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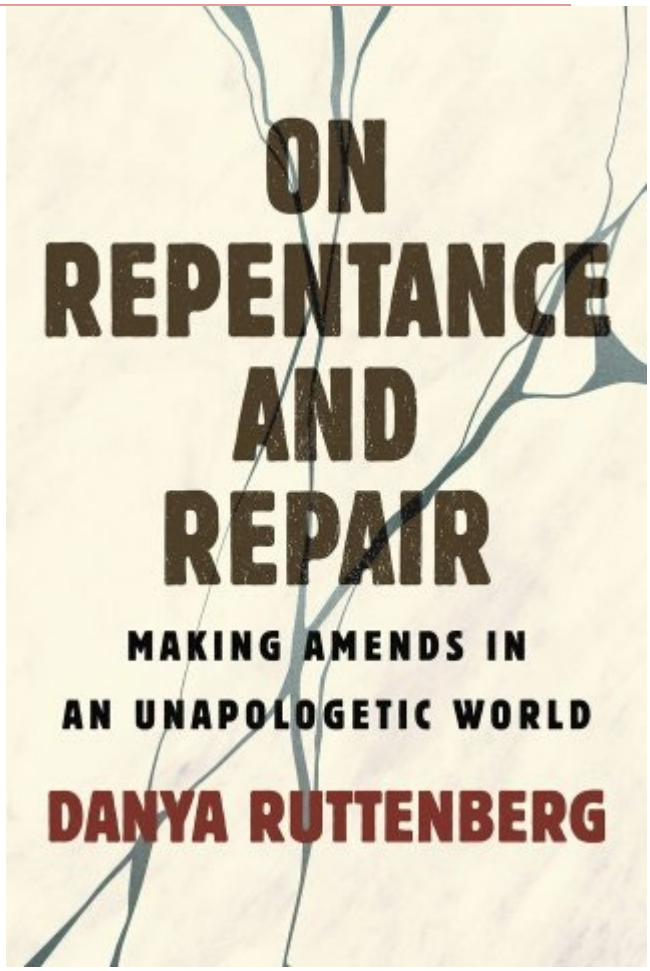
Repentance, Repair, and What True Forgiveness Takes: Lessons from Maimonides for the Modern World



"To forgive is to assume a larger identity than the person who was first hurt," poet and philosopher David Whyte wrote in his reckoning with the depths of life. "Forgiving," Hannah Arendt offered a generation earlier in her splendid antidote to the irreversibility of life, "is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven."

And yet our culture holds up forgiveness as a moral virtue in too binary a way, placing the brunt of repair on the wounded, making little demand of the wounder. We need more nuance than this, and such nuance is what rabbi **Danya Ruttenberg** offers in ***On Repentance And Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*** (*public library*) — a field guide to the rewards and nuances of forgiveness, drawing on the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides's classic Laws of Repentance, using their ancient wisdom to calibrate our cultural reflexes and

modernizing their teachings to account for our hard-earned evolution as a species conscious of its own blind spots.

She writes:

> The word “forgive,” in English, comes the Old English *forgyfan*, which translates primarily as “to give, grant, or bestow.” One Old English dictionary connects it to the Hebrew word for “gift.” It’s a present that is offered, something that is granted to someone freely, without, necessarily, a conversation about whether or not they have earned it. It’s an offering, of sorts.

Art by Jacqueline Ayer from *The Paper-Flower Tree*

And yet, Ruttenberg observes, such a conception of forgiveness makes repair a wholly one-sided process, tasking the person wounded with the whole of it. The Hebrew language itself offers a vital remedy of greater subtlety:

> In Hebrew, two different words, each with its own shade of meaning and weight, are used in the context of forgiveness. The first is *mechila*, which might be better translated as “pardon.” It has the connotation of relinquishing a claim against an offender; it’s transactional. It’s not a warm, fuzzy embrace but rather the victim’s acknowledgment that the perpetrator no longer owes them, that they have done the repair work necessary to settle the situation. *You stole from me? OK, you acknowledged that you did so in a self-aware way, you’re in therapy to work on why you stole, you paid me back, and you apologized in a way that I felt reflected an understanding of the impact your actions had on me — it seems that you’re not going to do this to anyone else. Fine. It doesn’t mean that we pretend that the theft never happened, and it doesn’t (necessarily) mean that our relationship will return to how it*

was before or even that we return to any kind of ongoing relationship. With mechila, whatever else I may feel or not feel about you, I can consider this chapter closed. Those pages are still written upon, but we're done here.

Slicha, on the other hand, may be better translated as "forgiveness"; it includes more emotion. It looks with a compassionate eye at the penitent perpetrator and sees their humanity and vulnerability, recognizes that, even if they have caused great harm, they are worthy of empathy and mercy. Like *mechila*, it does not denote a restored relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (neither does the English word, actually; "reconciliation" carries that meaning), nor does *slicha* include a requirement that the victim act like nothing happened. But it has more of the softness, that letting-go quality associated with "forgiveness" in English.

At the core of this ancient distinction is a central concern with what is needed for closure. (Here, we must remember that closure itself is largely a myth.) Maimonides offers a fascinating and very precise prescription: The wounder should make three earnest attempts at apology, showing both repentance and transformation — evidence that they are no longer the type of person who, in the same situation, would err in the same way; if after the third attempt they are still rebuffed by the wounded, then — and this is Maimonides's brutal twist — the sin now belongs to the wounded for withholding forgiveness. The intimation is that a person who, in the face of genuine remorse and evidence of change, remains embittered is too small of spirit and too cut off from their own noblest nature. Mic-drop.

Maimonides wrote:

> It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not appeased; instead, a person should be satisfied easily and get angry slowly. And at the moment when the sinner asks for pardon — pardon with a whole heart and a desirous soul. And even if they caused them suffering and sinned against them greatly, [the victim] should not take revenge or hold a grudge.

One of Aubrey Beardsley's radical 1893 illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. (Available as a print.)

While Ruttenberg acknowledges that no one is obligated to grant forgiveness at all costs, she considers how withholding forgiveness harms not only the repentant but the withholder:

> Maimonides' concern about the victim being unforgiving was likely at least in part a concern for their own emotional and spiritual development. I suspect that he thought holding on to grudges was bad for the victim and their wholeness. That is, even if we're hurt, we must work on our own natural tendencies toward vengefulness, toward turning our woundedness into a power play that we can lord over the penitent, or toward wanting to stay forever in the narrative of our own hurt, for whatever reason. And perhaps he believed that the granting of *mechila* can be profoundly liberating in ways we don't always recognize before it happens.

[…]

If you are still so resolutely attached to the narrative that you were forever wronged, you are harming yourself and putting a kind of harm into the world. Try to respond to those

who approach you sincerely — and who are sincerely doing the work — with a whole heart, not with cruelty.

Century-old art by the adolescent Virginia Frances Sterrett. (Available as a print and stationery cards.)

Still, at the heart of the book is not the responsibility of the forgiver but the responsibility of the repentant, and the complex question of what repentance even looks like in order to be effective toward repair, doubly complicated by the fact that, in many situations, one can be both wrongdoer and wronged.

With an eye to the myriad causes that might drive even the best-intentioned people to do harm — our blind spots, our unexamined beliefs, our own tender places and past traumas, our despair — Ruttenberg considers the necessity of letting go of our attachment to a particular self-image as a person who means well and therefore could not possibly have caused harm:

> Addressing harm is possible only 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 the courage to cross the bridge over that cognitively dissonant gulf and face who we are, who we have been — even if it threatens our story of ourselves. It's the only way we can even begin to undertake any possible repair of the harm we've done and become the kind of person who might do better next time. (And that, in my opinion, is what's truly heroic.)

[…]

This work is challenging enough when facing the smaller failings in our lives — how much more difficult is it when our closest relationships or our professional reputation is at stake, or even the possibility of facing significant consequences? And yet this is the brave work we have to do. All of us. We are each, in a thousand different ways, both harmdoer and victim. Sometimes we are hurt. Sometimes we hurt others, whether intentionally or not. The path of repentance is one that can help us not only to repair what we have broken, to the fullest extent possible, but to grow in the process of doing so.

Complement Ruttenberg's wholly salutary ***On Repentance And Repair*** with Martha Nussbaum — whom I continue to consider the greatest philosopher of our time — on anger and forgiveness, then revisit Nick Cave — whom I continue to consider one of the great unheralded philosophers of all time — on self-forgiveness and art as an instrument of living amends.

Hello. This is the weekly email digest of *The Marginalian* by Maria Popova. If you missed last week's edition — Nick Cave on self-forgiveness and creativity, Henry James on how to stop waiting and start living, and more — you can catch up right here. Also worth reading, my 16 life-learnings from 16 years of *The Marginalian*. And if my labor of love enriches your life in any way, please consider supporting it with a donation — for sixteen years, it has remained free and ad-free and alive (as have I) thanks to reader patronage. If you already donate: I appreciate you more than you know.