

“Harm Cracked Open; Letting In Repentance”
Genesis: 37: 3-8, 17b-22, 50: 15-21

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The story of Joseph and his brothers is a sweeping saga of jealousy, betrayal, revenge, and finally forgiveness. It is the gold standard of ancient stories on harm and repentance because of how detailed it is and how significant the stakes are between the siblings that have harmed each other. It is also an important story because this is not strangers who cross paths and end up hurting each other, but it is an intimate story about family. When we think about our own lives and the different people we have hurt or the people who have hurt us, I don't have to look at each personal list of wrongs and reckonings to know that almost everyone will have a family member on that list, probably more than one.

Notice I didn't say *if* we have hurt people or *if* we have been hurt. Harm is part of the human story. If we have made it this far in life, there has been at least one chapter of hurt in our life that came about because of the actions or words of another person. And if we are willing to look closely at our own words and actions, there is at least one chapter where we were the one who caused harm. That is why on this Lenten journey as we are cracking open the things we keep buried deep inside us, we are cracking open harm and letting in repentance, in the hope that what we let in will help heal the harm we have experienced or caused.

Harm is a broad term that encompasses small hurts that make us cringe with embarrassment or keep us up at night replaying our words all the way to the big hurts that change relationships, impact who we are or how we move in the world, and leave an indelible shape on our lives. Cracking open the harm we have caused or how we have been impacted is difficult because there are layers of emotions that pile on top of harm - protecting ourselves from the

rawness of pain or shielding us from shame. It is difficult because to address harm with each other requires vulnerability, honesty, and a willingness to be wrong, and the ability to center the needs of the one who has been harmed.

Repentance is the process we describe when this does happen. Repentance is about more than forgiveness or saying “I’m sorry.” Repentance requires listening, accounting for all that has happened, repairing the harm - even if it cannot be taken back - and transforming oneself so that the harm does not occur again, with that person or anyone else. Repentance is a transformative process and as each of us imagines the situations that come to mind when we think of the harm that has occurred in our lives, repentance is not always possible, and repentance is not necessarily the goal of every person who has been harmed. The movement away from harm and toward healing looks different for everyone - there is not one right way to respond or to heal ourselves.

I have been learning about repentance from Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, the author of “On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends In An Unapologetic World.” Rabbi Ruttenberg looks at the process of repentance in interpersonal relationships as well as in in the public sphere, in our institutions, and the kinds of repair we need to make as a nation. In each situation, Rabbi Ruttenberg says,

“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." (Page 49)

For Joseph's story of repentance, his brothers are not able to face what they have done to him - sold him into slavery, stolen his chance at a relationship with their father, severed him from his homeland and his family - until they themselves have experienced loss. It is not until they have known suffering and are afraid for their own lives that they are truly sorry for what they have done. When the narrative they have built about their life and what is going to happen in it shifts, the brothers are able to finally see what harm they have caused and lament the pain they have brought upon Joseph. They are finally able to look at themselves not as the heroes, but as the ones who are responsible for the suffering of another.

No wonder Joseph's brothers are afraid that he is going to get revenge on them. The tables have turned and suddenly they have lost their power, they realize how much pain they inflicted on their brother, and now Joseph is the one who holds all the power. Wouldn't we expect this to end in sweet, sweet revenge? Instead, Joseph chooses love. He has witnessed their remorse, he sees that his brothers understand the impact of their actions, and he trusts that they will not mistreat anyone else moving forward.

Joseph offers them forgiveness only when they are no longer able to wield power over him and that part of the story is key. Joseph has the power to choose how he will respond to their remorse. The story does not condemn the responses he doesn't take - including sending them on their way without his forgiveness - but it highlights that the choice of forgiveness would not have been possible to even consider until the offending parties ceased to have power over him.

It also only happens when the brothers understand that they are not owed Joseph's forgiveness, and they accept that they might not receive it. Rabbi Ruttenberg explains,

“Sometimes a penitent must understand that they won’t get the catharsis they so badly want, and that the most loving gesture that they can offer the person they’ve hurt is to leave them alone and find a way to live with the lack of closure.” (Page 67) No one is owed forgiveness. Instead, true repentance comes when we give up control over what will happen and how we will be received. Repentance is, no matter how sorry the one who caused the harm feels, led by the person who has been harmed and cannot be forced or quickened or wedged into place until or unless that is a path they want to take.

Five years ago we dedicated our entire Lenten season to forgiveness. We studied sacred stories together in worship. Each Wednesday night Arlene Camponella led a group on forgiveness in the community room. Never have I seen the community room more packed than when she extended an invitation to dive into forgiveness together. We showed up with broken hearts, with past hurt, and with hope for repairing relationships. The people in that room represented every cross section of the congregation and although every story shared was uniquely their own, we had many common themes run across the group.

Which is to say, this longing for forgiveness - to understand it, to receive it, to offer it - is not something you are alone in longing for. As part of a community of faith we acknowledge that we have shortcomings - it is why we lift up a prayer of confession in a unified voice, because we all need a little forgiveness over something that has happened - and together we build a community where we practice honesty and vulnerability when we have done something wrong, courage and truth telling when we have been wronged, and tools to navigate those spaces together.

As Rabbi Rutenberg says, “The work of repentance is, in many ways, the work of looking outside ourselves, looking with an empathetic eye at what we have done, letting it matter

to us, and trying earnestly to figure out how we can both meaningfully address it and ensure it never happens again. This is, in some ways, an act of tenderness, of extending ourselves to care for others, of giving ourselves the time and attention we deserve to grow, of investing in our own learning and capacity to heal. Because repentance is, I believe, in part, a kind of self-care. When we do the work, we give attention to our own broken places, our own reactionary impulses, our own careless ignorance. And it's a way of saying, 'Hey, self, you need some attention. Let's give you some help becoming the kind of person you want to be.'" (Page 59)

In other words, just as having been harmed does not mean you are not deserving of love, having been someone who caused harm also does not mean you are not deserving of love. When we let in the process of repentance - when we go on a journey of examining ourselves and moving toward repair - we are doing the work of love together. Joseph and his brothers took much of their lifetimes hurting each other, back and forth, until they had exhausted themselves of new ways to cause harm. It is our hope, that in cracking open harm together, we might let in the light of repentance sooner rather than later, to begin the journey to healing together, as a communal act of care and love that transforms our lives, one moment at a time, rewriting our stories and telling new chapters grounded in repair and transformation. May it be so.