

Greetings church,

We're on chapter 8, "Atonement; Or, What is Effected".

In this final chapter Rabbi Ruttenberg's whole approach to this conversation we've been having about confession, repentance, repair, forgiveness, and ultimately atonement can be fairly summarized in the following quotation: "In the framework we've been discussing, atonement works only if you've done the necessary work of owning harm and undergoing transformation - repentance. And if that harm has an interpersonal dimension, atonement is entirely impossible without repair, amends, and, in most cases, apology. Atonement is available, but it's the last step, after everything else is complete"¹. All of this we have been discussing doesn't only happen at a personal level; harm caused between two individual people. Harm happens at group levels, societal levels, national levels, and global levels. I've said it before but it bears repeating. If you continue to wonder or be frustrated that here in the United States we're still talking about the realities of racism, xenophobia, and people still in favor of the South rising again, it's because the harm that these isms have caused, along with the harm caused by a rebellion against this nation, have never fully been owned. They've never been confessed and repented of at a group, societal, and national level and therefore transformation has not happened. And because none of these things have happened, owning of harm (confession), repentance, and transformation, atonement has not been given. And this is why we are still talking about all of these things and why they will not go away.

But here's the thing. According to Rabbi Aaron Alexander we're fooling ourselves because harm, even after atonement, never goes away. Atonement "doesn't even erase the past, and it certainly can't wipe away all our shame. But it does offer a moment to feel free, once again ... while our past may stay with us, even haunt us, it need not totally define us. And that is something to celebrate."² Perhaps a core sin of our country is our false sense of exceptionalism. Perhaps we cannot bear the work of atonement because we can't even fathom the thought that we could have done something wrong; that we could have caused, and continue to cause, people pain and harm. We cannot corporately bear the guilt and shame and so we pretend we've done nothing wrong in the first place. More cynically, perhaps we don't care. Either way there is work that needs done in these United States and we are not doing it.

Perhaps we are not doing this atonement work as a nation because, according to the Jewish tradition anyways, atonement is "something that happens in connection with the divine"³. I stand by my assertion that the United States of America has never been a nation "after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13). We've never, as a whole collective nation, been in connection with the divine. The aforementioned exceptionalism would also preclude the humility necessary to do the work of atonement. Thus, it would seem that the atonement work Rabbi Ruttenberg is calling for needs to start small, grassroots, and work its way *up* into the broader national consciousness. We also need to not give up hope and throw our hands in the air and say it's all going to hell anyways. If indeed "the new heaven and the new earth" (Revelation 21) are one in the same, then there is no separation and our fate is all the same. Jesus came to *show* us exactly the way forward. Grace, humility, patience, peace, mercy, faith, hope, and love. We can bring healing into the world. -Pastor Eddie

¹Ruttenberg, Danya. On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World. Beacon Press, Boston, MA; 2022. p.196.

²Ibid, p.197.

³Ibid, p.200.