Transcript of Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg Interview

Conducted by Pastor Libby Howe, Wisconsin Council of Churches, February 2023

Pastor Libby Howe:

Good afternoon everybody, and welcome to WCC Wednesday. We are so excited to have you here this afternoon. WCC Wednesday is something we do every week. It's for Wisconsin Council of Churches. We go live with somebody around Wisconsin or beyond that lifts up our values of courage, justice, and holy imagination.

Today we have a very special guest, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, who is an award-winning author of eight books, including *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World*, which we're going to be talking about today. Rabbi Danya serves as a scholar in residence at the National Council of Jewish Women, and her writing has appeared in the New York Times, the Atlantic, Salon, Time, Newsweek, and many other publications. So welcome to you, Rabbi Danya. We're so glad that you are with us today.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Thank you for having me to be here.

Pastor Libby Howe:

So one of the reasons we invited you here today is because it is Ash Wednesday. That is the first day of the most penitential season of the Christian Church here, which is Lent and it's six weeks that lead us into Holy Week and Easter. In this part of the world, we're experiencing a huge snowstorm today. So a lot of Ash Wednesday services are getting rearranged or live-streamed or something, but this is one that a lot of folks have heard of. And in the Wisconsin Council of Churches, we are spending a lot of time recently talking about things like anti-racism, about white Christian nationalism, about the need for reconciliation and reparations with indigenous people, and also the dehumanization of poverty. Just those things in our world that we know really get in the way of us being who God has created us to be. The things we've done that have harmed other people.

So I picked up your book with all of these things swirling around me and I read it and then I listened to it and then I wrote about it. And then because I found it tremendously practical and so hopeful, I think your book and especially the subtitle, which is “Making Amends in an Unapologetic World,” has really hit a chord for people. And so beyond seeing sort of a general need for it, which I'm pretty sure everybody could sort of point to, we really need this right now. What was it that prompted you to write this book?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

So I've always loved Maimonides Laws of Repentance and this book is really built on that. Maimonides is the 12th century philosopher whose work on sort of codifying earlier thinking on repentance is sort of the backbone of this project. And I've always loved his laws of repentance and I've always taught it and it's always sort of had a soft spot for me. But when Me Too broke and we, as a culture, were starting to think about what are we going to do with all of these dudes who have acknowledged that they did the thing that they were named to be doing, and offered mostly really bad public statements? I'm so sorry that this is really bad for my family and oh gosh, this is going to really harm my career. Oh yeah, I did it, but what about my fans? Right?

Pastor Libby Howe:

“I'm so sorry I got caught.”

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

What do we do now? What are the implications and how do we know? Do we just leave them in the corner forever? Is there a path back? And I was asked to talk about this and which led to me dropping some ideas on Twitter and I just kind of think, well, according to Maimonides, I would be assuming this would happen and then this would need to happen. And then I would look for this as the next step. And people, I was just unprepared for the response. It was like the idea that we would ask the harm doer to do the work and not the harmed party, that we would say, "You have accountability work, you have responsibility." We are not going to ask anything of the victim. They have been hurt. We're not going to push emotional labor around forgiveness on them if you are sitting around with your finger and your belly button not doing anything. And repentance has become a really, really, really deep spiritual practice for me. All of this, the steps, and we can talk about this, but it's not a feeling you do, it's actions you take.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right, right. And that's a lot of, I know how Christians are wanting to preach repentance, but honestly I come at this. I'm a pastor and I’ve grown up, I'm a cradle Christian and I come from the Lutheran version of that. And I think you say so well, what we know about ourselves, which is that, or at least that we're learning that we have been participants in power structures and in institutions and as an institution that has done a lot of harm. And we can stretch that from the individual all the way up to, as you do in your book, the national, the institutional. But what felt like you did with your book is that or you do is this, is you make repentance that thing we can do. A real, it's not just an idea that we like and that we talk about. It's also, I think so critical that it becomes an idea, that it becomes action that's separate from forgiveness.

And even for a separate person, it's not even, forgiveness may be the work if they choose to do it, of the one who is harmed. But repentance is the work of the one who is harmed. And in our liturgy even, we connect, in the liturgy I participate every week. It's confession and forgiveness. The two things, they always go together. And so one of the things I just really appreciated about your book is how it separates it.

And so those are a couple of things that I really appreciated. But I wanted to ask you too, you and you do right now at least have an audience of mostly Christians, I'm going to assume people and you could be the rabbi of the world, which I don't know, is that a title you can get? I don't know. What do you really think Christians, especially Christians in the United States, need to hear right now? About where we are in our culture and from this place of repentance.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

We need to talk about accountability and what it demands. We need to talk about when someone causes harm or a party or an institution, we need to ask what is the labor that needs to happen for that party to bring healing. The emphasis on forgiveness can so often be that someone is sitting wounded and then you say, "Forgive." And you haven't attended to the victim's needs, you haven't given them anything. They're sitting there in pain. Nobody is given, “Do you need a doctor? Has anybody thought to pay for your medical care?” They're just sitting there and they're saying, "Oh, well you have to forgive." And it's like forgiveness can be such an easy way to reinscribe existing power structures. It can be a way to maintain the status quo. And particularly if the status quo is harmful. In the story in the Gospels where Jesus is saying “forgive 70 times seven,” there's actually a community accountability process that happens right before it.

Pastor Libby Howe:

[inaudible], and a lot of churches even have that in their constitution as a way to deal with the conflict that comes up in their lives. But I don't know a lot of churches that really do that very well.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Right. I mean, it's not that this is alien or [inaudible] to Christianity. I think it's very a deep, if we're talking about Protestantism or Martin Luther talks about repentance as one of the first ideas in the thesis, if I understand correctly. This is part of the work, but we need to say if we need to talk about taking responsibility, and that means we are all harm doers. We are all people who have been harmed. We are all bystanders to harm.

So we need to be willing to take responsibility when it's us, and it's not “if,” it's “when.” Right? I am a harm doer. Right? I've also been harmed. It's always “when,” and we need to be willing when we are not the one who has caused harm. If we are a bystander, our job is to make sure the victim's needs are centered and that the harm doer is doing the work step by step. And there are five steps in this process to, there are things you can do to create healing and sometimes systemic change. Because if a harm doer does a bunch of like, “Oh, but I said I'm sorry, oh, but I gave them $10 for their medical care.” And then they go do the thing again. Ain't it. Right?

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

If we give reparations to Black Americans, we give X amount of dollars to every single Black American, and we continue on in a white supremacist society.

Pastor Libby Howe:

That's not it.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

We have not repaired. Right?

Pastor Libby Howe:

And you haven't committed to that transformational work of one of the things you talk about is not being, and the Christian word that will, that sort of corresponds is that metanoia, that turning toward or turning around, that's the Greek. Is that if we haven't done that, then it's not done. I mean that we haven't become the better version or the newer version or the version God created us to be. We've just kind of glossed over it and hoped, and I think this is what we do. And then we see how harm and wounds continue to infect the life of our culture, our society, our congregations, our families, that we've never dealt with, they always find a way to mess with us. They never go away, no matter how much we try to deny they're there.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

And if you don't do the work of deep transformation. So if we talk about the steps, number one is fully owning the harm. “No, but what I meant…, I'm a really nice person. I had good intentions.” We don't care. Own it, own it, own it. Then you have to start the work of transformation. What are you going to do to become the person or the institution or the nation or whatever, that doesn't do the thing anymore. That's number two. Because if you don't do that, you're going to keep doing the thing. And whether that's taking out your anger on other people when you're having a feeling, or whether that's dismissing sexual abuse complaints in your place of work or whether that's ... Whatever the thing is, it can keep happening if you don't say, why is this happening and how can it be different?

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right. And then take us through the next, what are the next three? Because I know folks will want, and I don't want folks ... We're not going to give away the whole book. The book is totally worth reading, even though, but you've named the first two steps. What's the third step?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

So you own the harm, fully, fully, fully. Then you start to do the work of change. And that could take the rest of your life to keep working on. Or it could be, and that could be therapy, that could be rehab, that could be spiritual direction. It could be changing your org policies. It could be firing your board, it could be passing some new laws.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

That's the thing.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Shifting where you put money in the world. Yeah.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Land back. I mean, what are we talking about? So that's the thing. And so you start the transformation work, then amends, what is owed to the person who was harmed. And you can never undo the thing. But what can try to sew up that hole in the universe, that you can-

Pastor Libby Howe:

Love that phrase. I love that phrase. What can sew up the hole in the universe.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Right? Or that Japanese art of Kintsugi where you have the broken cup. When you repair it, you still see the gold, you repair it with gold. So you always see the cracks. But then you can do something and maybe the amends are monetary. Maybe the amends are you're spending every day, every week for the rest of your life you're volunteering at such and such place. Maybe you are ... I mean, we can go through a zillion different possibilities, but there's amends and then apology all the way down at step four. Because if you try to apologize and you're still basically the harm doer and you haven't done all of these steps involve deep humility and deep learning and deep transformation. The work of figuring out how to name what you did and then naming it, ideally publicly, Maimonides says, and there's a lot to say about-

Pastor Libby Howe:

Especially if it happens publicly. Yeah.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Yes. At least. I mean, it has to be at least as public as the thing. If you said something racist in a staff meeting, you have to at least own it to the people who heard you. But ideally it is, it's a call for accountability. It's saying, "Guys, I'm on a journey here and I want help and support as I'm trying to do better." And it's an end to the gaslighting of the person who was hurt.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right. Which provides tremendous relief to them. That's a really merciful act. Even at that level.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

It can be so healing. And so you've got the confession. That's deep emotional work. Then the transformation is obviously profound. The amends, which you don't decide for the person what the amends are, because then you're basically making them an object. You have to say, “What would be appropriate amends?” And their answer might surprise you. In which case, right, there's moral ... Oh, oh, oh, huh. Right. So then by the time you get to apology, you've learned so much and grown so much, so that apology is coming from an open heart that is actually contrite instead of, I don't know why everybody's so mad. You've actually, the light bulb has gone on.

Pastor Libby Howe:

You do know why everybody's so mad, would be upset if it happened to you. And you would have some sorrow about it. I like that connection in another interview I heard, but with sorry and sorrow. You don't say you're sorry unless there's some sorrow.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Oh yeah. Beautiful. And then the fifth step is when you have the chance to do the thing, and you will always have the chance to do the thing, you make a different choice next time.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right. Do it differently. And that should get easier the more we do it. I mean that practice, that character building, that becoming the person you want to be. Yeah. So one of the things that, thank you for sharing all of that with us. One of the things that I know is true of me is that, as I said, repentance wasn't a foreign concept to me, but it was kind of a foreign practice. We would always skip to forgiveness before we really talked a whole lot about repentance was, and partly that's because I don't think the church has always done repentance very well. I think it's really contributed a lot to some shame and a lot of guilt.

And I think we forced ... So our tendency has been to be like, well, let's talk about forgiveness then. Let's just not talk about this over here. And to focus really on being forgiven by God more than forgiven by more than in relationship with other people. But then, and if we did talk about forgiveness in relation to other people, it was forced or it felt like it was being forced or sort of compulsory to the person who was harmed.

So what I'm wondering about is, as we're thinking about becoming congregations or becoming faith communities that do this as practice, I'm wondering if you've seen it happening? Have you ... Because like I said, we have this in our constitutions, but it doesn't always make it into the way of our life. In fact, we're much, we look much more American in terms of our denial, and when we say we're not guilty, even though we are. Just because we look much more like that than we did ... And I'm actually in the Midwestern setting of this country, which tends to be even, I think has even more issues with this because we want to be nice and we think if we rebuke someone, it's not being nice, when in fact, that's very brave to rebuke somebody because we're hoping they'll listen to us. Where actually it actually is a bid for connection, not the other way around. So where is this? Do you see this happening anywhere? I'm curious because I actually work with congregations to do that.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Yeah. My favorite example of institutional teshuvah, repentance. teshuvah means return in Judaism, by the way. It's about coming back to where you were supposed to be all along. Okay. My favorite example is actually the University of Michigan Hospital where when there's a malpractice case, they show up at somebody's bedside and say, now they say, "This happened. We're so sorry. Here's some compensation." They own it. Here's what we're going to do to make it different. They go through all of the steps and just, they make it safer and they just show up the minute something happens and they proactively own it and their malpractice suits have dropped in half because people are feeling like they've gotten what they need. They feel like they're being cared for emotionally. And I think that's the number one thing is that when harm happens, it ideally is on the institution to show up before anybody is coming to them and saying, we are hurt and saying, "I see this. We are going to take care of you."

In the Jewish world, there are a lot of things happening right now. One denomination in particular, the Reform movement, has been deep in this process and did a whole set of investigations. There was, the Me Too of that community broke and a lot of names started getting named. And so they decided to do an investigation on all three branches of their denomination, the seminary and the organization and the Rabbinical association. And they released all of the investigations publicly. They named everything that was happening. They released things publicly. It wasn't perfect. Right? Then some survivors were saying, well, we, here's what we didn't like about how the investigation was done then.

So there's been a lot of back and forth, but then they got some people to do, some incredible people to do a restorative justice process that they're now road mapping out so that they can really make sure that the victim survivors have some space to have the conversations that they need, and to talk about accountability to the institution. It's not about the individual person that hurt me. It's about “I was at camp and the camp didn't take care of me,” right? “I was in rabbinical school and the school didn't take care of me.” And that's about institutional obligations. So they're in the process of road mapping out and trying to find a way to do this work that centers victims and it's all along. If you are not holding the people who were hurt at the center, you're not doing it right.

Pastor Libby Howe:

They get to determine, they get to ... And that's something that, I mean, one of those corrective shifts too is when we think about, when I hear forgiveness preached, when I preached it, probably it's really about the harm doer. It's like, well, what can I do to be right with God again? Or what can I do to be right with myself again? And no one's asking the question about is this person okay over here? What do we need to do to protect their peace or to give them peace again?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Right.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Yeah. Did you want to say something else?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Oh, just one of the things in Judaism that I think is the defense against that is that we have a line in one of our early sacred texts that you can't go to God on Yom Kippur and ask for atonement if you haven't made things right with your fellow human being. So that's like God and God's like, "Come back later." Did you do your homework? No.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Well, then it's not time yet. No, I think that's really significant. There's a place in Paul's letters of course in the New Testament where he says, "If you haven't settled accounts or with your brother or sister, don't come to the table yet." Which is that place. So it's somewhat similar in that reconciliation is part of being a community and being siblings together in community. So a friend of mine, we're going a little over time than we normally do, but we don't always get Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg either. So I'm going to ask a question that a friend sent to me. She said she's been reading through her family history and learned that her ancestors enslaved at least one person, possibly more while they lived in Virginia in the 1800s. And her question was just what to do with that? I have no doubt knowing her that she definitely feels the sorrow and is doing the work, all those things. But she's part of something much bigger and it's intergenerational as well.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Several things are clear to me. The answer number one is not nothing, right? Maimonides, so our guy on repentance also added a line to our Yom Kippur liturgy. So it says, we always pray in the plural, it's collective, we say, "We have sinned." And then he added and we and our ancestors. And it's like we are responsible for everything that was done by our ancestors that hasn't been fixed. All of this colonialism, all of this systemic racism, all of it, it's on us to fix it and to address it. So definitely not nothing. And definitely it's true that I as a white woman am not going to be the person who's appropriate to be giving the final, here is the answer.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Here's what you do.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

What? Right. So I would say if there's any information that can be got about who this person is and any sort of tracing back to find living relatives today, I would start there and start a conversation and say to basically say what would be amends, and start a conversation. If there isn't any way to connect to who descendants are today, and there may be multiple descendants and maybe there are multiple conversations. I imagine there are also local Black historical societies who could offer some really good insights and directions. Because yeah, I have a lot to say about reparations for the Holocaust or something like that. But this is not, and I cannot speak for all Jews, but I definitely am not the right person to be saying what is the, quote unquote, just solution here?

Pastor Libby Howe:

Yeah, as you said that with the Holocaust, I forgot to mention all of the different ways that Christians have been terrible to people in the past that I've ... So I should have, because that's certainly not over either. I mean, we're actually in a rise right now. I know about, especially with the white Christian nationalism that's coming out and Jews being included in that. So as you mentioned, what would you want as a Jew, not speaking for all Jews, but what would you want Christians to hear about how to resist anti-Semitic tendencies?

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Thank you for that question. Number one, please, please, please, please learn about antisemitism because it is insidious by design. It is meant to be slippery and slidey and kind of tucked into corners where you can't see it. So you have to learn about it so you can understand and identify it. You have to be so, and that includes theologically, it is so easy to slip into supercessionism. Oh yeah, it's so easy to go, "Oh, the Pharisees." And to not understand that when you call somebody a Pharisee as a bad word, you're basically saying, "Those damn Jews." Right? And it's like, "Oh, well I didn't mean that." It's like, well, the kid calling somebody gay in the playground also, that's homophobia. Even if they didn't mean you are someone who wants to be ... You know what I mean? You cannot use Pharisees as a slur. Those are our people, that's rabbinic Judaism.

And to understand that Jesus was actually having an intercommunal conversation, I read and reread the New Testament, and it's like Jesus was a Pharisee. Jesus was Bet Hillel. Jesus was from the house of Hillel, and he's yelling at the house of Shamai. And they are the same way that Hillel and Shamai always yelled at each other. You can track positions and how Bet Hillel holds and how the house of Shamai holds. And then later after the breakup, how you write about your ex is different than how you write about the thing when you're in the relationship. And the gospels were written after the breakup. And so like please give so much love and care about how you engage with the theological stuff. And right now we really need all need to be in solidarity with each other and all of the stupid myths and stereotypes about Jews. I just saw there are Nazis protesting outside a Broadway play right now.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Wow.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Yeah. It's not safe. We need love and support and we need to be showing up for other people. So it's all a group project.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Right. And I think that's one of the things we're learning, I hope we're learning, is that none of these ... Each while unique in their own experience, none of them are separate in their experience. We can't just deal with this. I'm involved with some LGBTQ work and we can't do that without talking about racism. We can't do that without talking about stealing land from indigenous people. We can't talk about immigration without talking about the life of Jews in this country or in Europe. So anyway, all of those important crossovers, really important. So we're going to stop. We could keep going. And I am so thankful that you have given us this time today with WCC Wednesday.

For folks that are listening, we do have some follow up experiences for you. Of course. I encourage you to read the book *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* by Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg. You can buy it everywhere. There are a couple of study guides that have been created, one for the book and then one also, tell me the name of your friend who created one specifically for Christian audiences.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

The very, very, very wonderful and amazing Reverend Molly Baskette, who's the author of, what is it? *How To Begin When Your World Is Ending*, which is also a brilliant book. And so she and I, she added a Christian addition to the guide. If you go to tinyurl/onrepentancelentguide, you will find it.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Okay. And we have that on our event page or on our ... And I think we'll post it under this when we post the Facebook video, the live video with people. So you can get the links to those two study guides. And then I'm encouraging a read of this book throughout the season of Lent, and even if you don't already have a practice of doing something in observance of the season. And then we're going to get together on April 20th and April 27th to have some conversation about it, sort of a WCC book club. Because this relates so importantly, it intersects so much with a lot of the work that we're doing, and I think the work that our world needs from people of all faith right now to learn how to be better together. So thank you so much, Rabbi. I am so thankful for all that you've done and all that you're doing and that you gave us your time here today. Blessings on whatever is next for you.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

So many blessings to you. And blessings to you and everybody on this Ash Wednesday, and at the beginning of Lent season. I hope it's powerful and transformative.

Pastor Libby Howe:

Thank you so much. Bye-bye.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg:

Bye-bye.