

The Transformative Power of Regret

This is one of my favorite times of the year. It's baseball playoff season! I want to share a brief story from the baseball world that occurred just a couple of weeks ago. Aaron Judge, who is the New York Yankees all-star outfielder, has been having an historic year. With 59 home runs, all eyes have been peeled to see Judge tie Babe Ruth's 1927 record of 60 in one season. And then on Tuesday, September 20th, at Yankee Stadium, Judge hammered one into deep left field. Michael Kessler, a college student, happened to be in the right place at the right time and ended up with the ball. Stadium officials quickly approached him and asked what he wanted to do with it. Any fan of the game knows that such a souvenir could be worth serious money—we're talking six figures. After the game, Kessler gave the baseball to Judge in exchange for autographed balls, a signed bat and some pictures with the slugger. If that was me, I think I'd have serious regrets afterwards.

Tonight begins the holiest day of the year and Yom Kippur just happens to be the holiday of regret. (And last week you thought "Days of Fear" sounded bad.) During this 24-hour period of prayer, fasting, and introspection, we pound our chests and publicly declare all the transgressions we committed and how regretful we are of the choices we made. Perhaps some of us have been thinking about all the things we wished we had done but chose not to as well as the things we did and wished we hadn't this past year. All of this comes bubbling to the surface at Yom Kippur. All of us have regrets.

In my years of being a hospice chaplain and rabbi, I have had the honor of sitting with people as they draw close to death. For those that are cogent, I listen to them and provide whatever comfort I am able to give. Sometimes I ask if they are afraid and usually, when their loved ones are out of the room, they share their true feelings about the end of life. One of the most common things people—mostly men, actually—have said to me during these visits is that they have no regrets about their life. This seems wonderful, doesn't it?

I don't buy it. Each and every one of us is filled with regrets. Some more than others. And some regrets are weightier and some don't take up as

much space. When I hear Sinatra sing “Regrets, I've had a few, but then again, too few to mention,” I can’t help but think what a joke this line is.¹

In an episode of NPR’s Hidden Brain², guest Amy Summerville, professor of psychology and director of the Regret Lab at Miami University in Ohio, explains that regret is the most common negative emotion in our lives. It is negative only because it makes us feel bad, not because it’s bad to feel it. Regret is an emotion that we experience when we look backward and say, *If only I hadn’t made that decision. If only I had taken that action or hadn’t taken that action my life today would be better.* We can thus have regrets of action and inaction.

Regret, while painful, is distinct to human beings. No other animal, as far as we know, experiences this emotion. When we look back and think about our regrets we imagine how life would have turned out had we made different choices. We recreate our past and tell stories based on a preferred reality. Regret also requires agency. Whatever our regret, it’s our own fault. If Michael Kessler looks back next week and regrets giving the ball to Aaron Judge, he can only blame himself. If you regret not connecting with a loved one, that is entirely on you. So long as we believe we have free will, regret is a sobering reminder that we have full autonomy over our actions.

Although regret is an emotion none of us want to feel, it can ultimately have a profoundly positive impact on our lives. Regret is far from useless. In his book, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves Us Forward*, New York Times bestselling author, Daniel Pink, teaches that there are four different kinds of regret.³

He calls the most common, “Connection Regrets.” This is the feeling you get when you think to yourself, *If only I had reached out more often before they died. Or, If only I hadn’t let this relationship slowly dissolve.* When we have such a regret, Pink explains, we realize that we value and honor

¹ I mean no disrespect to Paul Anka who wrote the lyrics.

² Hidden Brain. *Regrets, I have a Few.* Sept 11, 2017

³ These are not clinical classifications.

relationships and connections with loved ones. We are reminded how important love is in our lives. It enriches us at our most fundamental level. Two of my rabbinic mentors, Rabbi Richard Levy z'l and Rabbi Martin Weiner z'l, died in the past few years. While I will forever cherish my close relationship with each of them, I regret not being in better touch during their last year of life. I regret not telling them how much they meant to me, even though I am certain they both knew.

The second type of regrets are “Boldness Regrets.” This is the kind that makes us think about foregone opportunities. *If only I had left my boring desk job and started my own business, I'd be happier. If only I had asked out this person instead of chickening out, my life would be different today.* These regrets place us at a specific juncture in our lives and with hindsight, we realize we made the wrong decision. In some cases, we chose to play it safe. They remind us how fleeting life is and that we can afford to take more risks than we think we're capable of. I regret not studying in Israel in college. I know I would have loved the experience and I may have also found my calling sooner in life. Of course I am grateful for how my life turned out, and had I made a different choice years ago, Eytan and Shoshana might not be here. Nevertheless, despite how one's life ultimately turns out, a boldness regret is one that we still beat ourselves up over because we regret not taking that chance.

The third type of regrets are “Foundation Regrets.” These focus on many small decisions years ago that, when added together, create bigger problems later on. *If only I had taken school seriously, I would have a better job and life today. If only I put money away for my child's college education, I wouldn't have so much stress now. If only I exercised and ate healthfully, I wouldn't be having so many issues today.* These regrets point out a failure to act responsibly. They teach us that we value stability and being intentional and conscientious about the choices we make. They teach us the importance of thinking ahead. Granted, when we're younger, this is not always so clear. Many of us choose short-term gains over long-term goals. Yet, it's never too late to turn things around and live with a new mindset.

And the last type are known as “Moral Regrets.” We all make mistakes and do things that later on we feel awful about. Some of the most common moral regrets are, not surprisingly, about bullying and infidelity. These

regrets remind us that we took the low road in life. When we regret these past behaviors we learn that what is most important to us is being decent, kind, and trustworthy human beings. Often, with moral regrets we are filled with guilt on top of regret. We know we did something wrong and we wish we could go back in time and choose a better path. These are usually the type of regret that remind us of the hurt we caused to others. They ultimately teach us that when we are in doubt or at a crossroads in life, we need to choose to take the right and moral path.

What we regret the most might point to what we value the most. These feelings are useful to us. We don't want to banish them altogether or pretend they don't exist. Imagine if we banished grief. We wouldn't remember love. Grief is evidence that we loved. So too with regret. Without it we would not know what we cherish and honor in this life and we would not learn how to be better people.

We all have regrets. Even God, believe it or not. At the end of *parashat Bereshit*, God sees how wicked humans had become and the Torah actually says that God regretted creating us. God was heartsick.⁴ If God has regrets then we most definitely do as well.

The question we should be asking ourselves is: What do we do with our regrets? We know they serve a purpose even though they can make us feel crummy. We know we can't pretend we have none because we all do. One answer is to perform *teshuvah*, if at all possible. For many regrets, this isn't an option. But we can repair broken relationships. It's not as hard as we might imagine to pick up the phone or write a letter. We can also show love to the next generation if we didn't with the previous one. Nicole's grandfather Art, I'm told, was a militant father but he was a softy as a grandfather. I never had the opportunity to ask him if he regretted how he parented, but I imagine he's not the only person who showed more love to his grandkids than to his own children. Regret can lead to *tikkun* (repair) and make things right after being so wrong. Regret has the power to help us become better people.

The other answer is one that I learned from Rabbi David Wolpe. He teaches that the greatest regret in our people's history happened at Mount

⁴ Genesis 6:6 "The Eternal regretted having made human beings on earth, and was heartsick."

Sinai. While Moses is receiving the tablets from God, down below the Israelites are building a golden calf. When Moses descends from the mountaintop and witnesses the idolatry, he smashes the tablets into pieces. Moses obviously regrets breaking the sign of the covenant. The people regret losing faith and God regrets everything. Moses quickly rebukes the community and it's not a pleasant situation for anyone. But what do they do? How do they move forward? Do they simply forget what just took place and carry on? No. "Moses takes the symbol of regret, the broken tablets, and the rabbis tell us, the intact tablets and the broken tablets were carried together in the ark. You carry your regrets with you. Because that's how you remember. You carry them with you because that's how you do better. You look at them as teachers, not as tormentors. Everyone has their own *aron kodesh*. Everyone has their ark."⁵

I love this teaching so much. Each one of us carries around an ark filled with regrets. Some can be lessened by an act of *teshuvah* or simply reaching out. But most of our regrets can't be undone. Some linger and haunt us until our final breath. We live with them and we learn from them. Every day of our lives we carry our brokenness around. They are like physical scars reminding us of our past. This is what Yom Kippur highlights. This is the power of this day.

May we have the courage and strength to look into our own personal arks as we carry them into the new year and learn about the people we were and strive to be. May this heaviness not be too heavy a burden to bear and may it ultimately allow us to be compassionate to ourselves and to one another. *Ken yehi ratzon*. May this be God's will.

⁵ Excerpt from Rabbi David Wolpe's 2021 High Holy Day sermon, "Broken Tablets: How to Handle Our Regrets."