

Moving Beyond Regret
Parashat Noach
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Shabbat Shalom.

Let me begin by asking a simple question that isn't so easy to answer:
Has anyone here ever regretted anything that they'd done? Anything that they were responsible for that didn't work out the way you wanted it to,
And if so, would you be willing to tell us about it?

This is a strange way to begin a dvar torah for a very simple reason.
For most of us, almost all of us, it's not easy to talk about mistakes that we've made. It's not easy to talk about things we've done that we later come to regret.

After all, as the saying goes: success has a thousand fathers (or parents); failure is an orphan.

You might be thinking: Am I going to reveal myself to whoever happens to be in shul or zooming in or watching us on livestream? It's opening up oneself to the entire world to reveal what we've done to regret. Telling everyone is ... *embarrassing* -- or, at the very least, awkward.

We're not likely to do that unless and until we're with people who we trust, people who aren't going to give us a hard time when we open up about something like this. To confess to having regret really exposes you.

This is one reason why the story of Noah in this week's parashah is so surprising. It's surprising for a bunch of reasons: Think about it: It was only ten generations earlier that the whole world was created. And suddenly -- or so it seems, for the



Torah runs through ten generations in a matter of a few verses -- God decides to destroy it. And why? Well, he tells us:

וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי רַבָּה רָעַת הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וְכָל־יִצְרָל מְחֻשָּׁבֶת לִפְּנֵי בָרַק כָּל־הַיּוֹם:

ה' כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ וַיִּתְּעַצֵּב אֶל־לִבּוֹ: וַיִּנָּחֶם

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֲמָתָה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בָּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
כִּי עָשִׂיתִם: כִּי נִחַמְתִּי

וְנָח מִצָּא חַן בְּעֵינָי ה'

“And God saw how great was humanity’s evil on the earth, and how every scheme of their heart’s devising was only perpetually and entirely evil. **And God regretted that God had made humans on earth**, and God’s heart was saddened. And God said, “I will blot out from the earth the people whom I created — humans together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; **for I regret that I made them.**”

Twice we are told that God says I regretted that God made human beings. Only Noah, we are told, found favor in the eyes of God.

Why were the other people destroyed? They weren’t behaving properly; certainly not as well as God had expected or hoped that they’d behave. God *regretted* having created them.

Think about it: However we imagine God, we probably picture a being that is, well, superior to us. We often think of God as **omnipotent** and **omniscient**. God is all-powerful, and all-knowing.

And yet, in our Torah, the Bible teaches us that God comes along and expresses *regret* over what He’s done???

Does such a thing make sense at all?

Kathryn Schulz is a staff writer for the *New Yorker* magazine. For a time, she focused a lot of attention in her writing on making mistakes and feeling regret. About ten years ago, she gave a TED talk about something she'd done that she deeply regretted. It wasn't something she'd done that hurt someone else, or even something that had hurt someone else's feelings. It was something that impacted only herself. She had gone and gotten a tattoo.

In her talk she speaks about the fact this is not at all unusual. Twenty-five percent of the people between the ages of 16 and 50 who get a tattoo come eventually to regret it.

In her case, it was a little different from the norm, because she regretted it not a *year* later or a *month* later or even a *day* later.

She regretted it the minute she walked out of the tattoo parlor.

In researching this topic she came to see that not only was she not alone in regretting this particular thing that she did, but she found that regret itself is virtually universal.

Not everyone can experience regret. There are certain people, we call them sociopaths, who in fact are incapable of regret. They are perhaps neurologically incapable of experiencing regret. Just about everyone else is capable of it and experiences it.

People can regret a wide variety of things. But studies have been done exploring what people regret the most. They have found that what people regret the most are not things like getting a tattoo or not getting a tattoo, it's not about whether I bought a Prius instead of a Subaru. It's not about those kinds of issues.

What do you think is the number one thing people are regretful about?

It is that they did not pursue more **education**. It's that they did not get the education they wanted and needed ultimately to accomplish what they wanted to

achieve in life. That's related to the number two reason: **career**. The third, maybe not surprising basis for regret is **romance**. People often have regrets about their romantic choices.

Now, thinking about regret and thinking about expressing regret can bring us an unpleasant set of associations. It really does feel *bad* to be regretful and it feels bad to *confess* that one is regretful. You would think then that it's something we would try to avoid.

Katherine Shultz points out that in our society and in many situations, we find ourselves in social situations, work situations, etc., in which we are taught not to express regret, not to confess error, not to own something that we have done that has not gone well. Perhaps that increases our sense of anxiety about expressing regret. She points out in her book, entitled *Being Wrong*, that being wrong is not a sign of intellectual inferiority. In fact, she says, *it is the capacity to err that is crucial to human cognition*.

It was Einstein who when asked about this responded, "if we knew what we were doing, we wouldn't call it research."

Based on this, Katherine Shultz comes to an additional conclusion, namely, that **we should not regret regret**. In fact, we should be *grateful* that we have the ability to regret, because that means that we have the ability and maybe even the desire to do things differently, in the future. We have the ability to change. Without the ability to regret, we cannot become better people.

The term that the Bible uses for regret is *l'hinachem*, which is related to the word *l'nachem*, which means to console.

What's the connection between **regret** and **consolation**?

If in fact we feel regret, and that regret is channelled in a proper way within us, it can lead to consolation. We can feel consoled regarding the fact that we made a mistake and are committed to doing things differently going forward.

And so we see that an important -- though not necessarily obvious -- message comes to us from the story of Noah's Ark and the Great Flood. It comes from recognizing that the story concludes with God admitting that God blew it. God didn't quite accomplish what God had intended. The world didn't turn out the way God wanted it to.

If God can *make mistakes* -- and if God can *admit* that God made mistakes, and *regret* what God has done -- then we can too.

Note, however, that God doesn't start completely from scratch. God saves a remnant. God saves the paragon of virtue from that generation and works with that paragon to move on from there.

There is a lesson here too. The lesson is that when we experience regret, when we alter our trajectory, when we move forward in a different direction, it's not the same as denying whatever happened; it is not the same as pretending that we didn't make a mistake. *No, we build on who we have been, to become who we are becoming.* We live with and move through the period and process of regret, moving to become someone who builds on that to become a better and more authentic version of ourselves.

There are second chances. This is a key message of our parashah.

The challenge, it seems, for all of us, is to take note of those second chances -- and to rouse the courage to pursue them.

Shabbat Shalom.