

Fourth Cup of Wine: The Denial of Many of the Rights of Citizenship to People with a Criminal Record

Contributed by [Eli Allen](#)

Source: Baltimore Social Justice Seder

Leader: With the fourth cup of wine we remember God's promise to take the Israelites as God's own people. Just as God took on the Israelite people, we pledge to look out for the different members of our community. As citizens of the United States we share certain rights of citizenship, such as a social safety net, equal access to employment, student aid, and jury service. However, these rights are denied to those who have felony convictions. As a united community we must protest the permanent second-class citizenship imposed on those who have already paid their debt to society. And we must further protest how African Americans are disproportionately made second-class citizens, resulting in our current civil rights crisis.

Maryland and the federal government bar individuals with felony convictions from serving on juries, one of the most fundamental rights of American democracy. While Maryland restores voting rights to individuals with felony convictions, many states do not, with 1 in 7 African Americans across the country disenfranchised due to a felony conviction. It is estimated that more African American men are disenfranchised today than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified prohibiting laws that deny the right to vote on the basis of race.

The federal government permanently bars those convicted of drug offenses from receiving cash assistance and food stamps during their lifetime, unless their state opts out. Thirteen states have maintained this lifetime ban, while Maryland has partially opted out, shortening the ban to one year after the conviction. While an improvement over other states, any ban on receiving benefits is counterproductive. People suffering from drug addiction often need public benefits to access treatment, as the benefits can be used to subsidize the cost of the services.

The Housing Authority of Baltimore City bans individuals with felony convictions for three years after release from incarceration. The federal government's "One Strike and You're Out" policy requires all public housing agencies to evict a tenant if any guest or member of the household engages in any drug related activity on or off the premises. This fear of eviction often leads families to reject requests from relatives returning from prison who are looking for a place to temporarily live. As a result of not being able to obtain housing, many returning citizens experience homelessness, lose custody of their children, and are unable to benefit from the support of living with their family members.

Beyond the formal forms of discrimination, the permanent label of felon and criminal bring a painful sense of shame and stigma. As one incarcerated woman described her experience:

When I leave here it will be very difficult for me in the sense that I'm a felon. That I will always be a felon...for me to leave here, it will affect my job, my education...custody [of my children], it can affect child support, it can affect everywhere—family, friends, housing...People that are convicted of drug crimes can't even get housing anymore...Yes, I did my prison time. How long are you going to punish me as a result of it? And not only on paper, I'm only on paper for ten months when I leave here, that's all the parole I have. But, that parole isn't going to be anything. It's the housing it's the credit reestablishing...I mean even to go into the school, to work with my child's class—and I'm not a sex offender—but all I need is one parent who says, "Isn't she a felon? I don't want her with my child."

Recite together:

Baruch ata adonai, eloheinu melech ha'olam, borei pri hagafen.

ברוך אתה יי אלוקינו מלך העולם בורא פרי הגפן

(Drink the fourth cup.)