

On Repentance and Repair: What is *T'shuvah*?

Hello, I'm Rabbi 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. 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 the 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, sort of, a 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, right.

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, right, 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 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, right.

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 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, right. Own the harm fully that you have caused. Then we have starting to change, right. Begin to do the work to become the different person and the kind of person who doesn't do that thing.

Amends, right, 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.