



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"We Begin Again in Love"  
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What has been the hardest thing you have ever had to ask forgiveness for?

What is the hardest thing you have ever forgiven?

You don't need to answer these now. They are deep and tender questions. There are also all those things within us that we have perhaps not forgiven, because there has been no repentance, no repair. There are things we struggle to forgive within ourselves.

"We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love."

We are drawing near to the close of the Days of Awe and the most important holiday in the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which begins at sundown this evening. The celebration of the New Year, Rosh Hashanah, which began at sundown on Friday, September 15 and ended at sundown on Sunday, September 17 began this annual celebration of awe. These high holy days call the faithful into consideration of the awesome power of the divine (like we heard about in our Time for All Ages!), and Yom Kippur is the culmination.

While Unitarian Universalists hold Christian and Jewish teachings within our hearts as some of the many sources of our faith, I want to clarify one thing for those of you who, like me, do not hold Jewish identities. Repentance and atonement are related but not synonymous. In an interview with the publication *JewishBoston* in September of 2022, Rabbi Dayna Ruttenberg was

asked “And is atonement strictly done with the Divine?” She replied, “Yes. It’s a theological concept and one that is cathartic. It is a personal pet peeve of mine that people use atonement and repentance as synonyms in our culture. At least in Judaism, people do repentance, God does atonements.”

Whatever your own personal relationship with the concept of the divine, talk of repentance is of deep importance for humans who wish to grow and cultivate healthy and healing relationships.

In today’s reading, we heard about Rabbi Dayna Ruttenberg’s proposal that we adopt the practices of repentance and repair put forward by 12th century Jewish scholar and philosopher Moses Maimonides. It was a lot, but I think it’s vital to our examination of the process of forgiveness, repentance, and repair.

[This book](#) is a vital and engaging work, and as we mentioned earlier it has been selected as the Common Read by the Unitarian Universalist Association. We will be holding book discussions later this year, so I highly recommend picking up a [copy](#) to spend some time with these important ideas before we come together to discuss them.

In setting up the premise of her book and engaging with Maimonides’ Laws of Repentance, Rabbi Ruttenberg first makes several arguments about why American culture gets repentance wrong. Today I’m going to bring our attention to one particular aspect, which she labels “a watered-down, secularized distortion of Protestant thinking” – to wit, the idea that “just feeling sorry” for the times you have done harm is sufficient. She writes, “This focus on forgiveness has, however, had results that its originators likely did not intend. It was originally almost certainly not meant to elide questions of accountability, disincentivize perpetrators from taking responsibility, or put the onus of forgiveness on victims without meaningful redress. This goes against the Gospels themselves, where the verses about forgiving ‘seventy times seven’ are situated in the larger context of a discussion on accountability, and where Jesus modeled community accountability in relationships with Peter and others. And yet, a dismissed attitude toward

repentance nevertheless became so widespread in Protestantism that the Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously lambasted preaching forgiveness without simultaneously demanding repentance as ‘cheap grace.’”

There may be many of us hearing these words who have been harmed by this kind of theological framework in the past. When we are asked to forgive blindly, with no sense that the person or institution who has harmed us has taken any steps to change the behavior that led to the harm, we can feel silenced, ignored, invalidated. When we skip over taking deep stock of ourselves when we have done harm, when we jump straight to begging forgiveness, then we don’t sit within the discomfort that is the very thing we might require in order to change.

For those of us who may be members of the recovery community or love someone who is in recovery, some of this language may remind us of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. For what else is “Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves” and “Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs” - Steps Four and Five, respectively - but an echo of part of this framework of repentance?

These are the days of Awe. And it is awe-inspiring to witness the work of that “fearless moral inventory” in others and within ourselves. For what emerges time and again in Rabbi Ruttenberg’s examination of Maimonides’ model of repentance and repair is how liberating it can be both for the victim and for the person who has done harm. We cannot control whether another forgives us or not. The only changes we can make are within ourselves. And if we demonstrate a true commitment to those changes, we can make a better apology - as we heard in our reading, “the focus here is on what the victim receives rather than what the perpetrator puts out.”

Whether or not we are forgiven by those we apologize to, if we undertake the work of repair, if we can do less harm in the future because of the work we have done, we can repair ourselves as well.

On Yom Kippur, the faithful who have done the work of repentance are granted the gift of Atonement by God.

Every day, we are able to give our attention to the work of repair, and receive its gift for ourselves. Every day that we give our attention to the work of repair means we are striving to heal ourselves and heal our relationships, which together will heal our world.

To reiterate from the end of our reading: “The work of repentance, all the way through, is the work of transformation. It’s the work of facing down false stories and engaging with painful reality. It’s the work of being open to seeing ourselves as we really are, of understanding that other people’s needs and pain are at least as important – if not more so – than our own. It’s about figuring out how to be the kind of person who sees others’ suffering and takes responsibility for any role we might have in causing it. It’s about ownership – owning who we have been and what we have done, and also owning the person we are capable of becoming.”

We have named so much that is divine, we also name here that divinity resides within each and every one of us. The person we are capable of becoming is healing, is growing, and is contributing to the awesome beauty and wonder of the world.

May we be, may we grow, may we heal - may it be so.

“We forgive ourselves and each other, we begin again in love.”

Amen.