

Kol Nidre Sermon

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Only to Grow

About 20 years ago, I gave up the chance to be a superhero. Here is what I mean by that. After college, I spent ten weeks on a NOLS course in the Pacific Northwest. NOLS is the National Outdoor Leadership School. It was a full semester's worth of wilderness leadership training with backpacking, rock climbing, canoeing, and more. So much learning. So much awe. So much rain. From the moment I arrived at the branch, fellow students were talking about whether or not they would someday apply for a coveted spot on an IC, an Instructors Course. You see, you can't help but admire NOLS Instructors. They are rockstars. Superheroes. They are strong. Capable. Courageous. Resourceful. They can build a field hospital with what they carry in their packs. They could hike from here to Mt. Everest, climb it, and be back to break the fast. They have that look that people do when they take on mountains for a living. Perfectly tanned. Absurdly fit. Calm. Cool. They can handle anything. I was in rabbinical school when I took my second NOLS course, for outdoor educators in Alaska. A few months later, I got this call from NOLS. "We want to know if you'd think about applying for an IC." "Oh," I said, "thanks for calling, but I don't think I'd be accepted," and I listed all the things I had not been

doing to prepare. “I think maybe you would,” the voice on the other end of the line said, but I didn’t really believe her. And besides, I was busy. I had plans for the summer. Rabbi things to do. I just couldn’t veer from that path. Take a chance. I don’t think it would have changed the direction of my life but dang! I could have been a rabbi *and* a superhero rockstar. Missed opportunity.

It takes the Torah only 6 chapters and 6 verses to get to the topic of regret. It is one of the very first emotions explicitly ascribed to God. Just before the flood we read, “וַיִּנְקַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאַרְצָ וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים:”

“And God regretted creating humanity on earth. It sorrowed God’s heart.” That is what regrets do. They fill us with sorrow.

Author and columnist Daniel Pink identifies four different types of regrets. The first was my problem with that NOLS course. He calls that a boldness regret. A time when we look back and wish we had been more courageous and willing to take a risk. We can recognize one of these by this language – I was too afraid to...do this... I really wanted to...do that... but I decided to play it safe. I wish I had been braver, bolder. This is a very common regret. In fact, people who don’t take a chance hold much more regret

than people who do, even if that chance does not work out.¹ It's not all measured by the outcome. There is joy in simply going after what we want.

The next type regret is what Pink calls foundational. These are the ways in which we did not lay the groundwork for a stronger future. I wish I had taken school more seriously. I wish I would have saved money throughout my career and so on. We regret not doing what would have prepared us in advance.

Then there are moral regrets. I hurt someone. I did something wrong. I violated my own values and priorities. I chose something else – instant gratification, relief from my pain, whatever it was. I let it override my morality.

And finally, connective regrets. Relationships we don't have but want to have. Or want to strengthen but don't. These regrets sound like this - I didn't reach out. I thought it was too late. I thought it would be awkward. Or painful. Or that the other person wouldn't care either way. For the most part, Pink has found in his research, those things are untrue. It's not awkward. The other person does care. Pink teaches that if there is one thing to take from the thousands and thousands of people he has spoken to about regret it is this – always reach out. Always reach out.

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_h_pink_4_kinds_of_regret_and_what_they_teach_you_about_yourself

Author Sarah Addison Allen writes, “People always say life is too short for regrets. But the truth is, it’s too long.” Emily Dickenson calls remorse, “the disease not even God can heal.” She imagines actions of the past, or inactions, lingering ghostlike at every window and every door.² Must that be so? Must we be haunted by regrets for the rest of our lives?

Psychologists have found that the easier it is for us to envision a different outcome, the more likely we are to regret the past. The contrast - between what has happened and what we believe *could have* happened – can be unbearable. Harvard University’s Health Newsletter tells the story of a British man who regularly played the same set of lottery numbers. One week he failed to get his ticket and guess what? His numbers came up. They were the winning numbers. He was haunted by regret until he took his very last breath. It was so painful to come that close and to miss. What happened? Who knows? He forgot to stop at the store that day? He slept in a few extra minutes? He didn’t take his usual route to work? One mis-step and a lifetime of regret. We can die of regret.

Or we use it to live.

The Talmud tells the following story:

² In *Remorse is Memory – Awake* (#744).

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira made a Purim feast together, and they got very drunk. Rabbah arose and slew Rabbi Zeira. The next day, Rabbah prayed for mercy, and Rabbi Zeira was given life. The next year, Rabbi Zeira said to Rabbah, “Master! Let us make a Purim feast together!” Rabbah said, “A miracle does not occur each and every hour!”

Let’s unpack that story. It starts like this - Two rabbis walk into a bar. They drink too much. Maybe they’re young and stupid. Or impulsive. Or trying to prove something. Maybe there is money or a reputation on the line. Who knows? But something goes terribly wrong and Rabbah kills Rabbi Ziera.

When Rabbah wakes up to realize what has happened, he is hit by an unbearable wave of regret. He prays with every fiber of his being. For mercy – mercy for his friend and mercy for himself. Because looking ahead he knows that he *will* be tormented by regret. For the rest of his life. Predicting all that misery, he asks mercy. You know that feeling, right? Wanting the miracle. The time machine? To press rewind for a few days or even a few minutes? When the words come out of your mouth and you just want to stuff them right back in. When you lay down at night recalling your day and cringe to think, “Did I really do that?” When you see the look on someone’s face and you know that right then, right there a breach in the relationship has formed and it’s going to take a ton of work and time to repair.

The Talmud has a wild imagination. So Rabbah gets the miracle. With apologies to all those in this room who work there, you think Disney invented that stuff? Those sparkling stars that circle around after a character has died, whether it is Anna, the Beast, Eugene, Sleeping Beauty, whoever. The music that tells us – magic *is* happening. The reprieve is being granted. The Talmud was way ahead of us. Rabbi Zeira dies. Rabbah has killed him. And he comes back to life.

But then the story changes from a fantasy into something that is. Or can be. Remarkably real. It's about a year later. Rabbi Zeira asks, "Dude. You want to have another Purim party?" Has he forgotten what happened? Rabbah, who endured just one day of excruciating regret, will not forget. "A miracle does not happen every day." Which is Talmud-speak for, "No thanks...I'm not doing that again." We can presume there was every reason to justify another Purim party - The story comes right after the commandment to drink on Purim! And, in the end the incident worked out fine. Rabbah could have called himself lucky and moved on.

But his regret worked. It did what it is supposed to do. Inform us for the sake of the future. What if every regret we've ever had is not about the past at all? If it is entirely about what comes next. What if we *do* have a time machine? We just keep pointing it in the wrong direction? Regret tells us what to do in the future.

Mindfulness meditation teacher Jack Kornfield shares this bit of wisdom, though it was another great sage, Lily Tomlin, who said it first: “Forgiveness means giving up all hope of a better past.” In order to get past regret, *we have to* be willing to forgive ourselves. Not necessarily even because we deserve it. But because there is zero chance of a better past.

Some moments in history are in fact, uncorrectable. The guy with the lottery numbers. He’s not getting that morning back to re-do. Sometimes we have no choice but to grieve. Deeply. There is no way through it but through it.

And then we can work toward forgiveness. One of the things I love so much about this season is how it normalizes our mistakes. We’re all working on the same thing. Making ourselves better. Every one of us.

OK, we didn’t take the dream job. We didn’t speak up. We didn’t pick up the phone to check on someone. We didn’t realize how much damage we were doing. We didn’t because we were too overwhelmed or too tired or too consumed with our own lives. Ok. We didn’t. We didn’t. Or maybe we did. We had to choose between two lousy outcomes so we picked one. We went for the momentary thrill. We told ourselves what we wanted to hear. We chose the path of least resistance. Ok. We did.

When I was processing one of these failures once, an advisor back in Phoenix said to me, “hmm... turns out you’re not the mashiach either.” And back on that first NOLS course, I learned an expression I’ll never forget, from Rick. My instructor. One of those superheroes. He said, “Good judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.” It is a variation of what my friend Debbie Blyn tells students, “you learn much more from a wrong answer on a test than from a lucky guess.” We are here to learn, right? We are in this lifetime to learn.

One more point about changing the past. We can’t make the past version of ourselves know everything that the present version of ourselves knows. In addition to missing out on that NOLS course, like everyone I also have more serious regrets. Deeper regrets. I can think of a few times in my life, for example, when someone I really cared about could have used support. And for all kinds of reasons, I couldn’t give it. Or I didn’t. I was closed off. Ungenerous. Small minded. I didn’t have it in me to be bigger. Five years ago. Ten years ago, I wasn’t the person that I am now. Which is actually great news. It doesn’t mitigate the damage. We all have to deal with that. But it makes me wonder who I can be five years *from* now. Ten years *from* now. The only way to get there is by getting some of it wrong. In order to get it right.

Remember Genesis 6:6? God wishing God had never created humanity? The word for regret is *vayinachem*. That word also means comfort. You can’t say “regret” in

Hebrew without going immediately to “comfort.” It’s true that the flood that God creates reflects an initial impulse to...rewrite the past... to destroy the whole project of creating our world as if it had never happened. However, even God eventually learns to settle into reality, move forward, not backward and find comfort there. That’s the meaning of the rainbow after Noah’s Ark. It symbolizes the promise never to destroy all of humanity again. It’s almost like God regrets...acting so rashly...on regret. The point of the entire story is that we all have to learn to live in the experiment. In this great laboratory of screwing up. And trying again. My friend Sander Nassen says that Judaism is the religion of second chances. I hope that’s true. I think it is.

Can we transform our mistakes so that they bring goodness to us and all those around us? Can our boldness regrets, Our foundational, moral and connective blunders? Can they point us to a better future? Can we remember what it felt like to never find time to reach out? To play it safe while we envied those who were bold? Can those memories tell us what to do next time? All of those ghosts that are hanging around our window and our doors. Can we ask them what we need to know? And then bless them as they go on their way? Can we decide that we will use every single regret to grow? Only to grow? Doing so might just make superheroes, rockstars out of us all.