

Greetings church,

For the next nine (9) months or so, possibly longer, I'll be inviting you all along on my journey through a book by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg entitled, "On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World". For this month's installment, we'll dive into chapter 1 entitled, "A Repentance Overview".

Rabbi Ruttenberg wastes no time in confronting why the concept of repentance is a) going to be such a difficult concept for people living in the United States to grasp and b) bordering on offensive to the same people because it is so counter-cultural. "Judaism doesn't emphasize forgiveness to the same degree that Christianity and secular American society do. Jewish law teaches that the person harmed is certainly *not* (emphasis added) obligated to forgive a perpetrator who has not done the work of repentance ... Is forgiveness something the victim can choose to do at any point? Definitely. Can it sometimes be a useful part of the healing process? For sure. Is a victim *obligated* to forgive? Well, as we rabbis are fond of saying, that's a whole other conversation."¹ Part of the reason Christianity de-emphasizes repentance is that when God came to save us in Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit, God had nothing to repent of. *We* are our own victims. We hurt our own selves through our sin. We harm one another and in doing so, harm God. God does us no harm and only offers forgiveness. That's a powerful, amazing process. Part of the reason American culture de-emphasizes repentance, as noted in last month's writing, is the concept of American exceptionalism. When the United States couldn't *possibly* do wrong because it's the greatest nation ever, there's no need to repent because we're never wrong. Additionally, repentance and "confession of harm goes against many of our cultural and often individual instincts - to shift blame, to minimize the problem, to focus on our excellent and pure intentions, to put off an uncomfortable conversation to another day".²

Is repentance as simple and straightforward as simply saying, "I'm sorry. I was wrong"? Rabbi Ruttenberg, in her study of Maimonides, tells us there are five steps to repentance. **Step One: Naming and Owning Harm.** There might actually be two steps within this one because it is a difficult concept to grasp. We could rightly start by saying that before naming and owning the harm is actually *understanding* the harm caused. We've seen and heard many bad confessions in the public in recent years. Offenders not actually owning the harm caused but hedging and offering lots of "if's". "If that person felt offended then I apologize but I certainly didn't intend to offend that person." "I'm sorry that person felt harmed but I was just joking." "It was just 'locker room' talk!" "Another human being's suffering is not magically erased because the person who caused it says that they didn't mean to do it."³ Responses like these that we've seen and heard in culture in recent years indicate that the perpetrator, the person who caused the harm, does not truly understand the harm they caused. As such, the confession and apology is inauthentic and carries no real weight. After understanding the harm *then* we can offer a true apology in which we own the harm we've caused, feel ashamed by actions and commit to not doing that thing again. "A confession of harm is only regarded as part of the repentance process when someone actually intends to do the work."⁴ We cannot cut corners.

¹ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.25.

² *ibid*, p.26

³ *ibid*, p.23

⁴ *ibid*, p.31

This leads us to **Step Two: Starting to Change**. This is exactly what I have been preaching about when I speak into the concept of what Jesus is communicating at the end of Matthew 5. Jesus calls us “be whole or complete just as our Heavenly Father is whole and complete.” We are not fully formed. We are not the best version of ourselves; not yet. Because we continue to harm others and to harm ourselves. Repentance then is part of the process of this “becoming”. “The goal here isn’t merely making amends. It’s transformation.”⁵ It is both appropriate and ok that we have work yet to do; that we are not perfect, that we are not fully formed. We all make mistakes. Ask my kids to finish this sentence and they will. “We’re allowed to make mistakes. We’re not allowed ...”. To repeat them. We change and grow after making a mistake and legitimately naming and owning the harm caused. This is how we change. This is how we keep becoming the best version of ourselves; the version God created and intended before Sin got in and mucked everything up.

Step Three: Restitution and Accepting Consequences. This is tricky. This is the first point at which care for the victim, restitution, is introduced into the process. Some may be confused as to why this five step process of repentance does not focus and prioritize the victim. “If we ask a perpetrator to engage too early with their victim - before they’ve confronted the seriousness of their actions and their impact, before they’ve begun working to change - the likelihood of their causing additional harm, rather than meaningful repair, is much higher.”⁶ This is why the work of understanding harm, apologizing for harm caused and working on transformation is so critically important *before* making amends or restitution. Without the first two steps, the probability of causing further harm, rises exponentially.

Step Four: Apology. It is here that we finally get to the point of making an authentic, heartfelt apology indicative of our desire to change and transform. “A generic apology crafted by a publicist and posted on Instagram won’t make the cut; rather the focus here is on what the victim receives rather than what the perpetrator puts out.”⁷ The goal here is not to make the perpetrator feel better but to address the needs of and care for the victim. Maimonides talks about appeasing and imploring the harmed party until they are forgiven. “The focus is the mental and emotional state of the victim, not the boxes that a perpetrator needs to check in order to be let off the hook.”⁸ Our apologies should be other focused, about repairing harm done, not about doing our due diligence.

Step Five: Making Different Choices. This then is, as mentioned above, about changing how we live; about being transformed. About not repeating mistakes made and about not continuing to harm others. Are we becoming the best version of ourselves? Are we becoming more whole and complete as our Heavenly Father is whole and complete? This is good work to do.

This is going to be a good read and I am excited to bring you all along with me on this journey. I hope you all will receive the insights and comments from Rabbi Ruttenberg with an open heart and mind as we seek a way forward while living in rhythm. God’s grace and peace be upon you all.

In Christ’s Service,
Pastor Eddie

⁵Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.34.

⁶ *ibid*, p.37

⁷ *ibid*, p.41

⁸ *ibid*, p.41