

Greetings church,

We're on chapter 2, "Repentance in Personal Relationship; Or, Why is This So Hard?"

Let's start by addressing the question she asks about repentance being so hard. We'll start there because I suspect that many of you are asking the same question; that many of you are concerned or anxious about the discomfort of the task. And Rabbi Ruttenberg makes it very clear why this is so often such an uncomfortable task. "Addressing harm is possible only when we bravely face the gap between the story we tell about ourselves - the one in which we're the hero, fighting the good fight, doing our best, behaving responsibly in every context - and the reality of our actions. We need to summon the courage to cross the bridge over that cognitively dissonant gulf and face who we are, who we have been - even if it threatens our story of ourselves."¹ The concept of repentance is exceedingly difficult; it is even more so for those who struggle with the concept of the idea of being wrong. What is being asked when a mistake is made or is pointed out is to not double down, but instead to humbly admit error. This especially goes with so-called "unintended consequences". We have a saying in the Mariel household, "intent versus impact". The purpose of this saying is to call to our attention exactly what Rabbi Ruttenberg is talking about here. If I make a joke that I think is funny but it hurts the feelings of someone in my family, then my intent is null and void. What matters is the impact that the joke had on one of my family members. This is that "cognitive divide" that the rabbi was speaking of. I was being funny! I'm a funny guy! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I'm not a feelings-hurting-guy.

Rabbi Ruttenberg addresses this illogical leap, this fallacy, this cognitive divide. Did you see it? Did you see what I did there? We all do it. In my example, I was simply told that my joke wasn't funny, that my one joke hurt someone's feelings. Then I leapt straight to the point that I'm not a harmful person. One bad joke that hurts someone's feelings does not rob one of their funny guy persona. One bad joke that hurts someone's feelings does not make that person a bad person who goes around hurting people's feelings for kicks. "Many times, when people are told that they have caused harm, a defensive, self-protective impulse kicks in. We often deny either our actions or their impact, particularly if we have caused great harm - or if we believe that *doing a harmful thing* is the same thing as *being a bad person*."² This is what makes every single topic of our national discourse these days so confoundingly unproductive. Every critique, every pushback, it seems, is immediately viewed as an attack on someone else's personhood thereby completely eliminating even the prospect of thoughtful conversation or dialogue. "If someone interprets the statement 'You said something racist' to mean 'You are an irredeemably racist person,' they might well resist the critique, seeing it as a condemnation of their whole self."³ Because we fail to practice repentance, we can't even talk about race, or religion, or guns, or abortions or whatever precisely because we all fail, at one level or another, to practice humility and recognize our own imperfections; to realize that there just be something we're wrong about.

Another part of the difficulty in practicing repentance, why it is so hard, is the failure of so many of us to differentiate between punishment and accountability. I spoke of this in my Ash Wednesday and my Lenten luncheon homily as well. As a society, the evidence points to us preferring punishment instead of accountability. We want people punished for their crimes or for hurting

¹ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.49.

² Ibid, pp. 51-52.

³ Ibid, p. 52.

others, made to suffer, but we don't necessarily want them to be held accountable. Why not accountability? "... We can think of punishment as coming only from the outside, and accountability as inviting or pushing people to do the work from within. Accountability can feel vulnerable, scary, and even painful, but it has integrity and allows us to move forward. It moves us out of avoidance, blame, and denial, and into the reality of what we've done - we finally face it bravely and begin to learn and grow from the experience."⁴ You probably got squeamish or uncomfortable reading the words vulnerable, scary, and painful. Especially in a cultural ethos where what is valued is *not* vulnerability, but "sucking it up" and "pulling yourself up by the bootstraps" and "rubbing some dirt in it". As a society, we're really good at punishing others. We gave the Brits the boot and we sent Hitler and the Nazi's packing. We're really horrible at self-critically examining, at holding ourselves accountable for, our own misdeeds like slavery and the internment of Japanese-Americans. Part of the failure to differentiate punishment and accountability comes from a false sense of superiority and lack of humility as a society. This idea that we couldn't have possibly done something wrong because we're perfect; we're God's chosen nation; manifest destiny. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel is very insightful and helpful here: "Should we ... despair because of being unable to retain perfect purity? We should, if perfection were our goal. However, we are not obliged to be perfect once and for all, but only to rise again and again beyond the level of the self. Perfection is divine, and to make it a goal of [humans] is to call on [human beings] to be divine. All we can do is try to wring our hearts clean in contrition ... To be contrite at our failures is holier than to be complacent in perfection."⁵ This is precisely why, as Jesus tells us, the tax collector went home justified and the Pharisee did not (see Luke 18: 9 - 14).

Finally, care and consideration must be given to when apologies cannot be made by the person who did the harm to the one whom they harmed. "In Judaism, we have a series of prohibitions against saying or doing something if it would hurt another person, and this can include apologies that might cause, rather than alleviate, pain. One example cited in the literature is about gossip - if a person gossiped about someone else, and the person who was the target of the gossip was unaware of this fact, *and* if it would hurt this person to be told that they were, in fact, the subject of this conversation, then the gossip has no right to cause this person pain by asking for their forgiveness."⁶ They'll just have to live with, and grow from, their poor decision. It is worth repeating that apologies and forgiveness are not the same thing. There are times when someone has harmed someone so grievously that future interpersonal interaction, even to apologize and seek forgiveness, is not safe for the harmed person. "It seems clear to me that this idea would necessarily extend to other situations that might cause pain or trauma to the victim of harm."⁷ For example, it is few and far between the rapist who is able to apologize and ask forgiveness of the person they raped.

In Christ's Service,
Pastor Eddie

⁴ Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. pp. 58-59.

⁵ Ibid, p. 60.

⁶ Ibid, p. 66.

⁷ Ibid, p.66.