Early this summer I (and most likely most of you) thought that the worst of this damnable pandemic was in the rearview mirror. I hoped that I could put to rest the anguished memories of those early weeks of this plague. Giving up hugs. Covid refugees fleeing cities. The horrible fear of making loved ones ill. Isolating from friends and family. An apocalyptic vision of cemetery workers in hazmat suits. Two months ago, I was cautiously optimistic – naively I now know – that the "worst of times" was over.

As gut wrenchingly difficult as it was a year ago, I find myself even more emotional recently hearing the regret of so many because they, or a loved one, got ill because they chose to not be vaccinated. Michael Freedy, a 38-year-old father of five from Las Vegas, died in late July. His last text message to his fiancée? "I should have gotten the damn vaccine." Mindy Greene is a woman in Utah who decided against getting the vaccine. Then her husband was hospitalized and put on a ventilator. Watching him, she said, "I will always regret that (decision)." Steve Sechler is a healthy 43-year-old from Nashville who got Covid-19 and was admitted to the hospital in May. Now out of the ICU, he is still on oxygen, unable to walk and maybe needing a lung transplant. "I know that people want their freedom. I know that there's a point of contention," he messaged out, "But I'm telling you, do not end up like me. You will regret it."

I bring up these stories not just to encourage vaccinations (which I do), but to focus on the notion of *regret* as a powerful and necessary human emotion – a feeling that many seek to avoid, but Yom Kippur offers to us as the doorway to a well-lived life. After someone dies, I occasionally hear some relative of the deceased say, with some pride, that they have no regrets in the relationship. As admirable as that is, I sure hope that most of us are self-reflective enough to not think our good relationships offers us a free pass from living without regret. More than that, Yom Kippur teaches us that a life lived without remorse is one that is not only an unexamined life, but one that is unfulfilled.

Witness so much of what we say on this day. We recite an alphabet of contrition – אשמנו בגדנו *ashamnu, bagaddnu* … "we have done wrong, we have betrayed." Page after page we express regret in a litany of חטא על *al chet* - not only for what we did, but we might have done and chose not to. Indeed, for a full 40 day period before Yom Kippur Jewish traditions urge us to engage in self-reflection. Our "accounting of the soul" (חשבון הנפש *cheshbon ha'nefesh*) is about seeing the good within, but it is also being honest and forthright about how we missed the mark – with ourselves, our loved ones, in the community and in bettering the world.

Five years ago, a production company put a blackboard out on the street in lower Manhattan with the words, "Write your biggest regret."[1] As hardened as others think New Yorkers are, lots of people stopped to jot something down. They wrote "the time I wasted", "never going after my dreams", "burning bridges", "never seeming to find the time", "not getting involved", "not being a better friend." Almost all were about dreams not pursued. At the end of the day, the producers erased the board and wrote the words, "Clean Slate."

As tempting as it may be to think we get a "clean slate", we know deep in our heart and soul that we cannot erase the wrongs we've done. What we've done is there. Those wrongs can (if we are lucky) be forgiven but can never be (nor should they be) forgotten. In fact, it is the very act of remembering what we did and feeling badly about it – it is the regret itself – that can transform us.

Rabbi Joseph Solevetchik taught that "Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before."[2] And when you and I *do* recall where we missed the mark, when we might have spoken up and stayed silent, a space is made for regret.

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[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R45HcYA8uRA&t=4s

[2] Pinchas H. Peli, *Soloveitchik On Repentance: The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, 254-255.

It's important to note that remorse or regret is not the same thing as guilt. Allow me to explain through the story of a young woman who went to her psychiatrist.

"Doctor, she pleaded, "you have to help me. Whenever I go out to a restaurant I drink too much and eat all kinds of foods I know aren't good for me."

"I see," nodded the psychiatrist. "And you, no doubt, want me to strengthen your will power and resolve in this matter."

"Absolutely not!" exclaimed the woman. "I want you to fix it, so I won't feel guilty and depressed afterward."

Guilt, therefore, is the distress about what is past that burdens and debilitates. Remorse is the shame about what we did that is the prerequisite for change.

I wish those who refuse to be vaccinated during this pandemic were not far more prone to getting sick, being hospitalized, and dying in record numbers. But what I truly hope is that their regret will motivate those who survive to do what so clearly protects them - and us all. The goal, in short, is not to die with regret but to live … and to live through and beyond it. That is the goal of *teshuvah*, an inner change, which is our focus on Yom Kippur – to acknowledge our wrongs, to regret them and then to take the steps to change, so that we can feel proud about the life we live, comfortable with way we relate to those we care about and satisfied with what we are doing to better the world.

One ancient *midrash* tells how a philosopher once said to Rabban Gamliel, the leading rabbi of 2000 years ago, "God is a great artist, but there was so much raw material with which the world could be created." "What," Rabban Gamilel asked, "was it that was there?" "It's in your Torah," the philosopher retorted, "Chaos, void, darkness, water, wind and the depths."[3] That is what this day asks of us – not to expect a life of rainbows and unicorns – but to make

[3] Genesis Rabbah 1:9

something beautiful out of the darkness, our human failings, the disappointments and "what if's", the complicated, messy, and chaotic reality we all face.

Last year's best-selling novel *The Midnight Library* by Matt Haig tells the story of a woman named Nora Seed for whom nothing seems to go right. Stuck in her sadness, Nora decides that death is better than life – and so she commits suicide. She awakes in the Midnight Library, a place between life and death where there are an endless number of books, each containing the story of a life she might have had if she had made different choices.

Before Nora can choose an alternative life story, however, she is first asked by the librarian to list her regrets. Her regrets lead her, then, to reflect on what she wishes had not happened or how she might have chosen a different path. In the novel Nora gets the magical opportunity to live out those different lives, to see what might have been. Time and again, however, she comes to understand that no life is without some regret. More than that, Nora realizes that all those lives – all the possible things she might have done and choices she could have made - are there within her. All she has to do is move beyond the regret … and just be alive. Speaking through Nora, Matt Haig suggests:

> It is easy to mourn the lives we aren't living. Easy to wish we'd developed other talents, said yes to different offers. Easy to wish we'd worked harder, loved better, handled our finances more astutely, been more popular … It is easy to regret, and keep regretting, *ad infinitum*, until our time runs out.
>
> But it is not lives we regret not living that are the real problem. It is the regret itself. It's the regret that makes us shrivel and wither and feel like our own and other people's worst enemy.
>
> We can't tell if any of those other versions would have been better or worse. Those lives are happening, but [*this* is the life] … that is the happening we have to focus on.

As we reflect on these past 18 months there certainly is plenty to regret and much to curse – where we might travelled to sooner, what we could have said to someone before circumstances pulled us even further apart, how we could have been a bit less careless. על חטא שחטאנו לפניך *Al chet she'chetanu* – for all the

missed opportunities, the things we said and the opportunities we refused to take. על חטא שחטאנו לפניך *Al chet she'chetanu* – for the potential of each day being alive we let slip through our hands.

This day, however, offers us the gift of using our regret to do things differently, and be reborn into the possibility of each day. In the Torah this morning God sets before us life and death, the blessing and the curse. "Choose life", we are told. Not the perfect life. Not a life without headaches or hassles. But a life that we, like God, create out of the darkness, the empty spaces in our hearts and souls, the daily missing the mark and the chaos.

Let Yom Kippur move us, then, not to live with regret … but to embrace our regret and through it, to live.

Thanks to Rabbi Amanda Greene for ideas in this sermon and inspiring me with her life.