

Living *With* Regrets

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It is such a joy to see you all today, and I'm so happy to welcome each of you on this beautiful morning...I love Rosh Hashana; I love the energy of so many people coming here to Har Shalom to begin a new year together, with hope and optimism and the determination to make this new year even better than the last one. I heard a story about a woman who came into shul one Shabbat morning and was greeted by a very friendly usher at the doors. He wished her a Shabbat shalom, handed her a prayerbook; and she said she'd really like to sit up in the front row of the sanctuary. "Oh no," the usher said to her, "you don't want to sit up front. You see our rabbi is really boring, and he'll put your right to sleep. Maybe you'd prefer to sit back here instead." The lady said to the usher, "Excuse me, do you know who I am?" "No," the usher said. "I am the rabbi's mother!" Oh, the usher was so embarrassed, he lowered his head in shame. He asked: "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" She said, "No." He said, "Oh thank God!"

I am so grateful that my mother is here today...she came in from Cleveland to be here on Rosh Hashana, but I did notice that she's not sitting up front...and I'm wondering which usher told her to sit all the way in the back??

As we're all sitting here thinking about how next year is going to be so much better, and we're going to be so much better, and life is going to be so much better in 5776, there is this conventional wisdom out there that tells us that the best way to live, if you really want to live the good life, just live life without any regrets. Do you know how many books there are with the words no regrets in the title: steamy romance novels, memoirs, autobiographies, self-help books, marriage improvement and parenting guides; I even found a cookbook called *No Regrets*, by the Junior League of Oregon. Amazon didn't let me view a sample page, but I can only imagine what recipes it contained. Mmm! If you Google the words "No Regrets," you'll never believe the first thing that comes up (I don't want to see anyone taking out their phones now)...It's the No Regrets Tattoo Parlor in Tempe, Arizona! Studies say that a lot of people regret tattoos after a while, but you've got to hand it to the No Regrets Tattoo Parlor for trying to preempt that remorse. There are all kinds of people out there who tell us, look forward not backward. Just

forget about everything that happened in the past and focus on the future. The social media universe offers us numerous opportunities to do just that. If you're familiar with the hashtag phenomenon on Twitter or Instagram or Facebook, you might have heard of #regretthat? Or #ohwell. Or #YOLO (you only live once). Or #noregrets. I'll share a few actual tweets from that last one:

-Live, love, laugh. This life has only a ONE way ticket, enjoy it and live it to the fullest
[#noregrets](#)

-I'm in bed watching Netflix and I have no idea what day it is [#noregrets](#)

-bat mitz sweats will continue to be a staple [of] my pajamas in college [#noregrets](#)

-I will not apologize for following my passion. It's something that doesn't happen very often.
[#noregrets](#)

-I bought five pairs of shoes this weekend [#noregrets](#)

And this is probably my favorite, and by far the most intelligent one of all:

-Get temporary tattoos [#noregrets!](#)

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Never look back unless you are planning to go that way." NY Times bestselling author Jodi Picoult wrote in her 2010 novel *House Rules*, "My dad used to say that living with regrets was like driving a car that only moved in reverse." But you know what, cars have a reverse gear for a reason. Sometimes you need to back up in order to go forward. You need to check the rearview mirror before you make a lane-change ahead of you.

Surprisingly, the name "Rosh Hashanah" does not even appear in the Torah. Did you know that? It's a name this holiday picked up much later on. One of the original names of this holiday that is in the Torah, however, is Yom Ha'Zikaron, the Day of Remembrance. Here we are dipping apples in honey for a sweet new year; asking God to inscribe us in the book of life for the new year; imploring God to bless us and judge us favorably for the new year. And yet the original name of the holiday, Yom Ha'Zikaron/the Day of Remembrance, implies that it is very much about the year that's past. The tradition tells us that God remembers all of our deeds, every single one—positive and negative, and that the process of t'shuvah, of repentance and return that

we're working on here together today is essentially an act of remembrance. What do we sing so often on these holidays? *Zochreinu le'chaim*...As you are considering our future, God; as you are contemplating the year ahead for us, please do so with regard for the past. Remember God what we've struggled with, how we've grow, and what we've accomplished. Remember our failures, but also remember our victories. Now, as we remember this past year, I am confident that there is one thing the every single one of us has in common...and that is, at some point or another, we have all experienced the feeling regret. Regret is a universal emotion. Regret is that throbbing, stinging feeling that something in the present would be better, or I would be happier now if I had done or said something different in the past. If I only would have finished that degree, I could be in a much better job now; If I only would have showed her how much I loved and appreciated her, I could have salvaged that relationship. If I only would have saved more back then, I wouldn't be in the financial mess I'm in now. If I would have known more about being a good parent years ago, I'd have done so many things differently when my kids were younger. If I didn't hit REPLY ALL, the source of so many people's regret, or if I wouldn't have hit send on that angry email, I might still have that job today! If I would have learned Hebrew when I was younger or taken my Jewish education more seriously ,I would know so much more now; I'd be able to follow along and better appreciate services. We are laden with all kinds of regrets...some small and rather insignificant, and some that occupy a whole lot of space in our hearts. I want to suggest to you today, my friends that we should not be aspiring to live a regret-free life. I don't think that's natural and I don't think that's reasonable and I don't think it's all that beneficial either. Rather, having a healthy sense of regret can be the very catalyst that can help you to become the kind of person you aspire to be in 5776.

I am amazed and fascinated by the fact that the Torah depicts none other than God expressing at various times regret for having created or done certain things. The God of the Torah is breathtakingly honest, even vulnerable. Listen to Genesis chapter 6: *Vayinachem Adonai ki asah et ha'adam*, And God regretted having made man...*vayityatzeiv el libo*... God's heart was saddened by the thought of it. This occurs just before the Flood, when the earth was filled with wickedness and injustice and violence. I imagine God like a drone, hovering over this creation gone awry and thinking "What have I done? How did this experiment fail so badly!"

Thankfully the drone spotted Noah, *ish tzadik tamim be'dorotav*, the one righteous person in his generation, and God decides not to obliterate the entire enterprise. I wonder how much regret

God would feel, hovering over the earth today... In I Samuel 15 God says, *nichamti ki himlachti et Shaul le'melech*, I regret having made Saul the king. He doesn't listen to me. He doesn't obey me. He does what he wants, not what I want. I wish I had never made him king. Now there is extensive debate among commentators ancient, medieval, and modern about what it means for an all-knowing, all-powerful God to "regret" having done anything. But the Torah speaks in human language, and it seems to want to communicate to us that if God can have regrets, if God can, so to speak live with regret, then so can we. And more importantly if God can recalibrate, realign, and revise His plans—as God does so often in the Torah, then we should be able to do so as well. *Acharei midotav shel Ha'Kadosh Baruch Hu teileichu*...we instructed to follow the attributes of God. And one of those attributes is facing up to our regrets. That's why we shouldn't be trying to forget our regrets or to live life regret-free, but to live with and constantly learn from our regrets.

But friends there's a right way and a wrong way to live with regret. The wrong way is to turn regret into a life-long punishment, a life sentence. Kathryn Schulz, in her amazing TED talk¹ on the subject identifies some rather self-destructive things we do on account of regret:

The first is denial...whatever it is we regret having said or done, we just want to make it go away. We obsess about it, lose sleep over it, can't stop thinking about it day and night, wishing it hadn't happened. But of course that is rarely possible. You can't un-speak hurtful words, or un-do a misdeed once it's occurred. The second is bewilderment. It's the gnawing question 'How could I have done that?' That sense of not even knowing yourself or the part of yourself that made that inexplicable decision or allowed those unconscionable words to leave your lips. The third is punishment. That's where we get phrases like, 'I could just kick myself.' When do you say things like that...When we just want to punish ourselves, in some cases even physically, for having said or done this terrible thing. And the fourth is perseveration. That's a great word (especially for those of you preparing to take SATs), we perseverate about it. That means we put the denial, the bewilderment, the self-flagellation all on an infinite loop. We just keep replaying it in our minds and reliving it in our hearts and over and over and over. We can't undo it; we can't unfollow it; we can't unfriend it; we can't throw money at it and make it all go away...so

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_don_t_regret_regret?language=en

we turn regret into guilt, and guilt into shame and shame into self-loathing. Just to be clear once again, that's the wrong use of regret, that's the wrong way to live with regret, my friends.

So what's the right way? What's the healthy way, the holy way to live with regret? The Rambam teaches in his magnificent *Hilchot T'shuvah*, his Laws of Repentance that the first step to achieving forgiveness is to verbally confess the sin we have committed. It's not enough to think about it, or to know it in our minds, we have to speak the words of contrition in order to make them real. That's why in recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous or even Weight Watchers for that matter, participants are encouraged to verbally share their stories about recovery, or about challenges and difficulties they've encountered along the way. Let's face it confessing is not something that comes easy to any of us. It isn't fun, it can be embarrassing, or as my kids say, awkward! So the Rambam gives us a little script to follow. Here it is: "I implore You, God, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following [insert sin here]. Behold I REGRET and am embarrassed for my deeds [Rambam was talking about regret in the 12th Century]. I promise never to repeat this act again." Now let me ask you, if you're trying to live a life of #noregrets, then how can you ever do *t'shuva*? You see for the Rambam, regret is remediation; regret is the critical ingredient to changing our behaviors in the future. If you really love someone, if you really care about a relationship, if something was meaningful or valuable to you it should hurt when it gets screwed up, and when things go wrong. If we don't want to lose other precious people in our lives; if we don't want other goals or dreams to be dashed, then the reality of regret should be a part of our lives so that we can do better and be better the next time around. The key, and Kathryn Schulz says this so beautifully, is not to hate ourselves for having regrets. Instead we should forgive ourselves for what happened and channel the feeling of regret into the absolute conviction that we can do better—that we will do better if life grants us another chance.

And I believe that this day is all about the belief that God created each one of us with the capacity to live and speak and act with goodness, with holiness, and with integrity. We call God in the *Amidah El Melech Chanun ve'Rachum*, God is the King when it comes to Compassion and Mercy. That's why we're here. That's what all these hours of prayers boil down to. Yes we sinned. Yes we all messed up...some of us really badly. But forgiveness is possible. Change is possible. In musaf—I hope you'll be here for that part—we say *Ha'zocheir l'mazkirav tovot*

zichronot, that even in the midst of all this soul searching and judgment, God doesn't ignore all the good that is in us, because our God is a God of second chances. Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England wrote: "For centuries, theologians and philosophers have been looking at religion upside down. The real phenomenon at its heart—the mystery and the miracle—is not our faith in God. It is God's faith in us." God has faith in you. And so do I. I believe that 5776 can be your best year ever, if you learn to live with your regrets rather than to pretend they don't exist. Use those regrets not to punish yourself but to guide yourself to a better life to better relationships and to better decision making in the future. I want to invite you to join me in a prayer of emancipation from unhealthy regret. You may close your eyes if it helps... Yes I am aware of the risks of asking people to close their eyes during a sermon! But I'm giving you permission! I want you to think of a regret—a really serious regret—that's sunk its hooks into your heart. We've all got them... Something that you have been perseverating about; that you have on that infinite loop of denial, bewilderment, and self-punishment. It might be a relationship that was ruined; words you'd do anything to take back; something you regret having said or done to a spouse, a child, a friend, or a coworker; a decision you just wish you could have made differently. Now that you have it in your mind, I invite you to repeat these words after me if you'd like. Remember what the Rambam said, speaking words of sincerity is what makes them real... you can repeat them out loud or quietly to yourself:

I hereby forgive and release myself

For what I could have done

For what I should have done

But what I didn't do.

I feel genuine sorrow

And I know that if given another chance

My words and my deeds will be different.

I cannot change what happened in the past

But I can and I do forgive myself now.

Beginning today,

I will stop punishing myself for my regrets

And instead commit to learning from my past

So that my future will be better.

I commit to constantly growing

Constantly learning

Constantly becoming... a better version of myself.

When you hear someone say a blessing you're supposed to respond with the word: So let's all respond to each other's prayers: Amen!

Don't ever let your regrets make you feel hopeless or powerless. Remember, God believes in you, I believe in you. Your family and friends believe in you. From the bottom of my heart I wish you a year of hope, of transformation, and of abundant blessing...I wish you the very best year yet.