

Greetings church,

We're on chapter 7, "Forgiveness; Or, The Function and Limits of Clearing Debts".

In this chapter Rabbi Ruttenberg finally speaks to, perhaps, the thing that many of us in our American culture would have expected her to speak to much sooner; forgiveness. As indicated in earlier chapter reviews (and even some sermons) the broader American culture in which we live has little to no use for confession and repentance. While there are a myriad of reasons for this, I tie this inclination to our American culture's reckless pursuit of wealth. For wealth to continue to grow at a breakneck pace, those who are generating that wealth need not be bothered by slowing down. Being called into question about their personal or business practices that may be harmful (like slavery, historically) would force them to slow down thereby generating less wealth. Thus to keep the wealth generating and flowing, if harm is inadvertently (or intentionally) caused, it is incumbent upon the victim to "forgive and forget" and "just move on" lest we slow down the rampant accumulation of wealth. In fact, perhaps you simply need to buy yourself something nice to help you move on and get over it!

Except that "forced and coerced forgiveness is ... toxic".¹ For proof of this we need look no further than churches and church leaders who have insisted upon wives forgiving their abusive husbands and submitting themselves to their husbands' so called biblically granted authority.² Women and children have remained in unhealthy, abusive relationships because of the mis-application of the practice of forgiveness and the overlooking of the practice of repentance. Further, they have been gaslit into believing that they, the victims, are the ones causing and bringing about their own abuse. Thus "forced and coerced forgiveness is not only toxic - it can be lethal".³ Women in these circumstances have turned to violence and self-harm when seeing no other way out. "There should never be pressure on victims to forgive. Ever. When people try to force a victim to forgive, they can even cause additional harm, additional trauma."⁴

Repentance then, and not necessarily forgiveness, is the way that we as a society "... center the victim and their needs and it's on the person who did the harm to make things right".⁵ Are you frustrated that after all these years we're *still* talking about slavery and generational trauma? That we're *still* talking about racism. Frustrated that many consider the trite saying, "things are better than they used to be" a toothless platitude? The victims of slavery and racism and their needs were never centered. The persons (white persons) who did the harm, continue to do harm and have never collectively worked to make things right. We keep expecting victims of slavery and racism to forgive and forget and pay no regard to the realities of how that trauma is carried down from generation to generation. Forgiveness is **not** the corrective cure-all that we've been misled to believe that it is.

Ruttenberg also calls out the false equivalency between forgiveness and healing. Offering forgiveness or forgiving those who have caused you harm is not like flipping a magic switch that instantly heals you. "Deciding that forgiveness means healing does not automatically make it so."⁶

¹Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.171.

²If interested in a further and deeper examination of Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3 I would be happy to oblige.

³Ruttenberg. Ibid, p.171.

⁴Ruttenberg. Ibid, p.184.

⁵Ruttenberg. Ibid, p.173.

⁶Ruttenberg. Ibid, p.187.

Nor is even the repentance process that a perpetrator of harm may engage in a magic switch for healing. “Repentance (and forgiveness, my addition) and healing are, by and large, separate processes - and they can take time. People don’t change easily, and they don’t heal quickly.”⁷ Healing is a process, much like grief. And also like grief, everybody goes through the process of healing in their own time and at their own pace. It may even come to pass that forgiveness never occurs. “If someone hurts you in a way that causes irreparable damage, you are *never* obliged to forgive. Does that mean you can’t make the choice to forgive, or that forgiveness might not emerge organically at some point? Of course you may forgive, if that feels right to you. Indeed, it is sometimes exactly the correct next step in the process of healing or letting go.”⁸ This again brings us back around to the harsh reality that our American culture has got the concept of forgiveness completely wrong and we have much work to do in correcting the concept and in introducing the very biblical concept of repentance. We need to slow down and truly repent before trying to go further forward.

In Christ’s Service,
Pastor Eddie

⁷Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.180.

⁸ Ibid, p.185.