

The power of regret
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Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Many of my sermons start off with a joke or two and so here I go.

“The older I get the more I regret all the people I’ve lost over the years. Hmmm, maybe being a trail guide wasn’t such a great idea after all.”

“I asked my dad to tell me a decision he regretted. I must have stumped him because he just kept staring at me.”¹

Sigh, I regret finding such lame jokes about remorse. Geez! I could’ve done better, to be sure, but on the other hand that is the point of this sermon. Today is *Yom HaKippurim*, our day of atonement. We fast, abstain from pleasurable activities, pray all day, and ask God to forgive us for all that we have done wrong. In order to do this, we have to be aware of our mistakes, of the ways that we have fallen short. We need to revisit our past. This is not for the purposes of torturing ourselves but it is to help us make changes today that will lead to better decisions in the future. Without this process, we can easily keep making the same errors over and over again.

The emotion of regret is very unpleasant. Who likes to be a screw up? It feels terrible to know that we have let someone down, that we have hurt another, or that we have compromised ourselves and our values. And so, we work hard to avoid mistakes and try to live without regret. This can be a good strategy, on the one hand, because if we keep our values first and foremost on our minds, we may be less likely to short change them.

And so, it is helpful to remind ourselves of what is most significant to us. We can easily get lost in the day to day grind of school, work, responsibilities, and even survival. However, deep down we know what is most important to us, whether it is our partner, child, parents, or friends. Maybe it’s providing for our family or maintaining our health or well-being of another. It is good from time to time and especially during the *Yamim Noraim*, days of awe, to identify what is most vital to us and to evaluate if we are living in accordance with the best version of ourselves.

But then again, there comes a time, at some point or many times in our lives, where we error, transgress, sin, and make mistakes. It is then that we can be filled with regret. What do we do with such feelings? Addressing this was a wonderful article in the WSJ that was entitled, ‘No Regrets’ Is No Way to Live, By Daniel H. Pink based on his book, *The Power of Regret: How looking backward moves us forward.*²

Pink states that even though we may strive to avoid regret, it is impossible. He writes that “the “No Regrets” approach is an unsustainable blueprint for living. At a time like ours—when teenagers are battling unprecedented mental-health challenges, adults are gripped by doubt over their financial future, and the cloud of an enduring pandemic casts uncertainty over all of our

decisions—it is especially counterproductive.” Pink has studied decades of research into the science of regret and analyzed over 16,000 individual accounts of remorse and concludes that, “Regret is not dangerous or abnormal. It is healthy and universal, an integral part of being human. Equally important, regret is valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn’t drag us down; it can lift us up.”

Really? How can this negative emotion actually lift us up? Well, first we have to understand that regret is a natural emotion that we have as human beings. Children as young as seven start to develop this ability and by the teenager years, it is fully formed, according to Developmental psychologists. We are hard wired to experience regret but according to Pink it not only makes us human but it can make us better as well.

And so, let’s start with our own regret. What do you wish that you did differently? What would you go back and change right now, if you could? For some of us with decades of life, that list may indeed be long. Many people can experience regret over losing contact with a loved one, not being there for a friend in a time of need, cheating on a spouse, making poor financial decisions, not taking care of our health or the wellbeing of others. We first need to acknowledge where we have fallen short. Where we have made mistakes.

For me, there are a number of times that I have fallen short. I remember while on the swim team as a senior in High school, there was this terrible tradition of hazing the new swimmers or freshman. I went through the process the year before and then as senior, I was on the other end. I remember a newer swimmer expressed to me that she didn’t want to go through with the demeaning ritual of being called names and herded into the showers as a group. I don’t really remember all the things that were done to the new comers, but I do remember advising her to go with the flow and that it would be over soon enough. And she did so.

I felt a fair amount of shame about this later on because in retrospect, if I was stronger, I would’ve taken a stand by her side and perhaps even ended this long standing ritual of humiliation. By the way, boys and girls, this was a time when bullying was rampant and teachers and coaches looked the other way.

I remember as a junior in college of my shock at getting C in my history class. I was so used to getting A and B’s with minimal effort. My father reminded me though that I told him that I never went to class. Yes, I remember thinking that the professor was so very boring and wasn’t worth my time. I was ashamed of myself. Well, my senior year, I took a philosophy of semantics class. And it was the most tedious class I had ever signed up for but by golly, I went to every class and got my A as penitence to myself.

Feeling remorse is the initial stage of making *Teshuva*, of repenting in Judaism, followed by a confession. According to *Hilchot Teshuva* the laws of repentance found in the Mishneh Torah, (a medieval Jewish code of law), we are told by Maimonides, “If a person transgresses any of the

mitzvot of the Torah, whether a positive command or a negative command - whether willingly or inadvertently - when he repents, and returns from his sin, he must confess before God...How does one confess: He states: "I implore You, God, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following. Behold, I regret and am embarrassed for my deeds. I promise never to repeat this act again."³

Daniel Pink asserts that acknowledging past regrets can help us prevent future ones. He advocates for us to reframe our regret. Instead of trying to cover it up or drown in self-criticism, we are to engage in self-compassion. He advises us to strive to zoom out from our blunder and look at it from a wider perspective. Just as we are compassionate towards others for their mistakes, we should be kind and understanding of ourselves. Reminding ourselves that we are indeed human and being imperfect is part of a lived life. Pink suggests that we ask ourselves questions such as, "Is your regret something that other people might have endured, or are you the only person to have experienced it? Does it deserve kindness or contempt? Does the regret represent an unpleasant moment in your life, or does it fully define your life?"

This is to help us with perspective. By framing our regret with a lens of compassion, we will be more inspired to engage with improving ourselves. And so avoidance is never helpful in these times. Pink and Maimonides emphasize the importance of acknowledging our errors as a critical first step.

Pink next states that we disclose our experience. What you mean confess it? Yikes! Well, he teaches that by telling someone else about our regrets can help us avoid these mistakes in the future. Maimonides in *Hilchot Teshuva* has something to say on this very concept.

"It is very praiseworthy for a person who repents to confess in public and to make his sins known to others, revealing the transgressions he committed against his colleagues. He should tell them: "Though I sinned against so and so, committing the following misdeeds.... Behold, I repent and express my regret." Anyone who, out of pride, conceals his sins and does not reveal them will not achieve complete repentance as [Proverbs 28:13] states: "He who conceals his sins will not succeed." When does the above apply? In regard to sins between man and man. However, in regard to sins between man and God, it is not necessary to publicize one's [transgressions]. Indeed, revealing them is arrogant."⁴

I know in our society today, it can appear more advantageous to deny wrongdoing virulently but that is not in alignment with Jewish values. We are supposed to admit, confess, and take responsibility for our mistakes especially to all involved parties. If we did something harmful or hurtful to a colleague, friend, or family member, we are obligated to own up to it. We have to say, "I am sorry that I wasn't there for you. I want to apologize for that horrific error. I feel terrible about my lapsed judgment. Interestingly, though, this is only for wrongs between human beings. Matters between us and God can remain between us. And so, you don't have to confess

to eating that juicy pork chop, you can do that one directly with God. Many of you are thinking that you have a lot to confess to God on that subject matter.

Maimonides councils that it is not just telling someone what we did but we have to honestly feel bad about it. He states that, “Anyone who verbalizes his confession without resolving in his heart to abandon [sin] can be compared to [a person] who immerses himself [in a *mikvah*] while [holding the carcass of] a lizard in his hand. His immersion will not be of avail until he casts away the carcass.”⁵

Yes, holding on to an unclean animal while attempting to purify oneself will not work. And so contrition is an essential components of *Teshuva*, of repentance. If we don’t feel bad about our words or deeds, there is no remorse and there is no growth.

While confessing and admitting are ideal, Pink addresses situations where we feel that we cannot tell another soul. In such circumstances, he advises, we should write them out and list our mistakes for ourselves. By documenting our shortcomings, we will be able to move on more quickly from them. And so, one way or the other, it is important for us to acknowledge with words, our sources of regret.

And then Pink teaches that we extract a lesson from our experience. While we can’t go back and change the past, we can alter our present and future course. And so, if one felt they weren’t there for their friend in need, for example, they can strive to be there in the future for others. I once worked with a rabbi who felt a lot of sadness that he wasn’t present when his girls were young. He worked long hours and had trouble setting boundaries between his home and Temple life. Well, some years later, when they were teenagers, he resolved to do differently. He scheduled himself to be home and at their events. And he became an active part of their lives and to this day, he is very close to them and their children.

Pink writes that when we distance ourselves from our problems, we can see them in a clearer light and be able to extract meaning and guidance from them. He asks us to imagine that our best friend is dealing with the same regretful situation. What would you advise her/him to do? What does it teach? One can also write an email to oneself outlining the lessons we have learned or imagine that it is ten years in the future. How would we talk to ourselves about this incident so far down the road? Ultimately, he asserts that looking backward, if done constructively, can help us move forward and regret can help us to live a better life.

The essence of Yom Kippur is making *Teshuva*, is repenting. Maimonides teaches that, “[Who has reached] complete Teshuvah? A person who confronts the same situation in which he sinned when he has the potential to commit [the sin again], and, nevertheless, abstains and does not commit it because of his Teshuvah alone and not because of fear or a lack of strength.”⁶

And so the Jewish process is as follows, feeling sorry and contrite about our words or deeds, confessing them, and then making things right. If there was a loss of some kind, we reimburse

the person or replace the item or funds. And then, the final part is when we are in a similar situation in the future, we act differently. We make a better choice given what we have learned from our experience. And then, we have successfully repented. And as far as Daniel Pink's teachings, we have learned from our mistakes and will live more fully because of them.

Interestingly, there is another teaching from Maimonides that a *Baal Teshuva*, one who is repentant, is more dear to God than a pious person. Wait a minute, how can it be that one who has done nothing wrong is seen as less than a past sinner? Maimonides states, "A Baal-Teshuvah should not consider himself distant from the level of the righteous because of the sins and transgressions that he committed. This is not true. He is beloved and desirable before the Creator as if he never sinned. Furthermore, he has a great reward for he has tasted sin and yet, separated himself from it, conquering his [evil] inclination. Our Sages declared: "In the place where Baalei Teshuvah stand, even the completely righteous are not able to stand." The level of Baalei Teshuvah transcends the level of those who never sinned at all, for they overcome their [evil] inclination more."⁷

And so, our Jewish tradition teaches that one who has done wrong but has learned from it, improved him/herself, transcends and is even more beloved than one who has never erred. This is because we have wrestled with ourselves like our biblical Jacob did, before confronting his brother Esau. We have engaged in the very hard work of taking an honest look at ourselves and have strived to do better. Just as Jacob's name is changed to Israel, one who wrestles with God, we as his descendants, can be inspired to grow and learn from our mistakes. We can use regret as tool for improvement.

This is how we redeem ourselves and become the best people we can be. And so may we all be able to confront our shortcomings, our mistakes. May we be able to learn from them so that we can do better in the future. And may our lives be richer and more fulfilling because of them.

Notes

1 Upjoke.com

2 WSJ article https://www.wsj.com/articles/no-regrets-is-no-way-to-live-11643385936?mod=Searchresults_pos1&page=1gar

3 *Hilchot Teshuva* the laws of repentance found in the Mishneh Torah Chapter 1

4 *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:5

5 *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:3

6 *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:1

7 *Hilchot Teshuva* 7:4