

The Power of Regret – Yom Kippur 2022/5783

David was one of the first people I met thirteen years ago as I began serving as the rabbi here at Temple Judea. He was smart, kind, caring and passionate about Judaism. He and his wife, Shirley, were regulars on Friday nights and at Shabbat morning Torah study.

Over the years, we became very close.

Then he became sick, and in his last few months, I saw him often, and we became even closer. One afternoon, I got a phone call. It was a weak David on the other end. He asked me if I could come see him, shared that he wasn't doing well, that he was afraid, and that he wanted to talk. I told him I will be there soon, but my kids were little, and before I knew it – something came up, and then another something, and then dinner and bath time, and then another email or two, and when I was ready to leave it was too late, or maybe I was just too tired or more possibly, I just wanted to avoid the tension that came with leaving the house late in the evening. So, I stayed.

The next morning when I called to say, "I'm coming", it was too late. David was gone. And I will forever regret not being there by his side when he needed me.

It's not easy to talk about regrets.

I see it all the time.

I see it when I spend time talking with people confronting an illness or death, at these vulnerable moments, during our deep and emotional conversations when people try to summarize their lives, so often they say to me "I lived a great life, I have no regrets. If I could, I would do everything the same way all over again."

And I see it when I meet with family members who lost a loved one and when I ask them if their loved one had regrets, they almost automatically say - "no - they had no regrets".

But we all know this can't be true.

Being human means making decisions all the time.

And at times, some of our decisions turn out to be mistakes.

And then, in order to cope with these mistake, we turn to our imagination, and our minds ability to travel in time, and we create stories we call “ if only...”

If only I went to medical school, if only I listened to what my mother said about him, if only I told her not to drive that day, if only I went to the doctor sooner, if only...

REGRETS.

People don't want to talk about regrets because feeling regret is understood as a negative emotion.

It was Ruth Bader Ginsburg who said, “Waste no time on regret.” And Edith Piaf built her singing career on her hit, “Non, Je ne regrette rien.”

Why summon pain when we can avoid it? Why rue what we did yesterday when we can dream of limitless possibilities of tomorrow?

Author Brene Brown says that: “No regrets” doesn't mean living with courage, it means living without reflection. To live without regret, she continues, “is to believe you have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with your life.”

If we are honest about our lives, we know - regrets are unavoidable.

Regrets are unavoidable, yet so often, avoided.

I recently finished the book, *The Power of Regret* by Daniel Pink. In the book, Pink reveals that regret is the second most experienced emotion among all emotions - second only to love. But it is the number one negative emotion people report feeling.

Eighty-two percent of Americans say they often have thoughts about regret- what they describe as “could haves and should haves”. At eighty-two percent, we as Americans are more likely to feel regret than to floss our teeth.

And once again I stand in awe of our Jewish wisdom and tradition that brings us all together here, one day a year to talk about REGRETS. For what is Yom Kippur if not the day we set aside to acknowledge, to express and to deal with our regrets. The things we did and the things we wish we would have or could have done.

Yom Kippur reclaims regret as an indispensable emotion.

Regret is valuable. It clarifies, it instructs, and if done right, it need not drag us down but rather it can lift us up. To be able to acknowledge that every single decision I made in life - even the bad ones - brought me to where I am and made me the person I am.

Our goal in life, not just tonight, is to optimize regret not to minimize it.

Without regret there is no Teshuva, and without embracing regret, we cannot truly be our best possible selves. REGRET MAKES US HUMAN.

REGRET as we will discuss tonight MAKES US BETTER.

So tonight, let's talk about regrets. Tonight, let's look at our regrets as an opportunity, rather than as a threat.

Tonight, let's remember that the goal of Yom Kippur is not to paralyze us in fear of a judging God but rather to serve us as a "life review" helping revise our life goals, our attitudes, and actions.

So, I want to ask you tonight:

What do you regret?

Most people are likely to answer this question with a big "I don't know." I get it. It's not easy to face our regrets. But I challenge you to go beyond "I don't know", I challenge you to look deep into your soul. And push yourself to reflect. Cast away cynicism and that evil inclination to role your eyes - force yourself into the discomfort zone of regrets. Tonight, let's not hide behind, "I have no regrets."

What actions did you take that caused you discomfort? What inaction led to an outcome in your life that you wish were different?

When I asked myself this question, I had a hard time answering it. I know you are too so let me help you, let me share with you the most common regrets of people. Maybe understanding other people's regrets will help you be more honest about your own. It helped me.

After evaluating thousands of people's regrets, Daniel Pink divides regrets into four main categories.

The first, foundation regrets represent the lack of willingness to make an effort in the short term in order to gain in the long term. These regrets sound like this: if only I'd done the work, if only I'd eaten better or exercised more, if only I'd studied harder. These regrets are about our failures to invest in building strong and stable foundations, of health, education, careers, and finances. They serve as a reminder of how as humans we seek security and stability.

Next are, boldness regrets which represent the times we didn't have courage to take a bold action, the times we didn't take full advantage of a situation that presented itself. These regrets sound like: if only I've taken the risk, if only I listened to the friend who told me to buy bitcoin in 2005...if only I dared kissing her, if only I said "yes", if only I was willing to give it a chance. These regrets mirror our need as HUMANS to grow, to enjoy the richness of the world, to experience more than an ordinary life.

The third type are moral regrets which represent the times we were not good people. While moral requests only represent about 10 percent of all regrets- they are the ones that hurt the most and last the longest. The biggest moral regret seems to be with people we hurt by not telling the truth, by not keeping our promises, by being dishonest, and by not playing by agreed rules.

They sound like "if only I've done the right thing".

These regrets are painful and are carried for decades – BUT - they teach us that stamped somewhere deep in our DNA and buried deep in our souls there is a desire to be good, honest, and moral.

And finally, the fourth type of regret, connection regrets –THEY ARE THE LARGEST FORM OF REGRETS – these are regrets related to those relationships that were once core in our lives– and now are weaker, broken or totally missing. Pink defines these as rifts and drifts - rifts usually start with a catalyzing explosive event, and drifts - while not as dramatic, because they develop slowly over time, are more common.

These regrets prove that we humans need to love and be loved, we yearn to be connected and suffer when we are not.

So now that we better understand regret, I want to ask you again, “What do you regret?”

Do you regret not calling more? Not spending more time together? Not saying I love you enough times?

Do you wish you worked less? Do you wish you could see back then what you know today that money doesn't buy you happiness or health?

Do you regret being so angry? Not forgiving? Carrying that grudge all those years?

Do you wish you faced that fear?

Do you regret not controlling the words that came out of your mouth? That mean, insulting comment? Sharing and spreading the rumors?

Do you wish you hadn't left?

Do you regret not leaving?

I hope that by now you have identified at least one regret in your life, and if you did, you must be asking “What can I do about it? How can I embrace my regrets and use them as a springboard into a new beginning, into a place of wholeness and acceptance.”

What does this day have to teach us that can help us foster the power of regret and use our regrets as an engine for growth and goodness?

As you can already guess –

Yom Kippur offers a simple yet haunting path to that goal.

Let's walk together on the path of Teshuva of return.

You already took the first step which is to admit that you do have regrets, to recognize and to verbalize them. Language forces us to organize and integrate our thoughts.

There is a reason why the Vidui - our confession prayer tonight is said out loud. ASHAMNU, BAGADNU, GAZALNU, DIBARNU DOFI. We have betrayed, we have slandered, we have looked the other way...Tonight we can't hide behind the silence of denial, tonight we recognize that each and every person carries with them regrets. Because regrets are HUMAN. Tonight, we remind ourselves that without speaking about these regrets, we cannot take the second step.

The second step is to make amends. If we can.

Use the pain generated from the regret to move Yourself to action.

For if we feel no pain, no discomfort, and if we need not rid ourselves from these feelings, we might not be able to garner the courage necessary for the hard work of apologizing and repairing.

If you hurt someone you can apologize. And if you happen to be on the receiving end of somebody's expression of regret, maybe pause before responding and remind yourself that you are witnessing an act of bravery.

Trust destroyed can be rebuilt, conversations avoided can take place, that visit can take place. **BUT** if for various reasons, we can't make amends, at least we can try to heal some of the pain by spreading goodness around us. If those who deserve our apologies, love, our care and our generosity of heart can no longer receive it, we can still share it with others in need. And by doing so we will not only create a better world around us, but we will be reminding ourselves that deep inside of us, in our essence we want to be good, to do the right thing.

Let us not ignore our regrets nor wallow in them - but rather let's learn from them. Let's use the discomfort prescribed to the next 24 hours, the discomfort that comes from not eating, from being here, far from our zone of comfort where there is no rabbi challenging us and no screens distracting us, let's use this time to pledge that we will learn from our regrets, that we will not repeat these mistakes again, that where we can -we will do better. We can convert the power of regret into fuel for progress. Our regrets can be and need to be our catalyst for growth. That is why earlier I told you regrets can make us better.

"Sincere regret," David Whyte teaches, "may in fact be a faculty for paying attention to the future, for sensing a new tide where we missed a previous one, for experiencing timelessness with a grandchild when we neglected a boy of our own. To regret fully is to appreciate how high the stakes are in an average human life. Fully experienced, regret turns our eyes, attentive and alert to a future, possibly lived better than your past."

And my friends, as you do this - please allow self-compassion to replace searing judgment. Please treat yourselves with basic kindness not self-destruction -Yom Kippur is all about teaching us that no one is perfect.

That is why during the Vidui prayer we only tap our hearts lightly.

People who address their regrets with self-compassion are more likely to change their behavior than those who allow their regrets to affect their self-esteem. Forgive yourself for the actions you took and for all those missed opportunities never seized.

Noted clinical psychologist Dr. Darlene Mininni wrote: "Instead of criticizing yourself for 'that stupid thing I did,' remember that you probably did the best you could with the information and perspective you had at the time."

Please remember that regret does not define you or your life. It's not who you are but rather what you did or failed to do at a specific moment in time.

In his famous Hilchot Teshuva, Laws of Repentance, Maimonides teaches us to do exactly what I just described. Recognize your regrets, if needed- stop the hurtful action immediately, express remorse, make amends. And make sure to not make the mistakes we did in the past. Lets reach out to children and grandchildren, let's talk with them about our regrets so that they can learn

from our experiences, let's set an example and be that person who teaches others how to replace the pain we cause with acts of loving kindness, with Tzedakah.

And act now. HAYOM. Repeat the words of Rabbi Eliezer who taught his students that the best time to repent is the day before they die. "But when is that day?" they asked. "Exactly" he replied.

My friends, all this is true for regrets that have to do with things we have done, with harm we have caused. And true for the regrets that can be amended. In many ways, as hard as they are, these regrets are the easiest to face exactly because they have a corrective solution.

What about all our regrets, not over things we did, but rather over all the things we could have and should have done?

In some cases, we can still retract or reverse our decision, we can try again, even if a significant amount of time has passed. If 10 years have passed since the last phone call – why wait another day? Remember the Chinese proverb, that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the second-best time is today.

But what about the things we failed to do that we have no way to correct, things that we will never get a second chance to correct?

Those are the hardest. Those are the regrets that puncture a hole in our souls, in our hearts. Research shows that these are the most painful regrets and that, "Individuals regret *lost* opportunities the most, particularly when, or because, they've failed to achieve a sense of closure."

What can we do when we discover that Mark Twain was right by saying that, "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did do."

I have two suggestions for how to deal with regrets stemming from inaction.

The first is a great book I want to recommend called - *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig.

In this book, the hero is dwelling between life and death, she finds herself in a huge library with an infinite number of books, each telling the story of a

different life she could have lived if only she had made different decisions...I don't want to go too deep into the story, I only want to share the main message which is that all the alternative lives we imagine we could have had if only we made other choices, other decisions, all those lives, would probably not turn out to be what we hoped them to be. The life we think we might have had is nothing but an idealized dream. Because in every life, even the alternative ones we imagine we would have, or could have been better, you would have made other decisions that would have led you exactly to the same place, to a life with regrets – just different regrets.

Every decision we make in life stirs us away from infinite outcomes and so all we have at the end is the understanding that there is no option to live another life and that the only book that matters is the book of life, the book of life that we are writing for ourselves.

What is Yom Kippur if not about writing our book of life?

What is Yom Kippur if it is not about all of us standing in the liminal area between life and death, examining our own book of life and committing to do all we can, to write in it the best possible life we can imagine for ourselves.

The Midnight Library, as well as the liturgy of Yom Kippur, ask of us to focus on writing today and tomorrow's page, not lamenting on yesterdays. They ask that we learn from all we have done and that we cherish the one life that we have.

Let us see ourselves just like the Israelites who carried in the ark of the covenant both the broken set of the Ten Commandments, the ones Moses broke in his rage, with the second set that were given to him by a forgiving God. We too carry with us our broken dreams, our broken relationships, all the mistakes, the missed opportunities, and regrets – but we carry them with love. For they are part of who are, they are valuable to us. They make us human. They make us better.

The second teaching is to “at least” any situation. “At least-ing” the situation forces us to focus on the blessings in our lives, it forces us to engage in the Jewish discipline of gratitude.

Here are some of my personal “at leasts.”

I married the wrong woman, but at least I have four amazing children.

Divorce is painful and comes with a very high emotional cost, but I did find the love of my life.

I'm not a trauma room doctor, but at least I get to still help people in meaningful ways.

I wish I had a better relationship with my father, but at least he is an awesome grandfather

I regret I never made it to see David, but at least today, when the call arrives, I don't think twice before I go.

And so, in a few minutes when you go home, please don't talk about sports, or the stock market, don't talk about the plans for breakfast tomorrow. Please talk about your regrets, share them with loved ones, with a friend. Share with them what you have learned and gained from your regrets, create your list of "at least's."

If you can, make amends, give Tzedakah, use the power of regret to create a better you, a better world around you. And if your regrets are forever to be part of you – embrace them as you would embrace the set of the broken Ten Commandments, for these regrets have guided you, these regrets have shaped you, these regrets made you who you are.

And I wonder, what might we feel tomorrow, because of tonight's self-reflection--and what light may come through tomorrow because of tonight's vulnerability? And what promise, what potential, what newness, might emerge the day after?

There's no better time than right now, Yom Kippur, for us to find out.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah.