

Greetings church,

We're on chapter 5, "On National Repentance; Or, the Truth After Its Telling".

In this chapter Rabbi Ruttenberg makes the case for something, I hope, the great majority of us are already very familiar with; those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it. The, in my opinion, number one reason our nation is still gripped, twisted, and maligned by rampant racism is our nation's inability to confess the racism that was implicit in our nation's founding and repent of it. When we talked about slavery in my history classes growing up, it was not to make poor little white kids like myself feel bad about being white. And it still isn't. The purpose was to show us the atrocities of such dehumanization so as to not repeat it. But even in learning about it, there has still never been a reckoning where we, as an entire nation, were told to rend our garments and cover ourselves in sackcloth and ash as we beg forgiveness of God for treating His good creation of people with more melanin as "less than". The best way then to summarize this chapter is to simply state that Rabbi Ruttenberg makes the case for a legitimate national repentance that has not yet taken place but, arguably, desperately needs to.

Why? Confession, which comes before repentance, has the great potential to lead us out of this heinous quagmire that we as a nation find ourselves in. Confession has this potential because it empowers *both* those who have been harmed *and* those who caused the harm.

"Confession empowers those who were harmed by validating the truth of their experience, and also empowers those who were unaware, by giving them the opportunity to demand change from their government and society. Confession also, I believe, empowers those who caused harm, by inviting them to grapple with their actions and do the work of repentance, to whatever extent possible. How can we change if we don't know who we are? If we can't face what we have done?"<sup>1</sup>

The pushback we have heard time and time again from those who want to whitewash American history and take out all the hard parts is that even if white people harmed black people and native people, it was all in the past and I certainly haven't done any direct harm to any people of color. *However*, Maimonides points out that "our obligation to repentance outlives those to whom we are obligated"<sup>2</sup>. What that means is that even despite those who have directly experienced the harm no longer being alive we are not absolved from our collective ancestors' obligation to confess and repent. This is what makes for a functioning *society*. The Talmud requires confession in the first person plural; we have sinned which we carry on in our prayer of confession. Maimonides takes it one step further in asking us to pray, "we and our ancestors have sinned". Ruttenberg quotes an anonymous German commentator from the fourteenth or fifteenth century who says, "a person is obliged to mention their own sins, and the sin of their ancestors. Now why should one confess the sins of their ancestors? Because a person is held accountable for holding on to the deeds of their ancestors"<sup>3</sup>. Generational sin is a common concept in the scriptures. It seems clear that God always understood that unconfessed and unrepented sin would continue to cause harm on a societal level from generation to generation to generation until it is finally and wholly confessed and repented of. Indeed Ruttenberg concludes that "we are held accountable for the harm that was done before our

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<sup>1</sup> Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.116.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 132.

time - for all the injurious deeds that we have held on to, for all that we have not actively worked to undo”<sup>4</sup>.

If nothing else above has convinced you of the need for confession and repentance on a national scale, consider this final thought from Rabbi Ruttenberg: “We cannot change the past, yet we can change the future, but only if we are honest about what has been - and who was harmed, and who caused that harm.”<sup>5</sup> I do not believe that it is controversial to say that we, the United States of America, have been spinning our national morals wheels for decades now. Yes, we’ve made economic progress but we are overdue a wholistic moral reckoning and what we currently have is not it. Instead of working to become a more whole and complete society, we the people have chosen to continue down the path of isolation and separation. The antidote is confession and repentance. And the people to lead the way in confession and repentance is the Church.

In Christ’s Service,  
Pastor Eddie

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<sup>4</sup> Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.132.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 134.