

No Regerts? by Rabbi Steven Lindemann
Kol Nidre-2021

One of my favorite TV commercials opens with a big, burly, biker-type getting a tattoo. The artist is a wifty looking young woman, who is eating a Milky Way candy bar while she works on his arm. Curious to see how it's going, he looks down at the work in progress and in surprise, reads aloud what she has written: "No Regerts?" "Sorry," says the young woman, "I was eating a Milky Way."

Now, let me apologize, right away, for mentioning a candy bar, as we begin a 24 hour fast. Sorry. But I share this with you because Yom Kippur is all about regerts, or rather, regrets, and they go way beyond a misspelled tattoo.

Kol Nidrey sets the tone for the Day of Atonement by expressing regrets for vows, oaths and promises that have gone unfulfilled over this past year. The translation in our Mahzor doesn't do justice to the scope of this prayer. *Kol Nidrey*, *Ve-eAsaery*, *VaHarmey*, *V'Konamey*, *V'Khinuyey*, *V'kinusey*, *U-Shavuot*—each one of these has a particular nuance. A *Neder*, according to the Talmud, could be either a monetary pledge to the Temple or a prohibition taken upon oneself; *Asarey*—involves renunciation of some food or activity (like giving up chocolate or watching the Eagles, God-forbid); *Haramey*—references a ban on benefiting financially from some sort of questionable transaction ; *Konamey* are obligation—something we owe, like taxes; *Kinuyey* are promises we have made to ourselves; *Kinusey* are obligations we owe because of some misdeed—like a fine (ever throw away a parking ticket?) and finally, *Sh'vuot*—Swearing an oath to God (I promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Did we? Always?).

Perhaps these ancient terms do not resonate with us, as they did at the time of Talmud. Rabbi Max Arzt, who was a Vice Chancellor of JTS and Professor of Practical Theology, wrote a classic book about the High Holidays, titled “Justice and Mercy.” In it, he summarizes all the complex nuances of Kol Nidrey in one simple sentence: an expression of “Our high resolves and low achievements.” “No Regerts?” Of course, when we frame it this way, we recognize that we all have regrets.

And then, throughout Yom Kippur, *Al Heyt*, recited again and again, a series of confessions which suggests a whole catalogue of regrets.

Al Heyt She’Hatanu L’Fanecha B’Dibur Peh—For the sins of corrupt speech, gossip, foolish talk, mocking words. Which of us doesn’t regret something we’ve said in the past year?

Al Heyt She’Hatanu L’Fanecha B’Ma-akhal U-V’Mishteh—For sins of eating and drinking. (No regrets?)

Al Heyt She’Hatanu L’Fanecha B’Imutz HaLev—For the sins of hardening our hearts, acting without thinking, in business, in politics, in social settings.

Al Heyt She’Hatanu L’Fanecha—For insincerity, disrespect, haughtiness, effrontery, envy. For *Sinat Hinam*—senseless hatred. I hope not, but maybe?

V’Al Kulam Eloha S’lihot—For all of these, O God of forgiveness, forgive us, pardon us, grant us atonement.

Yes, of course, we have regrets.

And, the Mahzor offers another litany—*Ashamu, Bagadnu, Gazalmu*—We have transgressed, we have robbed, we have stolen, we have slandered, we have oppressed, we have....wait a minute. Who us? Me? You? It’s a bit much, no? When we stop chanting the Hebrew and actually read this, our natural defenses set

in, and instead of *Ai, yai--yai, yai*—in our mind’s ear, we hear “I didn’t do that.” Yes, of course, we know the interpretation that says this is about communal responsibility, that’s why the Hebrew is in the plural. Okay, still, **I** didn’t do it.

But maybe it’s not these sins of commission that bring the greatest regret. Consider this poem by Marguerite Wilkinson. It’s titled “Guilty.”

“I never cut my neighbor’s throat;
My neighbor’s gold I never stole;
I never spoiled his house and land,
But God have mercy on my soul!

For I am haunted night and day
By all the deeds I have not done;
O unattempted loveliness!
O costly valor never won!”

In this context, the response “I didn’t do it” is a poor defense. Who among us, here tonight, does not have the type of regrets referenced by the poet? The appeal from some worthwhile cause to which we considered making a donation, but didn’t do it. The Tzedakah we meant to give. Didn’t do it. The offensive words we overheard somebody use to malign some minority that we could have, should have, called out, but we were reluctant to create a confrontation, so we didn’t do it. I got really tired of hearing my barber complain about the immigrants running down his neighborhood, and I thought about saying something, but I didn’t. I just found a new barber. (And now we discuss Cecily Tynan’s shoes.)

About a month ago I was in a crowded airport waiting for a flight and the person next to me was wearing his mask below his nose. I was tempted to tell him to pull it up...but I didn’t. Instead, I just moved to a different seat. More troubling: the anti-Semitic remark or article or the unfair critique of Israel heard or read in the media. How many of you have thought about writing a response, even authored

one in your mind, but when it came to putting it on paper or in an e-mail, didn't do it? Confession: I still read Jane's New York Times. Of course, this is a time for confession. So, let's get more personal. On this night of Kol Nidrey, when we seek comfort from a forgiving God, how many of us could have made a call or visit to somebody who was in distress or just needed to hear a kind word...but we didn't do it. No regrets?

Yom Kippur is clearly a time to reflect upon regrets. I think the COVID pandemic has added an entirely different dimension to this. First of all, and most disturbing, there are the laments of those who have resisted vaccinations and then gotten COVID. Front page headline: Quote- "After They Spurned Vaccines, Covid Crept In. Then, Regret" –Unquote. Article:

A mother of four sits by her husband's bedside in the intensive care unit and taps out this message on her phone: "We did not get the vaccine. I read all kinds of things about the vaccine and it scared me. So I made the decision and prayed about it and got the impression that we would be OK." They were not. Now, she adds her voice to a growing group the paper labels "the remorseful." No gloating "I told you so," here, just another sad story. How many of you have lost family or friends, or know those who have? All of us, I am sure. But to have misinformation and deliberate disinformation out there creating confusion is truly disturbing. Regrettable. (NYT, July 31, 2021)

The pandemic has brought home to all of us a sense of vulnerability—the fragility of life. The uncertainties we can usually keep at the fringes of our

consciousness, now creep into our thoughts making us more contemplative. Quarantines, lockdowns, social distancing, attending services on Zoom and Livestream rather than risking gathering in large groups, avoiding even meals with extended family--it all leads to increased reflection on what is truly important in life, doesn't it? A cartoon I saw recently attempts to capture this with some sardonic humor. A man lying in a hospital with his wife sitting at his bedside says to her: "I wish I had spent more time answering my e-mail!" No regrets!?

A couple of months ago, Jane and I were sitting in the den one evening, just the two of us, yet again. I was watching TV, and Jane was reading the Book Review section of her NY Times, when she suddenly called out, "Hey, Steven, listen to this." It's about a book titled "The Midnight Library," by Matt Haig. Listen:

Nora Seed's life has been full of misery and regret. She feels she has let everyone down, including herself. She is estranged from her brother, she's distanced from friends, she's lost her job, and her cat. But things are about to change. When she finds herself in the Midnight Library, she has a chance to make things right.

The books in the Midnight Library enable Nora to live as if she had done things differently. Each one contains a different life, a possible world in which she made different choices that played out in an infinite number of ways, affecting everyone she knew as well as many people she never met. (The largest and heaviest volume is the Book of Regrets). With the help of an old friend, she can undo the decisions she has made, but the library and she, herself, are in extreme danger. Before time runs out, she must answer the ultimate question: "What is the best way to live?" (Book Jacket)

Then, Jane looks up at me and says: "Sounds like sermon material." So, I read the book, and here we are. Kol Nidrey, Yom Kippur—this is our Midnight Library. Two books are open—*Sefer HaZiknronot* and *Sefer HaHayim*—the Book

of Remembrance and the Book of Life. And who is our old friend? God, who gives us the power to choose. So, are there entries in the Book of Remembrance that you regret? Would you like to rewrite some of them in your Book of Life? Before time runs out, we must all answer that ultimate question: “What is the best way to live?”

In the *Midnight Library*, Nora tries on alternative life paths, as a glaciologist, a pop musician, an innkeeper. In some she achieves great success and even fame, but loses relationships that mean so much to her. In others, she keeps the relationships, but does not have success professionally. Each life path seems to bring its own regrets. Now, I’m not going to tell you how the novel ends, and none of us knows how the Book of Life will turn out. But I will tell you that in “*The Midnight Library*,” just as we read in the Mahzor, compassion, forgiveness and love all play a role. And let me also share one intriguing passage, from the book:

Nora asks, her friend, the librarian: “Can’t you guide me?”

And the librarian responds: “I could read you a poem. Librarians like poems.”

And then she quotes Robert Frost. “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-/ I took the road less traveled by,” And that has made all the difference...” And then her friend, and guide says: “What if there are more than two roads diverging in the wood? What if there are more roads than trees? What if there is no end to the choices you could make? What would Frost do then?” (p. 194)

What would you do?

Erma Bombeck, the great humorist, newspaper columnist, and author of 15 books, was asked how she would live her life differently, if she could live it all over again. She offered her response in a column that later became an illustrated book. Here’s some of what she says:

Instead of wishing away nine months of pregnancy and complaining about the shadow over my feet, I'd have cherished every minute of it and realized that the wonderment growing inside me was to be my only chance in life to assist God in a miracle.

I would never have insisted the car windows be rolled up on a summer day because my hair had just been teased and sprayed.

I would have invited friends over to dinner even if the carpet was stained and the sofa faded.

I would have taken the time to listen to my grandfather ramble about his youth.

I would have sat cross-legged on the lawn with my children and never worried about grass stains.

I would have cried and laughed less while watching television ... and more while watching real life.

I would have eaten less cottage cheese and more ice cream.

I would have gone to bed when I was sick, instead of pretending the Earth would go into a holding pattern if I weren't there for a day.

When my child kissed me impetuously, I would never have said, "Later. Now, get washed up for dinner."

There would have been more I love yous ... more I'm sorrys ... more I'm listenings ... but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute of it ... look at it and really see it ... try it on ... live it ... exhaust it ... and never give that minute back until there was nothing left of it."

What choices will you make here in our midnight library? During this Yom Kippur? What is the best way to live? What is best way for **you** to live?

Hold on to those questions for a few minutes more and let me tell you two quick stories. Perhaps you have heard them before, but they are worth repeating.

Reb Zusha, the great Chassidic master, (whom many considered a Tzadik) lay crying on his bed. His students, seeing the end of their teacher's life was near, sought to comfort him. "Rebbe," they asked, "Rebbe, why are you so sad? After all the mitzvahs and good deeds you have done, you will surely get a great reward in heaven!"

"I'm afraid!" said Zusha. "Because when I get to heaven, I know God's not going to ask me 'Why weren't you more like Moses?' or 'Why weren't you more like King David?' I'm afraid that God will ask 'Zusha, why weren't you more like Zusha?' And then what will I say?!"

You see, even the Tzadik had his regrets. Which of us achieves our full potential, as human beings or as Jews? No regrets?

The second story is about Louis Brandeis.

He was born to Jewish immigrant parents in Kentucky, in 1856, and he grew up without any formal Jewish religious involvement. By age 20, he was already at the head of his class at Harvard law school, where he was no stranger to anti-Semitism. Students and professors were constantly saying things to him like, "Brandeis, you're a really smart guy! You could go far in life if you were not a Jew. Why don't you convert?"

In his final year of school, Brandeis's brilliance had become indisputable. He had to be invited to join the Law School's honor society, despite his Jewish background. This was the first time that the elite organization had ever extended an invitation to a Jew, and they were hopeful he would see the error of his ways and renounce Judaism.

On the evening of his induction, Brandeis took the podium and gazed out upon his audience. He began this way: "I regret that I was born a Jew." The room exploded with noise as his fellow students erupted in enthusiastic cheering. "Finally, he has seen our point," you could hear the crowd murmur. And then, when the furor finally died down, Brandeis continued: "As I say, I regret that I was born a Jew. But only because I wish I had the privilege of choosing Judaism on my own." (As I heard it from R. Yaakov Rosenberg; it may be urban legend.)

Brandeis, never regretted his Jewish identity; what he regretted was not having acted upon it, until he was forced to choose. He went on to become a leader of the American Zionist Movement and was eventually appointed to the Supreme Court. In a speech to a Rabbinic Convention, in 1915, he said: "Let no American imagine that Zionism is inconsistent with patriotism. Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent." (Zionist Ideas, pp. 128-129)

How many of us are prepared to take a strong public stand against anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in this country? You could support the Anti-Defamation League, or the American Jewish Congress. You could make a contribution to Hillel to fight anti-Zionism on the college campus. You could become a member of AIPAC, buy an Israel bond (which you will have a chance to do in just a few moments, as well as supporting our Masorti Movement in Israel), you can join the TBS trip to Israel, in March. There are so many ways to express Jewish identity. What place will Jewish practice and Jewish values have in your life, this year? Will you be here for a class or a Shabbat service? We like seeing you...even in a mask. Any one of these choices will make a difference in your book of life and in the lives of others. And,

of course, we all need to remember the poet's caution and confession: "O unattempted loveliness! O costly valor never won." "I didn't do it?"

Nora Seed leaves the Midnight Library with a new perspective on her life. She also comes away with a bit of wisdom that her friend the librarian repeats several times: the objective is not to fully understand life (who among us ever does?); the objective is to live life, as best, as fully as we can.

Is there a pathway through life that is without regrets? The poet, the novel, the stories, the Mahzor, the pandemic, the personal ruminations all make that answer clear. But, just as surely, the regrets that we come here to confess on this Day of Atonement themselves provide profoundly important guidance for choosing a life path. That's why Maimonides maintains that regret is essential to Teshuvah.

Kol Nidrey, Yom Kippur—here, in the Midnight Library, with the Book of Remembrance and the Book of Life open--No Regerts? ...Time to choose how we will live in the year ahead.