As heirs to American history, we share responsibility for its wrongs. By Rivy Poupko Kletenik

It's my sister's annual joke. During the Yom Kippur communal confession, she declares dramatically, "I didn't do any of these things; I am not confessing to them!" Instead of beating her chest and reciting the ashamnu, "we have done wrong," she sings out "ashamtem: you have done wrong!" It is quite the outrageous quip. Yet I wonder if the rest of us are paying lip service to the communal aspect of our repentance process.

Article after article stresses the self-improvement angle of the High Holidays. We all need to take a closer look at our inner spiritual lives. But how often do we think about the transgressions we have committed as a community, deeds for which we share a collective responsibility?

Recently my eyes were opened by Ta-Nehisi Coates's book, Between the World and Me. He spares nothing in his demand for Americans to recognize the consequences of our shared history and deeds in regard to African Americans. Coates is a strong proponent of reparations. In an article in The Atlantic in June 2014, he reminds us of the biennial unsuccessful introduction of a bill, HR 40—Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act.

That African Americans are owed is clear once we understand that as slaves for 250 years on this land, they "were worth four billion dollars," Coates writes, "more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies — cotton — was America's primary export." Decades of Jim Crow, housing prejudice, and disproportionate incarcerations followed, depriving African Americans of their wealth and potential for livelihood.

All sorts of horrors and hypocrisies are slowly coming to light. In 1838, hundreds of slaves were sold by the Jesuits of Georgetown University and shipped to Louisiana in order to generate revenue for Jesuit institutions. David J. Collins, a Jesuit priest, is striving to heighten awareness of this part of history. He makes the point in his New York Times op-ed, "Georgetown, Learning from Its Sins," that though many of us arrived here in the 20th century and do not necessarily share the culpability of the past events, "it is our shared history and we are its heirs."

As people of the Torah, weaned as we are on our national narrative of "we were slaves in Egypt and God took us out from there with a mighty outstretched arm," we must lead the effort for national soul searching. We are commanded 36 times in the Torah to remember our origins, to understand the heart of the slave and to protect the weak and the vulnerable. It is time for the Jewish community to renew its passion for social justice by joining the efforts for reparations for African Americans.

In The Atlantic, Coates compellingly details the complicated Jewish experience with reparations as an example. They "could not make up for the murder perpetrated by the Nazis," he writes. "But they did launch Germany's reckoning with itself, and perhaps provided a road map for how a great civilization might make itself worthy of the name."

It is not enough to read this book and espouse opinions in the comfort of our own homes. Let's get out of our comfort zones and create some action from our collective ashammnu this year. Let our lofty and spirited communal confessions lift us toward taking collective action and making a difference.