

# **ON REPENTANCE AND REPAIR: MAKING AMENDS IN AN UNAPOLOGETIC WORLD**

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## **Discussion Guide for Christians**

### **About This Guide:**

This discussion guide offers readers a chance to process the ideas Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg raises in her book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Beacon Press, 2022), and to reflect more deeply on them.

Each chapter has both general questions about the book, found in every On Repentance and Repair discussion guide, and some additional questions and framings developed by Rev. Molly Baskette, author of *How to Begin When Your World Is Ending: A Spiritual Field Guide to Joy Despite Everything* (Broadleaf Books, 2022).

You can consider these questions alone, with one other person or with a group. Here, the text and concepts in *On Repentance and Repair* are starting points, but feel free to allow the conversation to unfold however it must, in whatever way feels organic to the moment.

While Rabbi Ruttenberg roots her approach to repentance and forgiveness in Maimonides and other Jewish thinkers, we hope you find its larger possibilities universally applicable and relevant to your experiences and community.

### **Suggestions for Group Discussion:**

It can be nice—and a good way to establish a sense of connection—for each participant to introduce themselves and share one word at the beginning of each discussion that reflects how they are feeling about the chapter(s) or about the prospect of discussing this/these chapter(s)—something they're holding, excited about, feeling, resonating with, apprehensive about, or anything else.

Since this book in particular touches on sensitive issues and may invite personal reflection or discussion of harms experienced or committed, you may want to begin the conversation with some general guidelines, such as:

- Our goal is to reflect on our own experiences and the experiences of others, not to make judgments. We will remember that we can never truly know another's experience.
- We will provide warnings for any possibly triggering topics. No group member will be obligated to provide an explanation for excusing themselves from a conversation or passing on a question.
- We will keep an open mind to better learn from one another.
- What is said in this conversation stays in this conversation, and may not be repeated outside it.
- Our aim is to create a space where we can hear each other and understand ourselves, not to give advice or to argue ideas of objective truth. With that in mind, in this conversation we will agree to speak in the first-person, about our own truth.
- We will assume good faith in one another.
- We will practice respect and open-mindedness when learning from one another.
- We won't rush to fill the silence.

Can everyone agree to these things? Does anyone have additional agreements that they'd like to propose?

### **From Rev. Baskette:**

Christianity has a long and ugly history not only of anti-semitism, but its theological kin, supercessionism: the idea that Jesus and the Christian church somehow fulfill, make inviolate and/or "supercede" the Jewish sacred texts, history, ethics and tradition.

In reality, the Hebrew Scriptures comprise the vast majority of the Christian Bible—more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our sacred texts. Any responsible follower of Jesus, himself Jewish, will want to understand the texts and context that shaped his thinking, teaching and living.

Jesus speaks quite a bit about sin, judgment, repentance and forgiveness—about both "cancel culture" and "call-in culture." How do we understand his teachings in light of his religion? Rabbi Ruttenberg gives a modern read of the 5 steps that medieval philosopher Maimonides, thinking and living 1,000 years after Jesus, offered for repentance and repair. The supplemental questions add an additional lens to the dialogue—some new bits for the kaleidoscope of conversation.

This addendum is not meant to pull focus from Danya Ruttenberg's main ideas, nor is it intended to be exhaustive. Doubtless these questions will raise even more questions! Hopefully they will spur you to challenge some ossified assumptions and tropes of Christian theology—including calling out the harm Christianity itself has done and continues to do. We can call our own tradition to repentance, open it up to healthy scrutiny, and at the same time nourish a Christian faith that is actually braver, truer and more healing for us as individuals, our communities and the world.

# Introduction

## What's Missing When We Seek to Repair Harm?

1. What does Ruttenberg argue are some of the key factors in American culture that make repentance work especially challenging here?
2. What are some examples of injustices that have resulted from rushed or coerced attempts at forcing forgiveness?
3. Who does a return to normalcy after harm, without meaningful redress, benefit? How? Who does a return to normalcy without meaningful redress hurt? How?
4. Have you ever forgiven (or said that you've forgiven) someone for the sake of unity or group cohesion? Have you ever demanded forgiveness for yourself or on behalf of another person in order to move forward? What happened?

In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus how often he should forgive someone who keeps sinning against him. Up to 7 times? Jesus answers either “not 7 times—but seventy-seven times” or “seventy times 7 times!” depending on the translation. Christians have been taught that our forgiveness should be limitless, even if the transgressor keeps harming us. Supererogatory grace is a virtue. What damage can that idea do in perpetuating cycles of harm? What are some other ways we might read this text in light of the wisdom of Rabbi Ruttenberg and Maimonides?

Rev. Jack Perkins Davidson writes, “The immediately preceding section in Matthew describes a process for communal accountability to interrupt bad behavior. If we read the whole section as one unit, it would seem Peter is asking a clarifying question about that process and how many times we must go through this process of communal interruption to stop the bad behavior. It’s not a call to roll over and enable, but a call to hold boundaries and process.”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, “Forgiveness does not mean condoning what has been done. Forgiveness means abandoning your right to pay back the perpetrator in his own coin.”

## Chapter One: A Repentance Overview

### What Might Be Possible

1. What are Maimonides' stages of repentance? Try to see if you can remember them first, as a group, without checking. But you can refer to the book (pp. 26-43) or the end of this handout if you get stuck. Why (does Ruttenberg argue) are they in this order? Do you think that's right?
2. How does Maimonides's approach to repentance differ from your existing ideas of apology and repentance? If your idea of repentance is similar to that of Maimonides, how does it differ from the mainstream American conception of repentance?
3. If you could add a step to the steps of repentance proposed by Maimonides, what would it be? Would you adapt any of the existing steps?
4. What are the stages of repentance that seem most intuitive or natural to you? Which ones seem (or have been, if you have done this practice in the past) most challenging or daunting?

Rabbi Ruttenberg writes “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 obligated to forgive a perpetrator who has not done the work of repentance.” She says of *tshuvah*, repentance: “In a spiritual context, *tshuvah* is about coming back to where we are supposed to be, returning to the person we know we’re capable of being—coming home, in humility and with intentionality, to behave as the person we’d like to believe we are.” *Tshuvah* has a correlative in the Greek New Testament word *metanoia*, “change of heart.” How has the idea of *metanoia/tshuvah* been central to Christian theology since the beginning? Has it gotten lost in our modern Christian spiritual practices and priorities? Where do you see it at work in yourself or community?

## Chapter Two: Repentance in Personal Relationships

### Why Is This So Hard?

1. Ruttenberg suggests that “addressing harm is only possible 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 and appropriately in every context—and the reality of our actions. We need to summon our courage to cross that cognitively dissonant gulf and face who we are, who we have been—even if it threatens our story of ourselves” (p. 49). Do you agree with her that addressing harm is only possible when we do this? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree with her that crossing that gulf requires some amount of bravery? What might be so difficult about this?
3. Try the exercise outlined in this chapter: “Imagine a scenario in which the people who have hurt you come to you in the way that would appease you best, make you feel most loved and cared for and seen—do that as a starting place, as you consider the people you have harmed” (p59). Does considering your own feelings of hurt help you to empathize with those you may have harmed? What are some of the risks or possible pitfalls involved with this approach?
4. What do you need in order to face the truth of your actions and their impact? Have you ever done this (by choice or not)? What happened?
5. How might you know if addressing someone directly could cause additional harm? Why is it necessary to ask this question? What are some challenges or pitfalls of it?

Christian theology often talks about forgiveness as a process initiated by the person who has been harmed. Think of Anne Lamott’s popular line “not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.” It is tempting to only see ourselves as victims rather than perpetrators of harm—the seductiveness of the hero role. But seeing ourselves as serial “forgivers” can turn into an empty kind of virtue-signaling if we don’t understand ourselves to be on the other side of the equation at times. In my practical experience, we have churches full of victims and no perpetrators!

Ruttenberg describes a process that begins not with the harmed person, but with the transgressor. What if we took an honest accounting of our own transgressions, and began there?

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## Chapter Three: Harm in the Public Square

### Accountable to Whom?

1. How would you define the difference between “calling out” and “calling in”? When would you utilize either tactic?
2. What are the components of effective rebuke, according to Maimonides (and/or Ruttenberg?) Do you agree or disagree with that (or those) perspective(s)?
3. Have you ever offered rebuke in response to a harmful statement or behavior in public or in private? If you have done so in both settings, which was more difficult?
4. Have you ever been rebuked in response to a harmful statement in public or in private? If you have received rebuke in both settings, which were you more willing to hear and receive?
5. Imagine that someone offered rebuke on an inappropriate comment in a public space. How and why would your reaction differ if this rebuke occurred online or in real life?
6. Review Derek Black’s story (91). What about Black’s story surprised you? What did it teach you about the repentance process? About “canceling”?

Our churches are rife with conflict and interpersonal harm. Often it happens in sly and passive-aggressive ways: parking lot conversations, microaggressions against more marginalized community members, long carefully-written emails from parishioner to pastor, a knife so sharp you don’t feel it going in until the bleeding begins.

In majority white, middle-class mainline churches [aka God’s frozen chosen], honest and mature rebuke can be rare. And yet immediately preceding Jesus’ call to forgive “seventy-seven times” is a roadmap for conflict resolution (Matthew 18:15-20). He invites us to address conflict directly and nonviolently, with a goal toward reconciliation. It mirrors Maimonides’ counsel: “it is essential that the rebuke be administered only between them both; and they should speak to them calmly, employing soft language. If the harmdoer receives it attentively, it is well; if not, they should rebuke a second, even a third time.”

The goal of rebuke is to “speak the truth in love,” (Ephesians 4:15), as the apostle Paul writes to a church in conflict. Quoting Ruttenberg, “We have been given a chance to grow, to learn, to become better. One Rabbinic text teaches that, in fact, rebuke is a necessary part of any healthy process: ‘Rabbi Yosi ben Chanina said, ‘A love without rebuke is no love.’ Resh Lakish said, ‘Rebuke leads to peace; a peace where there has been no rebuke is no peace.’ I accept that education.”

How have you seen the advice to “speak the truth in love” adopted effectively in church settings? How have you seen it misappropriated? What rebuke would you like to make against someone in your community? Have you ever been rebuked—and did you accept the education?

# Chapter Four: Institutional Obligations

## What Is Owed

1. What are some of the institutions of which you are a part? Schools? Places of work? Social groups? Religious community? Social networking websites? What else?
2. Are there institutions in which you could have a possible role with regards to harm—knowing that every institutional harm has many actors? Whether as a decision-maker, someone who could influence decisionmakers or other stakeholders, someone tasked to carry out orders, a bystander, or some other role?
3. Have any of those institutions caused harm? If so, in what way? Did it impact you in some way?
4. Have you ever experienced “institutional betrayal” (105)? If so, what happened? How did it impact how you thought about the institution? Yourself? Others connected to the institution? Did that feeling change over time?
5. Can an institution do repentance work? If so, what’s involved?
6. Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas suggests that a common pitfall of universities doing work around reparations for slavery is that “after the money has been paid to enslaved ancestors or for scholarships and other programming—systems and structures are not disrupted. Life goes on as usual—and these institutions continue to benefit from the ongoing legacy of white supremacy to the detriment of people of color.” (p. 113) And that, more than that, universities that were not actively involved in the Atlantic Slave Trade then consider themselves off the hook for the work of looking at the way they may uphold white supremacy. What does this example teach us about the work of repentance and institutions more broadly? How might it apply to one or more of the institutions of which you are a part?

Institutional betrayal and harm is not unique to the Christian church. And yet there are unique ways in which they have historically showed up in Christian institutions: the propagation of human slavery (preached as a positive in many Christian churches), colonization, forced conversion, not to mention the torture and execution of “heretics,” people of other faiths and no faith.

And harm continues today: particularly in the ways in which leaders claim to bear the authority of, and even embody, Jesus Christ himself to nefarious ends; the accumulation of wealth and power; the ongoing clergy sexual abuse scandal; the counseling of victims of partner violence to stay in abusive marriages; the doctrine of “complementarianism” asserting that men are the head of the household. Even in liberal churches we see the perniciousness of casual misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, classism and ableism. And white-majority churches that have intentionally tried to address racial justice still manifest white supremacy in a myriad of ways. Patriarchal consolidation of power and wealth are embedded in our hiring practices, investment strategies (if we have wealth to invest), liturgies, naming rights, decisionmaking, bylaws and informal culture, because “we’ve always done it that way.”

We have much harm first to acknowledge, and then repent. What are some ways that your own church(es) have done harm, historically? How is the harm ongoing? If you’re not aware of any harm, who might be a good person to ask? What might you read or research to find out more?



What is it going to take to actually change how our churches function in regard to dismantling the oppressive structures we have internalized? What is one step you can take in your setting, toward decentering wealth and shifting the existing power structures? (e.g. guest preacher invitations, bylaws review, pay equity, bilingual liturgy, images of Jesus that aren't white, etc.)

As much harm as Christianity has done, it has also spawned countless movements for abolition, enfranchisement, wealth redistribution, universal health care, land reform and other wholesale justice reforms. What contributed to the success of these movements? How did the example or message of Jesus spark these movements?

## **Chapter Five: On National Repentance**

### **The Truth After Its Telling**

1. How would you characterize the national repentance processes in South Africa and Germany? In the United States?
2. What are some obstacles to national repentance? What are some of the things that make it more possible?
3. Why does Ruttenberg argue that the confession step is so critical to the work of national repentance? What are some risks of excessive focus on confession?
4. Ruttenberg says that “we are held accountable for all that we have not actively worked to undo” (p.132). Name one national social justice issue that has received news coverage recently and reflect on whether you have yet taken action addressing injustice. What is one small step you can take to address harm in your community or nation?
5. What concrete steps can you take to educate yourself and others on historical injustices?
6. What are some useful strategies for targeting oppressive systems?

“80% of white evangelical Christians supported Trump in spite of his unfamiliarity with the Bible, his divorces, his vulgar (and violent) rhetoric, and his association with porn stars,” reported NPR. There has been a resurgence of rhetoric and activity over the past 6 years to reassert the United States as a “Christian nation.” It includes diverting public funds to private religious schools, rewriting curricula and banning books in public schools according to fundamentalist Christian criteria, attempting (and sometimes succeeding) to ban abortion on subjective Christian principles, rolling back rights for queer and especially trans community members based on misappropriated Biblical texts. The list goes on.

What do we make of this tension in our politics and culture? If Jesus were here to call Christians to repentance on a national level, what might he specifically ask us to repent, and why?

Why does it seem that followers of Jesus are exceptionally good at noticing the speck in our neighbor's eye, and so bad at noticing the log in our own? What is the work of white progressive Christians to call out/call in their siblings on the religious right? What do white Christians have to

repent, on the left or in the middle? Do Christians of color—who are explicitly harmed by white supremacist Christian nationalism—occupy a different role in the work than religious minorities, or non-Christian trans people, or others who are also targeted, but not Christian?

Reminder: Jesus never held elected office. He did all of his work outside the systems of power. Why?

## Chapter Six: Justice Systems

### What Consequences for Harm?

1. What picture does Ruttenberg paint about the American criminal justice system? How does it fit (or not fit) in with the conversation about repentance that we've been having so far?
2. Who benefits from the incarceration of a perpetrator of harm?
3. Can you describe the difference between restorative justice, transformative justice, and community accountability? If your group gets stuck, you can look to p. 150 for help.
4. Have you encountered the concept of restorative justice before? How does it differ from the criminal justice model?
5. What are some challenges inherent in a more restorative or transformative justice model?
6. Why is it important for the perpetrator and victim to discuss their responses to a harmful act separately before meeting (if they eventually choose to do so)?
7. Have you ever experienced restorative or transformative justice up close? What happened?
8. How do we hold appropriate consequences for harm that bring more wholeness to communities and allow for the possibility of repentance of the perpetrator?

Jesus quoted the Hebrew prophet Isaiah when he said he came to “proclaim good news to the poor... (and) liberty to the captives.” In Matthew 25, Jesus distinguishes between the goats who ignore the call to do justice and praises the sheep who feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, tend the sick and finally: visit the prisoner. (Note: this passage has sometimes been used as an antisemitic cudgel—ironically, in fact, since Jewish law considers all of the actions noted to be obligatory commandments (mitzvot), with redeeming captives a “great commandment” that takes precedence over many others. Traditional Jewish law also did not have a prison system—that was the Romans.)

Jesus says to a woman caught in adultery, when he saves her from mob: “go and sin no more.” In other words, he sees her as a whole person: a victim of others' hypocritical accusations and worthy of protection and defense, yet also a harmdoer herself. He holds her accountable for her actions, hoping she will turn herself around.

Where else does Jesus practice that kind of intimate, loving accountability that sees people in their fullness, and gives them an opportunity to change?

How can a healthy Christian theology of restorative or transformative justice inform our own approach or opinions about our modern carceral system?



## Chapter Seven: Forgiveness

### The Function and Limits of Clearing Debts

1. What are a few different ways to understand what forgiveness is, or entails?
2. What does a good apology require? Why do so many apologies fall short?
3. What is the role of apology in the work of repentance?
4. Is the person who is harmed obligated to forgive the harmdoer? Even if they apologize multiple times, sincerely?
5. Do you agree with Maimonides that refusing forgiveness after multiple sincere apologies constitutes a sin or harm of its own?
6. How has cultural pressure to grant forgiveness affected your own interactions with people who caused you harm? With those you have harmed?
7. Ruttenberg quotes Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's response to the question of post-Holocaust forgiveness, saying that "no one can forgive crimes committed against other people" (190). What are some appropriate ways to do repentance work when the victim of harm is no longer alive?

Jesus preached a lot of parables, sermon scraps and other memes about money and debt, perhaps none as poignantly as the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). How do we understand that parable in light of Rabbi Ruttenberg's questions in this chapter on Forgiveness? Does the prodigal son's apology hit the mark or fall short? How about the brother's posture? What do we think Jesus wants us to learn from this parable about "the function and limits of clearing debts"?

Nearly every week in our churches people recite this line from the prayer that Jesus gave us: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." Do we mean this? How have we practiced this? Where could we still?

## Chapter Eight: Atonement

### What Is Effected

1. How does Ruttenberg define atonement? How is it different from repentance or forgiveness?
2. Ruttenberg writes that, though the process of repentance is challenging, "the only way out is through" (201). What are some concrete techniques you can take from Ruttenberg's work that will help you to work through this process of repentance?
3. Why do you think Ruttenberg ends the book with this quote from the Talmud (Yoma 86a) in the name of Rabbi Hama Bar Hanina, "Great is repentance, for it brings healing to the world"? Do you think that's true? If so, how? If not, why not?

One of the trickiest bits of modern Christian theology is the theory of substitutionary atonement: the idea that God required a sacrifice to expiate the sins of humanity, Jesus became that sacrifice in our stead, and to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior is to win God's approval and eternal favor.

“As if God could need payment, and even a very violent transaction, to be able to love and accept God’s own children! These theories are based on retributive justice rather than the restorative justice that the prophets and Jesus taught,” writes Father Richard Rohr.

Jesus’ death did in fact reveal violence: human violence, not divine. His death was meant to jolt us awake by exposing the scapegoating mechanism and the senselessness of all violence. How do you understand Jesus’ death, and the varieties of atonement theory?

Rabbi Ruttenberg describes how the Black author Austin Channing Brown gave a testimony at her church about visiting a lynching memorial. Afterward, the white members of her church swarmed her, seeking absolution for the racist impulses and ideas they could suddenly perceive in themselves. In unburdening themselves, they burdened her. Atonement, Ruttenberg writes, is work. It won’t necessarily feel good, and it’s not instantaneous. We have to do it for ourselves, not shift it onto Jesus, or any other stand-in. When have you done this work? How did you begin?

A spiritual director once said “Communion is the deepest reality. It’s alienation that is the illusion.” Atonement literally means “At One-Ment.” It’s not just a cute pun. How do we overcome the perception of alienation—from God or other humans?