

On Repentance and Repair: Reflections from CCAR, URJ, and HUC-JIR Leadership

Thank you for joining us to learn more about institutional *t'shuvah* or repentance. In this past year, all three of our Reform organizations have been deeply focused on ethics. Even as our organizations are each involved in our own work of *t'shuvah* and repair, which is still ongoing and will be uniquely different for each organization, we wanted to share an opportunity for all of us across the Reform Movement to learn and grow together.

T'shuvah meaning "repentance" but also "return" and "realignment," is a powerful Jewish idea. In this season of repentance and renewal, we are so grateful that Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg has agreed to be our teacher and guide as we seek to learn more and broaden our understanding of *t'shuvah*.

This study opportunity is not itself an act of *t'shuvah*, per se. As the CCAR has heard from and continues to listen to and learn from the pain of survivors, we have been shaping our individual process of repentance, repair, and rebuilding. We are so grateful for those who have shared their story with us.

This work of repentance and realignment will be unfolding over the weeks, months, and years to come as the CCAR acknowledges the failings of the past, recognizes the pain of those impacted, seeks forgiveness, and continues to revise our ethics code and system. As all of this crucial work goes on in our Reform Movement, this learning experience is a chance to expand our collective knowledge about repentance that is so central to the Jewish belief system.

Our High Holiday liturgy teaches that the gates of *t'shuvah* are always open. We take this teaching seriously. Our work of *t'shuvah* is ongoing and multifaceted. As we strive to learn more about *t'shuvah* and explore all the ways to seek forgiveness and create true and meaningful repair for the future, may we be able to engage with a whole heart in the process of *t'shuvah*. And may we continue to bring ourselves ever closer to God, to each other, and to a more perfect world.

At this season, especially, our Jewish tradition instructs us to make time for *cheshbon hanefesh*, to take stock of our lives, recalling the times we succeeded, but especially when we fell short. Which leads us to the deep work of *t'shuvah*. *T'shuvah*, or repentance, requires that we take a number of steps to address the harm we have caused. Not only are individuals required to do *t'shuvah*, institutions also bear this obligation.

In this past year, the URJ and our partner institutions have each conducted and shared reports of in-depth, independent ethics investigations. This was a critical first step on a longer journey towards institutional *t'shuvah*. *T'shuvah* also requires naming and owning the harm. To that end, the URJ takes responsibility for the sexual misconduct, harassment, and abuse that took place on our watch.

Our work towards *t'shuvah* is survivor-centered and trauma-informed. It includes saying loudly and clearly to survivors, victims, and to all those affected, *al chet shechatanu*. For the sins that we have committed and for our failure to protect all those who are harmed, on behalf of myself and URJ leadership, we are deeply sorry.

We take responsibility for the harm that occurred. We are committed individually and institutionally to repair, when possible, and to do better in the future. Thank you to everyone who has helped bring us closer to the redemption and repair that we seek, including those who shared painful stories and experiences. The Days of Awe do not wipe the slate clean, but rather, summon us to walk the path of repair and healing. In the new year 5783, may we walk this path together.

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion is proud to partner with the URJ and the CCAR in bringing you this important discussion with Rabbi Ruttenberg on *t'shuvah*. The religious ideal of *t'shuvah* is limited, traditionally to the individual. Its application to institutions like HUC illustrates how a Reform approach to our tradition can bring Jewish meaning to the ethical challenges we face.

All acts of *t'shuvah* must begin with a keen sensitivity to those who have been harmed, prioritizing their need for healing. But a complete returning of us involves not only making amends to those whom we have harmed, but also a commitment to changing ourselves. As Rabbi Ruttenberg explains, step two of Maimonides' five steps of *t'shuvah* is to make that change. That process will involve many actions, actions that HUC is actively pursuing to ensure that abuses of power will never occur again.

Today's program draws on HUC's specific mission as an institution of higher education that emphasizes learning and understanding, the activity of the intellect. Like much of the *t'shuvah* process, learning requires an openness to confronting ideas that make us uncomfortable, unsettled, ideas that go beyond simply those we want to hear. Moral education always engages the mind, the heart, and the soul. We must have good reasons for the beliefs that we hold. And we will feel discomfort when our presumptions are called into question.

Opening ourselves to that discomfort is thus the first step to full resolution. And it is the only way to begin to effect lasting, eternal change, whether of the individual or of an institution. As Maimonides' taught, moral behavior emerges when as rational, caring beings, we conscientiously adopt habits that resonate with us emotionally, reinforcing ethical action.

The same Jewish wisdom applies to building morally decent institutions, where sustainable practices are essential to ensuring justice within our halls. Learning is just one of many actions we are taking at HUC to return to our best selves. The program is one step among other survivor-centered approaches on the path to *t'shuvah* and systemic change. I thank you for joining us as we turn, and turn again, as a movement and a Jewish people. May the new year ahead be filled for you with joy and happiness for your families and built on a stronger foundation for us all.