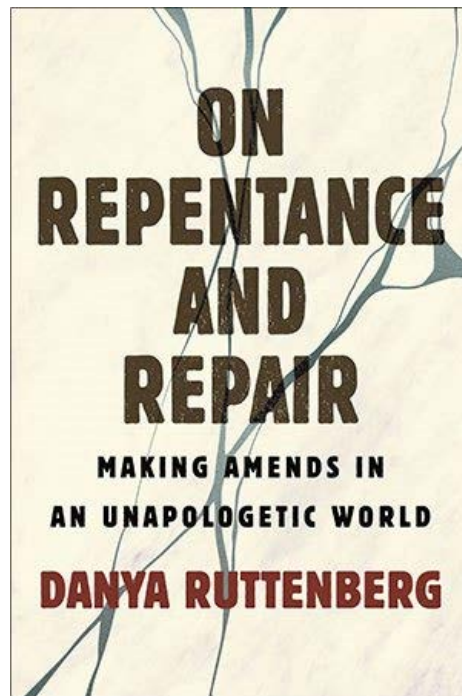


# ON REPENTANCE AND REPAIR:

A Reform Movement Program Study  
and Discussion Guide

Based on ideas drawn from



## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide is designed to accompany *On Repentance and Repair: A Reform Movement Program*, a recorded program featuring an interview of author Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg by Rabbi Jill Maderer. The program includes an introduction by Rabbi Mary Zamore of the Women's Rabbinic Network, a musical interlude performed by Cantor Rebecca Moses, and reflections by Rabbi Hara Person of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, Rabbi Rick Jacobs of the Union for Reform Judaism, and Dr. Andrew Rehfeld of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion.

The interview draws on the ideas in Rabbi Ruttenberg's book, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Beacon Press, 2022).

This discussion guide offers viewers the opportunity to delve more deeply into Rabbi Maderer's and Rabbi Ruttenberg's discussion, reflect on their own experiences of *t'shuvah* (repentance), and apply the concepts to their lives today.

The discussion questions below draw directly from the interview and offer a selection of relevant texts from Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance)*. English translations of the texts were prepared by Rabbi Ruttenberg and match those cited in her book.

The video is available in three formats:

1. Complete Program: a 47-minute video which includes the introduction, interview, musical interlude, and concluding reflections.
2. Full Interview with Rabbi Maderer and Rabbi Ruttenberg: a 32-minute video of the complete interview.
3. Interview Segments: five segments of the interview, divided by conversation topics.

The discussion guide is organized so that groups may use it with any of the video formats. Beginning time stamps for the Complete Program and for the Full Interview are provided below.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR BEGINNING GROUP DISCUSSION

Before viewing the video, begin by establishing a sense of connection in the group. Each participant may introduce themselves and share a word or two which reflects how they are feeling at the moment. For those who are in a setting in which a deeper prompt would be appropriate, invite participants to share an identity that others may not know about by looking at them, or that are often underrepresented or unshared in Jewish spaces.

Since the topics explored in this video touch on sensitive issues, and invite personal reflection, the facilitator may want to establish a few norms for group conversation.

Norms may include:

- Our goal is to learn together, reflect on our own experiences, and reflect on others' experiences.
- This is a judgment-free space.
- Please do not give advice unless it has been requested.
- People will share what they want. Don't ask for more details than provided.
- Please do not share someone else's story; that is their choice.
- No one is obligated to provide an explanation for excusing themselves from the conversation or passing on a question.
- Speak in the first person about your own truth. Do not challenge someone else's truth.
- Assume good faith and good intentions in one another and take responsibility for impact; it matters.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### What is *T'shuvah*?

Complete Program: 5:24; Full Interview: 0:30

1. What do you notice about Rabbi Ruttenberg's definition of *t'shuvah*? What new understanding(s) of *t'shuvah* does she introduce?

### Institutional *T'shuvah*

Complete Program: 13:19; Full Interview: 8:02

1. Rabbi Ruttenberg says that the work of institutional *t'shuvah* mirrors the process of personal *t'shuvah*. What examples of institutional *t'shuvah* might we see in our local communities or in the public sphere, and what stages of the process might that example illustrate?
2. Have you seen or experienced examples of institutional courage? What would a courageous step look like?
3. What needs to happen in our communities/institutions to get us to the point of doing institutional *t'shuvah*?

### Confession and Starting to Change

Complete Program: 18:49; Full Interview: 13:31

1. In discussing confession, Rabbi Ruttenberg is clear that one must fully own the harm they have caused. How does she explain that this is done?
2. Rabbi Ruttenberg also explains that confession requires *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of the soul. How can we truly account for what we have done wrong?
3. Text: *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:5*

In this text, Maimonides says that the “penitent who confesses publicly is praiseworthy.” How can we view a confession as praiseworthy? Why does Maimonides make this point to distinguish between the benefits of public confession?

*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 harm doer 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. as it says, One who covers their transgressions shall not prosper (Proverbs 28:13). But that is saying solely concerning interpersonal sins, but regarding sins between a person and God, the penitent need not make public--on the contrary it would be impudent of the harm doer to reveal them. The harm doer should, however, repent before God, blessed is God! and before God should detail the sins; and then make public confession upon them by simply saying: “I have sinned”. Such a procedure is, indeed, for their own good.*

וְשִׁבַח גָּדוֹל לְשִׁבּוֹת שִׁיתוּדָה בְּרַבִּים וְיִוְדִיעַ פְּשָׁעָיו לָהֶם וּמִגְלָה עֲבֻרוֹת שְׂבִינּוֹ לְבֵין חֵבְרוֹ לְאַחֵרִים וְאוֹמֵר לָהֶם אֲמֵנָם הִטְאַתִּי לְפָלוֹנִי וְעִשִׂיתִי לוֹ כֵּן וְכָךְ וְהָרִינִי הַיּוֹם שָׁב וּמִתְנַחֵם. וְכָל הַמִּתְגַּאֵה וְאִינוֹ מוֹדִיעַ אֵלָּא מְכַסֶּה פְּשָׁעָיו אֵין תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ גְּמוּרָה.... בְּמָה דְּבָרִים אֲמוּרִים בְּעֲבֻרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ אֲבָל בְּעֲבֻרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם אִינוֹ צָרִיף לְפָרְסָם עֲצָמוֹ וְעִזּוֹת פָּנִים הֵיא לּוֹ אִם גָּלָם. אֵלָּא שָׁב לְפָנֵי הָאֵל בְּרוּף הוּא וּפְוִרְט חֲטָאִיו לְפָנָיו וּמִתוּדָה עֲלֵיהֶם לְפָנֵי רַבִּים סְתָם. וְשׁוּבָה הֵיא לּוֹ

4. A key to confession is recognizing that our actions have consequences. How can accepting this fact help us with sincere confession? What do we need to do to face the truth of our actions?
5. Confession has an impact on the victim. Consider a time when you have been the recipient of a confession. How did it feel for you to hear and receive that confession?
6. How does Rabbi Ruttenberg explain that we begin to make change? What is the re-thinking that she says is required for this step?
7. Text: *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:4*

What are the things that Maimonides lists for the penitent to enact in order to start to make change? Why do you think Maimonides provides so many steps for the penitent on the road to change?

*Among the ways of repentance are for the penitent to constantly cry out in tearful supplication before the 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.*

מִדְרָכֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה לְהִיּוֹת הַשֵּׁב צוֹעֵק תָּמִיד לְפָנֵי הַשֵּׁם בְּבִכּוּי וּבִתְחִנּוּנִים וְעוֹשֶׂה צְדָקָה כְּפִי כַחוֹ וּמְתַרְחֵק הַרְבֵּה מִן הַדְּבָר שֶׁחָטָא בוֹ וּמְשַׁנֵּה שְׁמוֹ כְּלוּמַר אֲנִי אֲחֵר וְאֲנִי אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁעָשָׂה אוֹתוֹן הַמַּעֲשִׂים וּמְשַׁנֵּה מַעֲשָׂיו כְּלֵן לְטוֹבָה וּלְדָרֶךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּגְלוֹת מִמְּקוֹמוֹ. שְׁגָלוֹת מְכַפֵּרֶת עוֹן מִפְּנֵי שְׁגוּרָמַת לוֹ לְהַכְנִיעַ וְלִהְיוֹת עָנּוּ וְשֹׁפֵל רוּחַ:

8. What are concrete ways that we can begin to change when we have done wrong? How do we recognize when others have started the work of change?

## Amends, Apology, and Making Different Choices

Complete Program: 21:48; Full Interview: 16:31

1. How does Rabbi Ruttenberg say one should make amends? What pieces are needed in order to repair a situation where one has caused harm?
2. Text: *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:9*

In this text, Maimonides states that sins committed against another person are not absolved until the person who has done harm makes “restitution of what is owed and they beg the forgiveness of their neighbor.” What does this involve? Why is this important?

*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, or had forbidden coition 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.*

אֵין הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְלֹא יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפְרִין אֲלֵא עַל עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְמִקּוּם כְּגוֹן מִי שֶׁאֵכַל דָּבָר אָסוּר אוֹ בָעַל בְּעִילָה אָסוּרָה וּכְיוּצָא בְּהוֹן. אֲבָל עֲבֵרוֹת שֶׁבֵּין אָדָם לְחֵבֵרוֹ כְּגוֹן הַחֹבֵל אֶת חֵבֵרוֹ אוֹ הַמְקַלֵּל חֵבֵרוֹ אוֹ גּוֹזְלוֹ וּכְיוּצָא בְּהוֹן אֵינוֹ נִמְחַל לוֹ לְעוֹלָם עַד שֶׁיִּתֵּן לְחֵבֵרוֹ מֵה שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ וַיְרַצְהוּ. אִם עַל פִּי שֶׁהִתְחַזְּרָה לוֹ מִמּוֹן שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ צְרִיף לְרַצּוֹתוֹ וְלִשְׁאֵל מִמֶּנּוּ שֶׁיִּמְחַל לוֹ.

3. What are some examples of ways you could make amends for wrongdoing before issuing an apology? What does the work of making amends show the person who has been wronged?

4. Why does the step of apologizing come so late in the process?

5. Text: *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:9*

This text illustrates the complex dance of making an apology. Why is the wrongdoer obliged to try to apologize so many times?

*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 harm doer] 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 harm doer 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.*

אָפּלוּ לֹא הִקְנִיט אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ אֲלֵא בְדִבְרִים צָרִיךְ לְפִיֶּסוֹ וְלִפְגַּע  
בוֹ עַד שְׂיִמְחַל לוֹ. לֹא רָצָה חֲבֵרוֹ לְמַחֵל לוֹ מִבֵּיא לוֹ שׂוּרָה שֶׁל  
שְׁלֵשָׁה בְּנֵי אָדָם מֵרַעְיוֹ וּפּוֹגְעֵינּוּ בוֹ וּמִבְקָשֵׁינּוּ מִמֶּנּוּ. לֹא נִתְרַצָּה  
לְהֵן מִבֵּיא לוֹ שְׂנֵיָהּ וּשְׁלִישִׁיתָהּ. לֹא רָצָה מְנִיחוֹ וְהוֹלֵךְ לוֹ וְזֶה שֶׁלֹּא  
מַחֵל הוּא הַחֹשֵׂא. וְאִם הָיָה רַבּוֹ הוֹלֵךְ וּבֵא אָפּלוּ אֲלָהּ פְּעָמִים עַד  
שְׂיִמְחַל לוֹ:

6. Sometimes the person whom you wronged won't accept your apology. How would this make you feel? How would you move forward from this?

7. Rabbi Ruttenberg explains that while no two situations are *exactly* the same, a situation does not have to look the same for the harm to be the same. Thus, when one does not do the work of reflecting on and changing their behavior, they will repeat or recreate previous harmful patterns. Rabbi Ruttenberg offers two historical examples. Can you think of other examples: historical or current; societal or individual?

8. How do you know when you have done full *t'shuvah* and would be someone who "makes different choices"?

## Forgiveness

Complete Program: 29:53; Full Interview: 24:35

1. How has cultural pressure to grant forgiveness affected your own interactions with people who caused you harm? With those you have harmed? In what ways has an imbalance of power affected that dynamic?

2. Rabbi Ruttenberg and Rabbi Maderer each tell us what gives them hope when it comes to doing the work of *t'shuvah*. What gives you hope?

## Confession

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:5

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 harm doer 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. As it says, One who covers their transgressions shall not prosper (Proverbs 28:13). But that is saying solely concerning interpersonal sins, but regarding sins between a person and God, the penitent need not make public--on the contrary, it would be impudent of the harm doer to reveal them. The harm doer should, however, repent before God, blessed is God! And before God should detail the sins; and then make public confession upon them by simply saying: "I have sinned". Such a procedure is, indeed, for their own good.

ושָׁבַח גָּדוֹל לְשׁוֹב שְׂיִתְוֹדָה בְּרַבִּים וְיִזְדַּיעַ פְּשָׁעָיו לְהֵם וּמְגַלָּה עֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִינֵנוּ לְבֵין חֵבְרוֹ לְאַחֵרִים וְאוֹמֵר לְהֵם אֲמַנֵּם חֲטָאתִי לְפָלוּנִי וְעֲשִׂיתִי לוֹ כֶּךָ וְכָךְ וְהָרִינִי הַיּוֹם שָׁב וּמִתְנַחֵם. וְכָל הַמִּתְגַּאֲהַ וְאִינוֹ מוֹדִיעַ אֲלֵא מְכַסֶּה פְּשָׁעָיו אֵין תְּשׁוּבָתוֹ גְּמוּלָה.... בְּמָה דְבָרִים אֲמוּרִים בְּעֵבְרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ אֲבָל בְּעֵבְרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְמִקּוֹם אֵינוֹ צָרִיךְ לְפָרְסָם עֲצָמוֹ וְעִזּוֹת פָּנִים הִיא לוֹ אִם גָּלָם. אֲלֵא שָׁב לְפָנֵי הָאֵל בְּרוּךְ הוּא וּפּוֹרֵט חֲטָאֵיו לְפָנָיו וּמִתְוֹדָה עֲלֵיהֶם לְפָנֵי רַבִּים סֵתָם. וְטוֹבָה הִיא לוֹ

## Starting to Change

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:4

Among the ways of repentance are for the penitent to constantly cry out in tearful supplication before the 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.

מִדְרָכֵי הַתְּשׁוּבָה לְהִיּוֹת הַשָּׁב צוֹעֵק תְּמִיד לְפָנֵי הַשֵּׁם בְּבִכִּי וּבִתְחִנּוּנִים וְעוֹשֶׂה צְדָקָה כְּפִי כַחוֹ וּמִתְרַחֵק הַרְבֵּה מִן הַדְּבָר שֶׁחָטָא בוֹ וּמְשַׁנֶּה שְׁמוֹ כְּלוּמַר אֲנִי אַחֵר וְאֵינוֹ אוֹתוֹ הָאִישׁ שֶׁעָשָׂה אוֹתוֹן הַמַּעֲשִׂים וּמְשַׁנֶּה מַעֲשָׂיו כְּלֵן לְטוֹבָה וּלְדָרֵךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּגְלוּלָה מִמְּקוֹמוֹ. שְׁגָלוֹת מְכַפֶּרֶת עוֹן מִפְּנֵי שְׁגוּרָמַת לוֹ לְהִכְנַע וְלְהִיּוֹת עָנוּ וְשִׁפְלֵ רוּחַ:

## Amends

Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:9

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, or had forbidden coition 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.

אֵין הַתְּשׁוּבָה וְלֹא יוֹם הַכִּפּוּרִים מְכַפְרִין אֲלֵא עַל עֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְמִקּוֹם כְּגוֹן מִי שֶׁאֲכַל דָּבָר אָסוּר אוֹ פָּעַל בְּעִילָה אֲסוּרָה וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן. אֲבָל עֲבֵרוֹת שְׂבִין אָדָם לְחֵבְרוֹ כְּגוֹן הַחֹבֵל אֶת חֵבְרוֹ אוֹ הַמְקַלֵּל חֵבְרוֹ אוֹ גּוֹזְלוֹ וְכִיּוֹצֵא בָהֶן אֵינוֹ נִמְחַל לוֹ לְעוֹלָם עַד שְׂיִתֵּן לְחֵבְרוֹ מֵה שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ וִירְצָהוּ. אִף עַל פִּי שֶׁחָתְזִיר לוֹ מְמוֹן שֶׁהוּא חָיֵב לוֹ צָרִיךְ לְרַצּוֹתוֹ וּלְשַׁאֵל מִמֶּנּוּ שְׂיִמְחַל לוֹ.

## Apology

*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot T'shuvah (Laws of Repentance) 2:9*

*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 harm-doer] 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 harm doer 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.*

אָפּלוּ לֹא הִקְנִיט אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ אֶלָּא בְּדִבְרִים צָרִיךְ לְפִיֶּסוֹ וְלִפְגַּע  
בּוֹ עַד שְׂיִמְחַל לוֹ. לֹא רָצָה חֲבֵרוֹ לְמַחֵל לוֹ מִבֵּיא לוֹ שׂוּרָה שֶׁל  
שְׁלֵשָׁה בְּנֵי אָדָם מֵרַעְיוֹ וּפּוֹגְעֵיו בּוֹ וּמְבַקְשִׁין מִמֶּנּוּ. לֹא נִתְרַצָּה  
לָהֶן מִבֵּיא לוֹ שְׂנֵיָהּ וּשְׁלִישִׁיתָהּ. לֹא רָצָה מְנִיחוֹ וְהוֹלִיךְ לוֹ וְזֶה שֶׁלֹּא  
מַחֵל הוּא הַחֹטֵא. וְאִם הָיָה רַבּוֹ הוֹלִיךְ וּבָא אֶפְלוּ אֵלָּהּ פְּעָמִים עַד  
שְׂיִמְחַל לוֹ:

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg for sharing her wisdom and insights about t'shuvah so that we may all continue to learn with and from her writings and teachings.

Thank you to our Reform Movement partners for their collaborative work on bringing this program and resource to fruition.

Special thanks to:

Shari Isserles, RJE, *Association of Reform Jewish Educators*

Rabbi Rick Jacobs, *Union for Reform Judaism*

Rabbi Jill Maderer, *Congregation Rodeph Shalom, Philadelphia, PA*

Cantor Rebecca Moses, *American Conference of Cantors*

Rabbi Hara Person, *Central Conference of American Rabbis*

Jill Peltzman, *Union for Reform Judaism*

Dr. Andrew Rehfeld, *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion*

Jessica Silver, *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion*

Julie Vanek, RJE, *Central Conference of American Rabbis*

Rabbi Laura Novak Winer, Ed.D, RJE, *Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion*

Rabbi Mary Zamore, *Women's Rabbinic Network*

Rabbi Julie Zupan, *Union for Reform Judaism*



