and not allowing him to speak for himself. He told people what he did and why, and they didn't want to hear it. And I just wonder if you could say a little bit about that because I think that is something that anyone who's doing any kind of advocacy in many areas, but especially with incarcerated people, we have to be so careful that we're not putting our agenda on top of whatever might be what someone is really trying to convey. I hope that wasn't too convoluted.

Prof. Robin Bernstein: No, I mean, of course you could add me to the long line of people who have spoken for William Freeman. I mean, he's deceased, obviously. And, in a way, I certainly am speaking for him. One could say that. I hope I have done it absolutely faithfully. What I try to do very hard in this book was to hear his voice, which is not easy. It took all my skills as a historian, but I was absolutely determined to really hear what he was actually saying, and to listen across sources because Freeman never wrote his own story out. He never dictated an autobiography as, let's say, Harriet Tubman dictated her autobiography. Freeman never did.

So what we don't have is a comprehensive statement from Freeman himself. But what we do have is many people, from within his own family and also from beyond his own family, people who cared about him and loved him, but also people who are enormously hostile to him who heard him and told newspapers and other sources what they heard. So there's an enormous amount of text, of people saying, "this is what he said to me." And those people who said that are themselves very diverse in who they were, but it

also in what their relationship was to Freeman. So by hearing that diversity, I was listening very, very carefully. What I was able to do was hear where these diverse people, who agree on very little, where they agreed on what Freeman was saying. And my thinking was that if they agreed on almost nothing, but they agreed on what he said, that was probably true. And I was trying to hear his voice in that way.

And the other thing, that every time I got stuck in writing this book, which was often, every time I got stuck, I always went back to the same couple of questions. And one of them was, at this moment in the story, what could Freeman see? What could Freeman hear or not hear because he was deafened? And what could Freeman touch at this moment? So I was trying always to figure out what his experience was from the outside in, not so much to say, "Freeman had this emotion." I don't know what his emotions were. I can't know. I don't know his psychology. It's not possible. But what I can know is what he said. I can know what he saw, what he touched, what he experienced. Those are the things that I can know. And those are the things that I tried to put forward in this book to really honor this person who has been shut up for almost 180 years. He was dismissed. He was dismissed as, quote, "a lunatic," unquote. He was dismissed as, quote, "delusional." The idea that was put forth by specifically the defense was that by wanting payment, by wanting wages for his work, that alone constituted a delusion, that alone constituted insanity. And this was a way to dismiss what he was saying, which was in fact, completely rational, which is that people deserve to be paid for their work.

So, this is some of what I was thinking about as I was writing this book. I wanted to honor him as a person, as a person who did some terrible things, and had something very important to say to us today. And I wanted to let all of that be true, to let Freeman, in his complexity, exist on this page.

Virginia Spatz: Well, thank you so much. And I'm going to ask one last question and suggest that in the meantime, people can either put their own questions or comments in the chat, or they can use the Raise Hand feature, and we'll create a queue for people to respond.

But one of the things- I am a big fan of footnotes, and I read most of them, I think- and one of them had a note in it that said cycles of prison reform work to perpetuate carceral systems. And I was thinking about how could it have been different? Like, would it have been okay if Freeman had been paid some kind of wage when he got out? I mean, I guess he got, I don't know, $0.50 or something and he didn't think that was sufficient. But are there ways that we can work for reform or is that always a trap? And with that, I'm going to kind of bow out and let other people speak. But that's the thing that I was hoping maybe you could give us some insight.

Prof. Robin Bernstein: Yeah. So, the book really indicts reform. The book has a lot of examples of people who tried to reform the Auburn State Prison and, either did not, in fact, succeed in making it any more humane or in some cases, actually made it worse. And the argument that I make in the book is that these cycles of reform, what they really did, what they really accomplished, was to distract from the most important global questions. So there's a part of the book where I describe how, one form of torture that was happening in the prison fell under fire, and so the prison invented a new form of torture. And the idea was that this new form was somehow more humane than the old form, that it was modern and clean.

But my point is, this is just a distraction from, first of all, the point that torture is torture and it's always wrong. And second, if you have a carceral system that can only function through torture, maybe that's a sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with the carceral system. But instead of asking these big questions about should we be torturing people, should we have prisons if they necessitate torture, instead they get to argue about whether this form of torture is ever so much better than that form of torture. So it's basically a dodge. It's a dodge. Now, I'm not willing to say that all prison reform by definition is a dodge. But I am willing to say that the forms of prison reform that I describe in this book function to perpetuate the system. Now, whether that's universally true, I wouldn't claim that. But in the period that I'm looking at in this book, it's absolutely true. And some of the slimiest characters in the book are reformers. They're people who had very good intentions, but they were afraid or didn't care enough to ask the bigger questions.

And this book is really ultimately about capitalism. So, there were a lot of prison administrators in the history of the Auburn Prison later on, who did care about reform. And some of them cared very sincerely about reform, and some of them cared very sincerely about helping prisoners live better lives, for example. But the argument that I make is that they were trying to introduce reform into a system that was fundamentally not built for rehabilitation, not built for justice, not even built for punishment. It was built for productivity. It was built to serve capitalism. It was built to generate profits. And anything else was just layered on top of that fundamental goal.

So, I was talking about how there was a lot of torture in the prison. One of the things that's very difficult to grasp but is really important to grasp is that the purpose of the torture during Freeman's lifetime was not punishment. That was not the purpose. The purpose of the torture was productivity. The purpose was to prevent rebellion, which would cut into productivity, and then some of the forms of torture were actually meted out to all the prisoners every single day, again, not for the purpose of punishment, but

for the purpose of making them work and making them work harder. So this is, really important to me that we understand that this is the root. This is the root of the entanglement of capitalism and incarceration to this day, because the Auburn system, once it was established in Auburn, New York, it spread fast and hard. And there were certain specific practices that spread to places like Sing Sing and also places like Saint Quentin that I mentioned before.

But what spread even faster and even harder was just the fundamental new idea that a prison could exist primarily as an economic force. And that idea is now deep in every single one of us. Whether we agree with it or not, it's deep in us. So, if I wanted to open up a brand new prison in your backyard, and I wanted to come into your community and tell you and convince the people in your community that this was a great idea and they should support it, the first argument that I would make is this will bring jobs. This will help with taxes. This will be an economic boon to your community. Now, you could agree with that or not, and I imagine everybody here disagrees with that, but it's an argument that seems to make sense. And it's familiar. You know, I see people nodding like, "yeah, of course, sure that's the argument that you would make. That's the argument that might actually convince some people." The fact that that argument is obvious, the only reason that it's obvious is because the people who are actually in my book came up with this idea in Auburn, New York, over 200 years ago.

So, this idea that a prison can and should be an economic force, I would say it's everywhere on the planet now, whether prisons are actually built on that principle or not the idea is everywhere. And it started in Auburn. Sometimes people ask me what effect I want the book to have on people, and I want a lot of effects. One thing is I want to put the North back on the hook, but one thing that I want is for us to hear the weirdness of some ideas that have become so commonplace. One idea that, to me, is very weird and we should hear as weird, is the idea that any person should benefit economically off another person's incarceration. I think that no person should benefit financially, economically off another person's incarceration, and just the idea that we think this makes sense is a travesty.

Virginia Spatz: Thank you. We have a couple of questions. I'm going to read two from the comments that I think maybe you can answer together.

One is, "why this case specifically, out of all those who were incarcerated in Auburn?" That's from Isaiah. The next one is from Marcia asking, "what in particular sparked your interest in this story, and what did you learn of William Freeman's plight?"

Prof. Robin Bernstein: Okay. I'm looking at the chat myself just a little bit here. So, how I got interested in William Freeman- my entrance to this entire story was through William Freeman. I found it by accident, which is, I think, how a lot of histories begin. I was reading something else and I came across a footnote. And the footnote referred to a theatrical production that happened in Auburn, New York. I had never heard of Auburn. I didn't know anything about it. It had happened in Auburn, New York, in 1846. And in this theatrical production, a black character, a black male character, killed some white characters.

Now, this was shocking to me because one of my fields of knowledge is theater and performance history, and what I knew about America in the mid-19th century was that white people absolutely did not want to see representations of black-on-white violence. It was too threatening. It was too frightening. It could not be contained as entertainment. This was in a world that was shortly after Nat Turner's Rebellion. So, white people did not want to see this, and they so much did not want to see it that they would actually doctor productions of Othello, because Othello, of course, has a scene of black on white violence. They would actually rewrite Shakespeare in order to avoid seeing this.

And yet here in Auburn, New York, in 1846, white people were lining up and paying money to see this. And I thought something must have happened in Auburn, New York that was race shaking. Something must have happened to make white people in this place at this time behave so differently from white people elsewhere at the same time. So what was it? I started looking into the performance, and the performance represented William Freeman. I'd never heard of William Freeman. And so I started learning about William Freeman. And then I learned that he had been forced to labor in the Auburn State Prison, where his labor was leased to local for-profit companies. And I thought, "wait a minute. What?" Wait, there was convict leasing in New York state in 1840? Like what? I thought, like many people, that convict leasing was invented by the South after the Civil War. And so then I was hooked. And then I thought, "well, if I didn't know that, I bet a lot of other people didn't know that either." So then I had to learn more and more and more, and the story just kept getting bigger and bigger.

At first I thought I was going to write an article. I thought I was going to write an article about the theatrical production. Then I thought I was going to write an article about William Freeman. But as I dug more and more into it, I realized just how important this story was, and how important what William Freeman had to say, how important that was, and that it was something that we needed to hear today. So that's how I entered into this book, and that's why I wrote it. That's why I wrote about this case.

Somebody asked why this case and not plenty of others? The answer is because William Freeman actually did succeed in threatening the prison. He did not succeed in getting his back pay. He did not succeed. He wasn't trying to close the prison down. The prison still exists. But what he actually did do was shake it up and win. That's no small thing. I mean, you saw how big that prison was. I mean, for a young person, a young individual to actually make all of New York State quake, is quite something. And then the other reason that I haven't really talked about yet, that this case is so important, is that because he did successfully threaten the prison that was so important to so many people, they struck back in ways that had enormous consequences, and in particular, they struck back in ways that actually inaugurated what was then new forms of racism. And these forms of racism we're continuing to live with today.

So it was just enormously consequential. It was really powerful. It's a story that I think is capable of bearing the weight of the task of putting the North back on the hook.

Virginia Spatz: Well, thank you so much. I'm going to shift things over to Shir Lovett-Graff, who's going to close us out and maybe ask another question.

Shir Lovet-Graff: Hi. First of all, I just want to thank you so, so much for being with us. My name is Shir. I'm another core organizer and co-founder of Matir Asurim. So I think, with our remaining time, I'll just ask a final question to you. How would you like your readers to bring this book into life? How would you like us to honor the work that you've done in bringing this story to life?

Prof. Robin Bernstein: Yeah. Thank you. That's a great question. I would like people to get involved in prison abolition. That's what I'd like. And I also would like people to get involved in working to abolish the prison industries.

So this is what I've been doing. I've been working with a fantastic organization called 13th Forward. I don't know if anybody here knows about it or is involved. But 13th Forward is working to abolish forced prison labor and unfair working conditions in prisons in New York State, including, of course, the Auburn Prison.

So this is one example of so many. There are so many fantastic organizations that are working to end prison profiteering, that are working to, lobby for fair working conditions for people in prison who do choose to work, working to make sure that, people have basic rights, for example, first of all, to choose not to work, or to choose to work. If they choose to work, to be paid fairly, to have the right to invest their money, if they choose to, to have the right to organize, to have the right to put money towards Social Security,

to have the right to have their work garnished or not garnished according to their will, but not against their will.

These are some of the things that 13th Forward is working toward and that I'm a part of. But that's just one example of one organization. There are many organizations that are doing similar work. So short answer to your question, Shir, I hope people will get involved to end exploitative prison labor and possibly to end prisons.

Shirt Lovet-Graff: Thank you. Yes. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, with the Jewish New Year coming up, may it be so.

I just want to thank you again so much for bringing this conversation and bringing your work and this book to our community. For those on the call, we would love, love, love to see you connect with Matir Asurim. We send out a monthly newsletter with events and updates. I'll also put our core email address in the chat if you'd like to get more deeply involved. We are always looking for people interested in volunteering, be it organizing penpals in your community, be it writing for our monthly newsletter, be it creating resources for our incarcerated members, be it dreaming about what we can do together.

So, thank you all so much for coming and, thank you again Robin, for being here. Thank you so much for inviting me. And soon, Happy New Year to everybody.

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