“No Regrets”

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The Maggid of Dubnow was once passing through a town and came upon an old, abandoned barn. On the side of this barn were 100 targets. And in the center of each target, was an arrow. 100 targets, 100 bullseyes. He was amazed. Immediately he went to the town square and asked the villagers who was the marksman that had such amazing skill. They pointed to a boy, sitting off to the side with a bow and quiver next to him. “Young man,” he asked him, “how is that you are so skilled to have accomplished this incredible feat with your bow and arrow?” “It’s really easy,” the boy replied, “I shoot the arrows first, and then I paint the targets around them.”

If you draw the bullseyes after you shoot the arrows, you never regret a single shot.

American culture celebrates this “No Regrets” attitude. We hear it all the time, as if living life without regrets is the secret to happiness. Life is too short to live with regrets; don’t waste your time worrying about things that you have done.

On the surface it sounds ideal: “I have no regrets because I am happy with who I am right now. I have no regrets because I don’t waste my time dwelling on the past, I am focused on the future.” No regrets, no looking back, just moving on.

Perhaps Shakespeare put it best: “Things without all remedy should be without regard; what's done is done.” And it sounds like good advice for life… until you remember who

said it. It was Lady Macbeth, advising her husband not to waste time regretting his past actions…like committing murder.

The sociologist and author Doctor Brene Brown teaches that living without regrets "doesn't mean living with courage, it means living without reflection."[1] To live a life without regrets is to live an unexamined life, and Jewish tradition teaches us that that we need to be examining our lives, especially on Yom Kippur.

In our confessional, we pray these words: "Adonai, we are arrogant and stubborn, claiming to be blameless and free of sin. In truth, we have stumbled and strayed. We have done wrong." It is the height of arrogance to come here on Yom Kippur and say that we have examined our lives and have no regrets. It is much easier to reflect on the year when we justify our mistakes as what we intended to do all along, when we shoot first and paint the targets later. But painting the targets after the fact does nothing to improve your aim, and we are here because we have missed the mark and have made mistakes.

It is not easy to admit to our regrets and failings, which is why we recite them together in the plural: Ashamnu, *we* have sinned, *we* have done wrong.

Our tradition teaches that regret is universal and both necessary and unavoidable and we have to face up to it.

Even God has regrets.

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[1] Brene Brown, *Rising Strong.*

God regrets choosing Saul to be the king, telling the prophet Samuel, נחמתי "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from Me and has not carried out My commands."[2] God, who should have known better, made the wrong decision.

Later, in the book of Jeremiah, we learn that God regrets using Rome to destroy the Temple and sending the Jewish people into exile. נחמתי "I regret the evil I have done to you"[3]

And probably the most well-known instance of God's regret is in the story of the flood. Not long after creating the world, God regrets doing so. The Torah teaches that,

> When Adonai saw how great was the wickedness of human beings in the earth, that the direction of their thoughts was nothing but wicked all the time, Adonai regretted having made human beings on earth, and was heartsick. So God thought, "I will wipe the humans off the face of the earth, נחמתי I regret the day I made them."[4]

God's regret is so profound that God takes an extreme action to try to fix it, tries to erase the mistakes made with humans and go back and start all over again. What started with good intentions —the creation of human beings — has gone horribly wrong. It is from a place of deep regret that God destroys almost all that had been created.

The Talmud explores God's regret and there is debate about what exactly God regrets about creating human beings. As part of that discussion, Hillel and Shammai argue about whether it would have been better for human beings to be created or not have been created at all. In one of the rare instances when Shammai wins an argument it is

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[2] 1 Samuel 15:10

[3] Jeremiah 42:10

[4] Genesis 6:5-7

determined that it would have been better had human beings not been created. However, the rabbis go on to say that since we already were created, it is our responsibility to examine our both our past and future deeds.[5] This is what we are doing here tonight.

We come here to work on our souls, to sit with the uncomfortable truth that we have not always done the right thing and that we need to do better. Yom Kippur challenges us to name our regrets because that is the first step of Tshuvah — repentance — and how we become better.

Regret is painful and uncomfortable. We cringe with regret. It forces us to face the worst in ourselves, the moments when we would like to tell ourselves that we were acting out of character, a momentary blip instead of who we really are. Yet it is those moments that we truly regret that teach us who we really want to be and how we could be better.

Part of the pain of regret is that we have to take responsibility for our actions —we must admit that we had a choice and made the wrong one. We could have done something differently. We could have made a better decision. We could have exercised more self-control. We could have taken the leap. But we did not. And it is frustrating to imagine how things might have been better if we had only done something differently. Regret is the first step — that intense, emotional response to our self-examination that helps us to own up to our mistakes and change ourselves.

Doctor Brene Brown teaches that “Regret is one of the most powerful emotional reminders that change and growth are necessary…Regret is a tough, but fair teacher.

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[5] Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 13b

To live without regret is to believe you have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with your life."[6]

If you have no regrets, then you are not doing the work of Yom Kippur. That is what really would be a waste of time — to spend all these hours in prayer and contemplation and not leave this place changed.

The Talmud teaches that one who has no regrets —who says, "I will sin and repent and then sin and repent" —that person is not truly penitent.[7] Tshuvah is about recognizing what we have done wrong and learning from it, so that if we were to face the same circumstances again we would do something different.

Brown says something similar to the Talmud based in modern psychology: "There's a power in… saying, 'I do regret this decision. What can I do differently? How can I grow? How can I change?' It is an uncomfortable but really important reminder to learn to do things different next time."[8] Regret is painful, but if you let it, regret can be the motivation to act differently in the future.

Reflecting on the last year and on our lives, our regrets come in all sizes.
Some of us may have big regrets —things that were life-altering and continue to unsettle us —but most of our regrets are smaller, more ordinary occurrences. We fail to act kindly. We pretend not to see someone in need so we don't have to stop and offer a hand. We pass up opportunities because we are afraid. We intentionally misunderstand a cry for help so we don't have to answer it. We don't take a chance, sticking with what

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[6] Brene Brown, *op cit.*

[7] Babylonian Talmud Yoma 85b

[8] Brene Brown, *op cit.*

we know instead of trying something new. We are silent when we should speak up. We say the hurtful thing because the other person deserved it, or because we were justifiably angry, or just because we were hurting and wanted to offload it onto someone else. These moments happen all the time. Perhaps this is why we want to ignore them and pretend that we have no regrets.

Our Yom Kippur liturgy and tradition are clear: we are supposed to remember and regret all of these things. We confess our sins over and over. In case we are tempted to say we have no regrets, reciting Al Chet and pounding our chests reminds us otherwise —it reminds us of everything we have done wrong, categories of sin we may have forgotten about until we recite the words together.

“What we regret most,” says Brown, “are our failures of courage, whether it’s the courage to be kinder, to show up, to say how we feel, to set boundaries, to be good to ourselves.”

Our regrets can help teach us to take that chance, to speak up, to be kinder.

Our regret can remind us to refrain from hurting someone just because we can, to refrain from the revenge that feels good in the moment, to hold back the hurtful words that are truly better off unsaid.

Perhaps the reason regret is so painful is because it forces us to acknowledge that there are some things we can not fix. There are some mistakes that we can not undo, chances we can not go back and take, words that we can not unsay, there are things that are irreversibly broken.

God regretted creating human beings and tried to start over, but we know that you can't go back and erase mistakes, and what God did next is equally regrettable, destroying the earth and living things in an attempt to wash everything away.

After the flood waters recede God seems to regret destroying the world in anger and promises to never again cause such complete destruction.Knowing that humans still have the capacity for evil and concerned about the temptation to once again send rains, God creates a reminder in the form of a rainbow, a promise to stop the rain and not let floods again destroy the whole earth.God learns through experience and regret.

Later in the Torah, the Israelites have escaped Egypt into the wilderness, only to panic and build a Golden Calf. God is ready to destroy them and start over with Moses as the new father of the Jewish people.

Moses reminds God about the promise to Abraham,Isaac and Jacob that their offspring would be numerous and would populate the promised land. Moses asks God to repent from the plan to wipe them out.God listens to Moses and here uses the same word for "repent" as was used to express regret over creating humans: נחמתי nechamti, I regret. God has regrets and repents, and does not act on the impulse to punish the people by completely destroying them.God is learning, and changing.

When later faced with a similar situation, God makes another choice, and does not act in anger. This is true repentance: choosing not to repeat the action that you regret.

An admittedly-fallible God seems at odds with the theology of Yom Kippur. Instead of being all-knowing and all-powerful as portrayed in our prayers.

An all-knowing God would not make mistakes, our Torah teaches that God does not know everything; instead God feels sorrow and has regrets. An all-powerful God could go back in time and change things, but our Torah teaches that even God does things that can not be undone.

Rabbi Brad Artson teaches that: “A timeless, changeless God cannot regret. Regret means being different than you were a moment ago…Over and over again the Torah emphasizes a God who expresses emotion, a God who is always meeting people in relationship, and changing because of that relationship.”[9]

God’s regrets are a lesson in Process Theology, a theology which teaches that God and the universe and everything in it are constantly changing together. Process theology understands that God is not a static and unchanging being, but instead is growing and evolving, alongside humanity.[10]

If God is capable of regret and repentance and change, then these things are woven into the fabric of the universe and we too are capable of regret, repentance and change.

One of the most fascinating things I found when researching this sermon is based in the Hebrew we use for these concepts that shows how they are woven together. The Hebrew word used in Torah to describe God’s regret — נחמתי nechamti — and that God later uses to mean “repent” —is the same word used elsewhere by the prophets to describe God’s offering of comfort. It may seem odd to use the same word for regret

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[9] http://www.newcaje.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/BA-Derekh-On-the-Way-A-presentation-of-Process-Theology-by-Rabbi-Bradley-Shavit-Artson.pdf

[10] https://hartman.org.il/Blogs_View.asp?Article_Id=378&Cat_Id=275&Cat_Type=

and repent and comfort in Hebrew, but this is the real key to Yom Kippur. Reflecting on our deeds and learning from our regrets is ultimately where we will find comfort. Regret, repentance and comfort are tied together. And comfort is an important part of the process: first an examination of our deeds, then regret for our mistakes —both big and small — then repentance, and finally the comfort that comes from learning from our regrets. Yom Kippur is a reminder that we can change, we are constantly changing and we can change for the better.

You can come away from Yom Kippur with a sense of comfort and satisfaction with who you are now and everything that has brought you to this point —not because you have no regrets, but because you have learned from them.

Regret is a powerful teacher.
May wrestling with your regrets teach you to learn from your mistakes.
May you find true repentance and may you change for the better.
May your repentance lead you to forgive yourself
and give you the wisdom to act differently in the future.
May you continue to grow and change.
May we all be able to say *nechamti* — I regret.
Nechamti — I repent.
Nechamti — I have found comfort.