RACIAL and FOOD JUSTICE

APPETIZER: BREAD from the EARTH

FRAMING
The complexities of food justice — working to foster stronger, local food systems, self-reliant communities, and a healthier environment — can be found in every bite we take. This activity will help you realize that you are inextricably connected to our food system, and so you should be responsible for making that system a just one.

INSTRUCTIONS
Begin by taking a look at the food in front of you. Look at the ingredients on each plate and begin to think about the items used in the dish.

1. Consider the question: Are we intimate enough with our food system today to still know and appreciate where our food comes from?

2. Divide up into groups of two or three, ask each person to pick one dish from the menu and see if they can trace back the origin story of each ingredient in that dish as far as they can. Where was it produced? How many people helped create it? Was it processed? Where was it purchased? How much did it cost?

Once the groups have finished, come back together to share some of the discussions you had surrounding your ingredients and reflect on what justice issues you know of that are linked to the food on your table.

ENTREE: FOOD and RACE INTERTWINED

FRAMING
Institutionalized racism impacts food systems in a diversity of ways and has different consequences on communities of color at different stages of food production and consumption. As Audre Lorde says, “There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

INSTRUCTIONS
Read the following excerpt out loud from Dismantling Racism in the Food System, published by Food First - the Institute for Food & Development Policy. In the excerpt, authors Dr. Eric Holt-Giménez and Dr. Breeze Harper explain how systems of agriculture have grown intertwined and codependent on systems of racism in the United States.

“Racism—the systemic mistreatment of people based on their ethnicity or skin color—affects all aspects of our society, including our food system. While racism has no biological foundation, the socio-economic and political structures that dispossess and exploit people of color, coupled with widespread misinformation about race, cultures and ethnic groups, make racism one of the more intractable injustices causing poverty, hunger and malnutrition. Racism is not simply attitudinal prejudice or individual acts, but an historical legacy that privileges one group of people over others. Racism—individual, institutional and structural—also impedes good faith efforts to build a fair, sustainable food system.”

After reading the excerpt, find a chevruta (a partner) and select from the texts below to explore how communities are addressing racism in food systems. Use the guiding questions and share any takeaways with the larger group.

Chevruta literally means “friendship” or “companionship.” It is the traditional rabbinic approach to Talmudic study in which a pair of students analyze, discuss, and debate a shared text. Unlike a teacher-student relationship, partnered learning puts each student in the position of analyzing the text, organizing their thoughts into logical arguments, explaining their reasoning to their partner, hearing out their partner’s reasoning, and sharpening each other’s ideas, often arriving at new insights into the meaning of the text. Spend some time wondering out loud together before referring to the guiding questions. Allow space for each partner to have the opportunity to share a response.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Using Dr. Holt-Giménez and Dr. Harper’s definition as a foundation, how do the articles illustrate ways to address racism in food systems?
2. How are these programs identifying and addressing root causes of food injustice?
3. What are the challenges and assets in the communities these programs are organized by or based in?
4. How could you, as an individual, or as part of your different communities, support the work?

TEXT ONE: “FARMING FOR THEIR LIVES”

Georgia Street Community Collective, is a community hub first, garden second. In March 2008, Mark Covington, his mother, nephew, and neighbor began cleaning up vacant lots near their homes. They planted flowers and a couple of rows of collards as a way to deter people from tossing garbage on the lots they’d just tidied. (Bulk garbage pickup didn’t stop at vacant lots.) It didn’t work right away—Covington would find overflowing garbage bags with addresses from Royal Oak, a suburb 15 miles north. But by that summer, the farm had begun to expand, fueled by Covington’s vision to engage local kids from the community. Now, the farm encompasses 13 lots.

GSCC sells eggs and honey, but gives away almost all of the other produce that it grows. “Programming is the main focus—the gardening part just brings the kids in,” Covington says of his nonprofit model. The goats, chickens, pigs, and ducks are a means to an end. Kids are fascinated by them; in turn, “that gets them around mentors—people who want to live right,” he says. The farm is a social enterprise, housing a lending library and hosting coat drives, school supply giveaways, movie nights, and brunch with the Easter Bunny. “If it was about money, I wouldn’t be doing it,” Covington says.

In the mid-1970s, Detroit’s then-mayor, Coleman Young, introduced the Farm-A-Lot program, a city-subsidized initiative to put pockets of vacant land to agricultural use. Residents could call City Hall to request a parcel. The program is now defunct, but the idea of growing self-reliance through tending land continues to resonate with some residents, particularly as affordable grocery stores have shuttered throughout the city. At the same time, nutrition-related diseases have reached crisis levels. More than 90 percent of the black Metro Detroiters surveyed in a 2014 study were either overweight or obese. Many struggle to manage chronic conditions such as asthma and Type 2 diabetes.

In the midst of all this, “simply growing is an act of resilience,” says Devita Davison, the marketing and communication director of FoodLab Detroit, an incubator program for local food entrepreneurs. When it comes to the city’s food system, Davison says, “the cavalry ain’t coming to save us.” But, she argues, farming could help.
Go into any grocery store this time of year and you’re sure to find an abundance of neatly packed cartons of blackberries, blueberries and strawberries. For many it’s a hallmark of summer.

Beneath the sweetness of these berries, though, lies a bitter labor dispute that has been roiling for years at Driscoll’s, the world’s largest distributor of berries — the ones you find at Costco, Target, Whole Foods and host of other grocery stories.

The conflict came to a head last week in Washington state, when farmworkers and their families marched alongside hundreds of supporters on a usually sleepy country road about an hour north of Seattle. With bullhorns, musical instruments, honking cars and chanting — “Wage theft is not OK, Sakuma has to pay” — the loud procession made its way to the family-owned Sakuma Brothers berry farm and packaging plant.

The workers, many of whom are undocumented indigenous Mixteco or Triqui from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, were marching to commemorate the third anniversary of their dispute. Organized by the independent Familias Unidas por la Justicia (Families United for Justice), protesters rallied for a continued consumer boycott of Driscoll’s berries and to put pressure on Sakuma Brothers to sign a contract allowing union representation for seasonal farmworkers.

“Farmworkers are the people who are most oppressed in the social and labor ladder,” the group’s president, Ramon Torres, wrote in an email, translated from Spanish. He and a growing number of farm worker unions across the nation are hoping to change the way workers are treated.

In a statement on their website, the union alleges that Sakuma Brothers is guilty of “systematic wage theft, poverty wages, hostile working conditions, and unattainable production standards.” They’ve organized protests, strikes, legal actions and boycotts of both Sakuma Brothers and Driscoll’s, their largest client for fresh berries…

The first time Tatiana visited the Curtis “50 Cent” Community Garden in Jamaica, Queens, she didn’t want to touch the dirt. “It was scary,” she says. “I just had to stick my hand in real quick and get it over with.”

That was around two years ago. Tatiana, then in 10th grade, had racked up around 200 absences at her nearby high school. She was failing all of her classes, and a handful of petty crimes had landed her in juvenile court. Through the Queens Youth Justice Center, an alternative-to-detention program, Tatiana was placed in an all-girls group. Every Thursday, Shernette Pink, who runs the program, led the teenagers in conversations about self-esteem and motivation—discussions they rarely had at home or school.

But it wasn’t all talk. Pink had recently been contacted by Heather Butts, a coordinator with H.E.A.L.T.H. for Youths, a leadership and development nonprofit that established a presence in the 50 Cent Garden, one of the few green spaces in a neighborhood where public parks make up only 3 percent of the total acreage. Butts suggested bringing some of the teens from the Queens Youth Justice Center to volunteer at the garden...

Elderly neighborhood residents oversee most of the beds, where they tend to rotating crops of runner beans, kale, tomatoes, and the occasional pumpkin.

Before Tatiana started working alongside them, she’d never gardened before. “I am not a nature person,” she says. “I won’t even go camping.” But something about the garden kept her coming back. With the help of the elderly locals, many of whom came to Queens from the West Indies, Tatiana planted a bed of marigolds and tomatoes; this year, she’s growing eggplant. “I feel like I’ve helped to make something,” Tatiana says.

“What does gardening do?” Butts says. “It gets you active, it teaches you about responsibility, it teaches you about caring for something outside of yourself. If you become a good gardener, you’ve learned all of that.
DESSERT: NO ONE is GETTING LEFT BEHIND

FRAMING

Pursuing racial justice is a process. How we approach it will evolve as we explore our identities and histories and as we change through our experiences. But Jewish tradition and the sources we have read tonight push us to take the initiative in beginning that process.

INSTRUCTIONS

Take a look at the Next Steps document and choose one or more actions that you will follow through on. Then, choose one person at the dinner to be your accountability partner and exchange contact information. Set a time in the next month to follow up with each other.

Take time to reflect on this experience and process the information presented in your discussion. Go around the table, having everyone read one line of the following prayer by Miriam Grossman, organizer and rabbinical student at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.\(^5\)

Our G-d and G-d of our ancestors, give us a vision that history is long. It is not every loss of every people all at once.

Give us hands to join with on either side. This time we remember every other time; this time we have each other.

Give us something different than hope-give us fire: warm, bright, life-giving, light-giving, angry. Give us memory. An intersecting, intersectional web.

This moment in history is this moment in history- it is not my Grandmother’s house burning down. And no one is getting left behind.

My G-d…and G-d of our ancestors, no one is getting left behind.

With Miriam’s prayer ringing in the air, take a moment to think about what it means to leave no one behind in the fight for racial justice.