

ON REPENTANCE AND REPAIR: MAKING AMENDS IN AN UNAPOLOGETIC WORLD

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Discussion Guide

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.

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. If you'd like, you can reference Maimonides's Laws of Repentance as you discuss the book, connecting each section back to the original source and its context. You can access Maimonides' Laws of Repentance from the *Mishneh Torah* and the other texts referenced in the book on Sefaria.org, but we have included the basic laws from which Rabbi Ruttenberg draws below.

The sections of the Laws of Repentance that correspond to each of Maimonides' stages of repentance are below, after the questions.

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.

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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?

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?

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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?

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?

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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 Rutenberg?) 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”?

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?

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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?

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?

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?

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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?

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?

Chapter Eight: Atonement

What Is Affected

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?

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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?

Maimonides' Stages of Forgiveness

Here are Maimonides' five stages of repentance. All sources are from the Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance. Numeric citations refer to the chapter and specific law within that chapter.

1) Confession:

All of the commandments in the Torah: whether they be the positive commandments, or the negative commandments; if a person transgressed any of them, whether they did so intentionally, whether they did so unintentionally, when they repent and returns from sin - they are obligated to confess before God, blessed be God, as it says (in the Torah, Numbers 5:6-7), "When a person does any of the sins of humans...and they shall confess their sin that they committed..." This refers to a verbal confession. And confession, that is a positive commandment.

How does one confess? They say, "Please God, I have sinned, I have erred, I have [willfully but unrebliously] transgressed, I have done such-and-such [specific sins], I am regretful, and ashamed for my actions, and I will never again return to my old ways." This is the essence of the confession, and anyone who wants to lengthen [the confession], this is praiseworthy. (1:1)

What is repentance? The sinner shall cease sinning, and remove sin from their thoughts, and wholeheartedly conclude not to revert back to it.... And also that they regret sinning.... In addition they should take to witness God who knows all secrets that forever they will not turn to repeat that sin again.... It is, moreover, essential that their confession shall be by spoken words of their lips, and all that which they concluded in their heart shall be formed in speech.

One who confesses by speech but has not their heart's consent to abandon their erstwhile conduct, behold, they are like one taking an immersion of purification and in their grasp is an impure creeping thing, when they knows the immersion to be of no value till they cast away the impure creeping thing. (2:2-3)

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The penitent who confesses publicly is praiseworthy, and it is commendable for them to let the public know their iniquities, and to reveal the sins between the harmdoer and their neighbor [who was harmed] to others, saying: "Truly, I have sinned against that person, and I have wronged them thus and such, but, behold me this day, I repent and am remorseful". But the one who is arrogant and reveals not but covers up their sins, is not a wholehearted penitent...But that is saying solely concerning interpersonal sins... (2:5)

2) Begin to change:

Among the ways of repentance are for the penitent to constantly cry out in tearful supplication before the [Divine] Name, to bestow alms according to their means, and to distance themselves exceedingly from the thing wherein they sinned, to have their identity changed, as if saying: "I am now another person, and not that person who perpetrated those misdeeds", to completely change their conduct for the good and straight path, and to exile themselves from their place of residence, for exile atones iniquity, because it leads one to submissiveness and to be meek and humble-spirited. (2:4)

3) Amends:

Neither repentance nor the Day of Atonement atone for any save for sins committed between a person and God, for instance, one who ate forbidden food...and the like; but interpersonal sins, for instance, one injures their neighbor, or curses their neighbor or plunders them, or offends them in like matters, is ever not absolved unless they make restitution of what is owed and they beg the forgiveness of their neighbor. (2:9)

4) Apology

And, although they make restitution of the monetary debt, they are obliged to pacify [the harmed party] and to beg forgiveness. Even if they only offended their neighbor in words, they are obliged to appease and implore till they are forgiven. If their neighbor refuses, [the harmdoer] should bring a committee of three friends to implore and beg; if [the injured party] still refuses they should bring a second, even a third committee, and if the injured party still refuses, they may leave and go, for the person who did not forgive has now committed a sin [and the harmdoer is discharged of obligation]. But if it happened to be their rabbi, they should go and come for forgiveness even a thousand times till they do forgive. (2:9)

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5) Make different choices.

What is complete repentance? One who once more had in it in their power to repeat a violation, but separated themselves from it, and did not do it because of repentance, not out of fear or lack of strength....Even if one did no repentance work save in old age, at a time when it was already impossible for them to repeat the misdeeds, although it is not the best repentance, it still is of a help and they are considered a penitent. Moreover, though they continued a life of sin but did repent on their dying day, and did die a penitent, all of their sins are forgiven. (2:1)



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