

On Repentance and Repair: Interview with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg and Rabbi Jill Maderer

Hello I'm Rabbi Jill Maderer from Congregation Rodeph Shalom in Philadelphia. And I am grateful to be here in conversation with the Reform Movement and with Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg about her newest book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*.

Rabbi Ruttenberg, your book lays out so much brokenness in this world, in our lives, in our relationships. And yet at the same time, through Jewish wisdom, it really provides a path into hope, and repair, and possibility. Can you to start us off? Can you give us a definition of *t'shuvah*?

T'shuvah is a Hebrew word that is often translated as "repentance", but it actually really means "returning". Like you, in Hebrew, might buy a bus ticket that's *haloch v'shuv*, right, a going there and a coming back. That we're coming back to where we were meant to be all along. *T'shuvah* is also an answer to a question.

So it's a way of coming back to finding the answers, to the person that we wanted to be, to living in our integrity, to living in connection with other people, to living in connection with the divine, to living in harmony with our integrity and our values.

So if the work of *t'shuvah* is really the work of the person who has done wrong, who has committed a transgression or harmed someone else, how is it that in the work of *t'shuvah*, we are centering the victim and the victim's needs?

So the work of naming and owning the harm that we have caused, if it's really just about us, if it's about me, me, me, I've done wrong, I'm so bad, it's all me, and we're not really looking at the person who was hurt, and really getting what we did, and caring for them, and really trying to figure out how we have impacted them, and how we can try to-- best we can-- repair the hole in the cosmos that we have created, and to attend to their needs and to become the kind of people who don't do this thing ever again to anyone else, then we're not doing the work of repentance. We're doing a sort of an egocentric exercise. And so if our repentance work does not at all times take the victim, the person who has been impacted's needs and care and concern into account first and foremost, then something's missing.

Now there's the victim who's been directly impacted, but then there may be indirect impact or some kind of witnessing. So what are the layers of impact?

I mean, it's contextual, right? If there's something that happens inside a marriage and the only two people who are impacted are the two people inside that marriage, that's one kind of harm and one kind of repair work that's going to be involved. But so often in our world, harm isn't just the sort of simple equation. There is the person who caused harm. There is a person who is affected. There are witnesses to the harm who may be receiving cues about what's OK and what's not OK. There may be witnesses to the harm who are harmed indirectly because they are now put on notice, that suddenly this is not a safe space for them either, and this is not a safe culture for them, and their own concerns will not be believed or cared for.

There may be people whose own past traumas are triggered. And a culture of what is safe and not safe, it may be created. And if we're thinking about institutional trust, there may be people whose sense of safety and belief in an institution may be impacted by the nature of the harm. If we're thinking about a cultural or national level, it has the potential to shape entire systems of power, and who has power, and how that power is wielded.

Now we're using the term victim. And I've also seen the term survivor or impacted individual or targeted individual. How are you approaching your terms?

It's complicated, and there is not one right, magical answer that's going to address every situation. I tend to use victim as an umbrella term because there are so many different kinds of situations and so many different types of harm, right. Forgetting to pick you up at the airport and stepping on your foot are some kinds of harm, and systemic racism and sexual abuse are other kinds of harm, and it's hard to describe them all in one word.

Some people choose to use the word survivor to describe their experience of coming through trauma. And the decision to use that word is often very personal, and for some people it denotes a process of getting through healing. And that's really powerful. And, of course, if that is the correct word to describe your experience, then absolutely, you should use it. And I try not to be presumptuous. And so I tend to use victim as a more umbrella term to describe someone who has been impacted or injured by harm.

And we all do harm. We're human beings. We are imperfect. And so we are blessed in our Jewish lives that we have this guidance from Maimonides and from our tradition. Can you tell us, how does my Maimonides guide us?

When I read the Laws of Repentance, I see five distinct steps that really take someone through a process of repentance work.

OK. What are the five steps?

So we've got confession. Own the harm fully that you have caused. Then we have starting to change. Begin to do the work to become the different person and the kind of person who doesn't do that thing. Amends. What do you need to do to repair the situation that you caused? Then apology, and we'll talk in a moment about why apology is so late in the game. And then the fifth and final step is, when you have the chance to make that same injurious choice, you do something different. You make different choices. You naturally, and organically, through all the work of repentance and repair, have become the kind of person who chooses in a different way.

Many of our communities, our institutions, are finally coming face-to-face with brokenness, with wrongdoing, sometimes even tragic wrongdoing coming from within their systems and within our systems. Can you speak to how these steps of personal *t'shuvah* can be brought to the work we are and need to be engaged in our institutions?

I have found [they] work on the personal level, the deeply, deeply most intimate personal level of our lives. They work on the institutional level, on the broader social level, on a national level. And when we hold them up, they can be a mirror that illuminates what's missing in our processes.

When we say, "Wow, there's some real work that's happening here. Let's see where we are." And then you say, "OK. This confession happened. What does it look like? Has it done everything it needs to do? Are victims feeling cared for? What about starting to change. What has changed, what hasn't? Are we clear that the person is beginning to do the work in a way that won't cause the harm again, that systems are changing? What amends have happened, what amends haven't happened? Are the person or people harmed getting what they need? What apologies have and haven't happened? Are the people who are harmed, the person they were harmed, are they feeling appeased, and if not, why not, and what needs to happen to get there?"

And most critically, what needs to happen to make sure that this is never going to happen again? And what needs to happen so that everything that happened steps one, two, three and four were so profound that when we get to step five, it's obvious. Naturally, step five should not be a choice. Step five should be a natural and organic outcome of steps one, two, three and four. By the time you get to step five it's like, well so clearly, I am so different and so transformed by all of the other things I've been doing that there's no way I could possibly be over there doing the things that I did before, those horrible things.

I think so often in our institutions that the more our institutions of trust can show up and act like institutions of trust when things go wrong instead of offering what psychologist Jennifer Freyd calls institutional betrayal, right, which is like another layer of trauma. Another injury on top of the original injury. When I love and feel connected to a place that is my home and it doesn't live up to my expectations when I'm harmed, then it's another layer of trauma.

And when it shows up and is there for me when I need it, even if it's not 70 sqajillion dollars, if they just show up and say, you have needs now and I see you, I think it just does so much for people's sense of humanity and being seen.

Our institutions have deep work to do. What do you describe as institutional courage?

So this is also-- that's also a phrase from the work of Dr. Jennifer Freyd, who is tremendous. Institutional courage is not, as she says, a binary. That there are not institutions that are brave and institutions that are not brave. It is a journey. And every institution needs to find their way, step by step, and to do the thing that is scary but that meets the needs of the people that were harmed. That is the thing that feels vulnerable but that attends to the needs of the people who have trusted it. And then to walk the next step, and what is the next step after that?

OK, it's great that we did this, but we can't stop here. What is the next thing after this that we can do to be bigger and braver and to better model our Jewish values, and to better be an example of what caring for our people really can be. And that every time an institution takes that step, it shows every other institution what's possible, and it offers more healing and more light into the world, and it cares better for the people who need it to.

Let's begin with the first step. How would you describe confession?

Confession is about owning the harm that you have caused and owning it fully. It's about no hedging, no qualifications, no, "but I really intended really well and I was just trying to be a good person." It requires, even before you do the confession step, a little bit of that *cheshbon hanefesh*, accounting of the soul, to really cross that bridge between the story of yourself as the hero and the good guy who's always doing right, and having to face, you didn't do the right thing.

No matter what it is, you have to just name it, own it, fully. And definitely, it has to be at least to the person or people that witnessed and experience the harm. If you say something racist in a staff meeting, then all of the people present in that staff meeting have to hear your confession, whether you put it on the team Slack, whether you name it in the staff meeting next week, whether you catch yourself in the moment and say, "Oop, I just heard what came out of my mouth and that wasn't right," and then correct yourself and own it.

Whatever it is, you have to confess fully. And it's praiseworthy, even, to do it in a more public way, to tell more people that this is what happened, as a way of asking for help, as a way of accountability. It's a way of saying, I'm going on a repentance journey, and I want to change, and I'm inviting all of you to help me because I can't do it alone.

What is the potential impact for the victim to hear this confession?

So this is really part of why I think that all of the steps of repentance are deeply victim-centric, even if we don't see the victim named in each of the steps. So for example, in the confession step, suddenly there's an end to the gaslighting. There is suddenly an end to any question about where culpability lies. The victim can stop questioning themselves. "Did this really happen? Was it really that bad? Am I making this up?"

A victim who's clear on what happened but maybe isn't believed by everybody in the community has that validation and vindication. "See, look, they're owning it." Everybody around now is clear on what happened, and that victim can get the full support that they have deserved all this time from everyone in the community.

And that's something that, ideally, is negotiated with the person who was harmed. You don't make amends at a person. You make them to the person and with the person. And what would feel like the correct amends to one individual may feel different than a totally different individual who has experienced the same kind of injury.

So restitution can be financial, it doesn't need to be financial. It can be direct with the victim, but also indirect with a community or with a cause. Once I've moved through and I've really started to work these steps, I've confessed, I've started to change, I've made amends, at this point, when can I expect to return to the way things were? When can I go back to my position, my job, my status, my honor, my relationship?

Part of the amends process is accepting that actions have consequences. Things are different than they were before. It's just a fact. The person who was injured doesn't get to automatically go back in time, and neither do you. And the really critical piece of this work that a lot of people struggle with is that you don't get to just punch the buttons and say, now everything is better so I'm back.

And it may be that if you are doing this work in a deep and sincere way, that people will see naturally and organically that you are on their team. The person who was not invited to game night might be invited back to game night as a result of their very sincere actions. But somebody who is coming into that space with the entitlement, "OK, give me my status back. Of course, I have earned it because I have checked those boxes," is somebody who does not understand the harm that they caused.

Moving to the fourth step of *t'shuvah*. How would you describe apology, which is remarkably late in the game?

And there's a reason why apology is so late. So you have already done-- this is the end of the process. You've already done, basically, just about as much as you can to try to sew up that hole in the cosmos that you, yourself, created. You have owned what you have done. Beginning to and continuing to try to change and grow and transform. You have done what you can to repair, in whatever way that you can.

And by now, hopefully, you've gotten it. You've gotten the memo. You've gotten that there's another human being that you hurt. And so hopefully, by now, it matters to you. You see that there's another person there. And the apology is not about checking a box and getting off the hook. It is about communicating to another person that you are sorry that you hurt them.

And Maimonides uses very victim-centric language in the apology. He talks about, you need to appease them. It's like *fayes otam* [to appease them]. It's not about saying certain words, it's about, what would be the thing that would appease, care for this person? And so it's got to be from this open, flowing heart that sees the other person and wants to have them feel better.

What happens in the case of the apology encounter that would cause further harm to the victim? What happens if that apology is actually unwelcome?

So it's difficult, and it's a complex dance, because we know that we need to apologize and in a victim-centric model, again, it's not about a cathartic experience for the perpetrator. I've heard so many examples of somebody being ambushed at the last minute or called in the middle of the night. And it's like, the experience of the person who is harmed is not on the harm-doers mind, and that's not healing. That's not repair.

And so we need to step way, way back and have the humility to know that sometimes we don't get our cathartic experience, and that living with that has to be one of the consequences of our actions. And that's just part of the work. My rabbi, Rabbi Alan Lew, *zichrono livrachah*, may his memory for a blessing, used to say, how could the person get to exactly the same situation? And then he would answer in his kind of Brooklyn accent, like, if you don't do the work, you will find yourself in exactly the same situation.

That our unresolved anger that we don't address, that we don't deal with, will insert itself, somehow, maybe not in that exact situation with that same person. But our anger will blow up in some place, somewhere. Our unaddressed fear of commitment will explode in another relationship somewhere along the way, somehow, somehow. Or whatever issues that are playing out in the workplace will somehow go through. Like our internalized white supremacy will somehow manifest in another way.

The systems and structures in our HR department that manage to effectively bury this complaint are going to find a way to harm someone else if we don't address the systems. So when we don't do the work, we continue to find ways to manifest the harm. And it may look different, but the patterns are undeniable. We go from first contact, to the Trail of Tears, to Wounded Knee, to the Dakota Access Pipeline.

We go from slavery, to lynching, to redlining, Jim Crow, to mass incarceration and voter suppression, right? It doesn't have to look exactly the same for it to be the same harm. And when we don't do the work, we will find ourselves back there. When we think about institutions, when we think about nations, the work of confession, the work of starting to change requires rethinking some of how things have been, and that is scary, and that is threatening. And it doesn't always require that suddenly we are dismantling everything that has ever existed and creating something new from the ground up. It sometimes just requires shaping new systems and creating better, more whole systems, and it's a vulnerability. It opens us to vulnerability.

When we make ourselves vulnerable and own the harm that we have caused, we can create new futures for ourselves and for everyone who is hurt. And for institutions, and for organizations, and nations, and individuals, it's scary, but it offers a new path of wholeness for everybody.

Wider American culture is very individualistic, and very, everybody look out for themselves. And so when harm happens, we don't, as a wider American culture, have the tools to figure out how to hold harm doers accountable, or to give people who are hurt the tools to make sense of that. It's this very kind of like, let go, just let go of it, is a survival mechanism that people use because they don't have a lot of other coping mechanisms.

We live in the kind of culture where people in power don't have a lot of incentive to do *shuvah* work, because it is often, financially in their best interests not to. And that often, when we see change happen, it's because it is in their financial best interest to change the name of the racist mascot. There are all of these cultural factors that are in play, and we live in a culture that really, really loves forgiveness, and really loves to pressure the victim into forgiving, and that assumes that at the moment the victim has forgiven, then everything is fine and back to how it was and nobody is holding the harm doer accountable.

Yeah. I'm just grateful that Maimonides has given us this gift. The person's *shuvah* can do all of their *shuvah* work, can do-- complete master of *t'shuvah*, can get right with themselves, can get right with God, can go to do all of the things that they need to do and be ready to go apologize to God at Yom Kippur and all of that stuff, even if they are never forgiven. So this notion that the victim has to forgive them so that they can finish their repentance work is false. If the person coming to you isn't really doing the repentance work, if it seems like they're checking off the boxes, they're like apologizing, but they really haven't owned what they're doing.

If somebody's saying you should forgive, but they haven't even begun the repentance work, none of that. Then there's definitely no obligation to forgive. That's also part of it. And if someone is doing the real, honest, thoughtful, clear work of repentance, if they are owning fully what they did, if they are trying to change, really meaningfully, if they are attempting to do real amends, if they are coming to you and doing everything they can to appease you, to pacify you, to care for you and in a loving apology.

And if the apology doesn't land, they're coming back and bringing an accountability team, as Maimonides suggests so that they can make sure that apology is landing, or so that they can have some help making sure that you're cared for in that negotiation or whatever. If somebody is really, really, really coming to you with an open-hearted way and you're still having trouble forgiving them, maybe you need to check yourself.

Are you stuck in a victim mode? Is it benefiting you to lord this over them? Are you being unnecessarily petty? What's going-- you know, like, check yourself to see what's going on that you can't find a way to, again, not find that warm, fuzzy place, but to just close the accounts.

You've raised this caution around never pressuring the victim to forgive, which I think points to a potential problem, which is that, we don't always have between the perpetrator and the victim a balance of power. Can you speak to potential power differentials in this work of *t'shuvah*, and in particular, forgiveness?

So often what happens is that harm is caused with an imbalance of power. Someone who has more power in a situation causes harm, and then there is pressure on the victim to forgive, which is often read in our culture as a way of kind of allowing the situation to end. Then we're done. The victim has forgiven. No more accountability work is needed. We don't need to have any more systemic change, or we don't need the perpetrator to do any more inner work or come to a situation and make different choices. And it becomes a way of, very often, trying to reinscribe the original power situation.

Rabbi Ruttenberg, what, when you look into this broken world, what brings you hope?

The fact that more people are having these conversations. The fact that more people are taking this work seriously. The fact that more and more people are saying, it's not enough to leave things as they are. We need more healing, more repair, more care.

And these are hard times. These are really hard times in so many ways. But I believe in us. And I have seen so many individuals and communities showing up when it matters. And I know that we can, together, come together and care for one another and create a future that is so much more whole than the past we have left behind.

As we approach the Days of Awe, I find hope in the path of repair that you illuminate, and in the approach that you teach, which is, the path is not insurmountable, the work is not infinite. Our job is to start where we can, go as far as we can, and do our best in this work of *t'shuvah*. Do our best in all the areas we have power to bring repair. Thank you for your teachings.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

L'shanah tovah.

Shanah tovah.