

**Yom Kippur Morning 5782**  
**Yes Regrets**  
**Rabbi Karen S. Citrin**

I am happy to share that I was able to find a little time to read for pleasure this summer. I hope you did as well. I was inspired by a novel that I read entitled, *The Midnight Library* by British author Matt Haig (2020).

In this story, we meet protagonist Nora Seed. Her life has been full of misery and regret, and she feels she has let everyone down, including herself. She decides to end her life, yet something happens, and she finds herself in a library, where she has a chance to live as if she had done things differently. She encounters her childhood school librarian there, a woman who had shown her kindness in her younger days. The librarian explains, “Between life and death there is a library. And within that library, the shelves go on forever. Every book provides a chance to try another life you could have lived. To see how things would be if you had made different choices...” She asks Nora, “Would you have done anything different, if you had the chance to undo your regrets?”

As Nora stunningly witnesses the moving shelves of books, her childhood librarian Mrs. Elm continues to explain how every life contains millions of decisions, some big and some small. Every time one decision is made, outcomes differ, which lead to further variations. All the books on the shelves are portals to all the possible lives Nora could be living. They are not pasts, only present and ongoing future. The Midnight Library is in-between; it is not life or death. At this point Nora notices that all the books look the same except for one, which is grey not green. And it is very heavy. Mrs. Elm illuminates, “Every book in here except one is a version of your life. This library is yours.” “Except one?” asks Nora. “This one?” “Yes, that one. It’s something you have written without ever having to type a word. This book is the source of all your problems, and the answer to them, too. It is called, my dear, *The Book of Regrets*... Every regret you have ever had, since the day you were born, is recorded here. I now give you permission to open it.”

Haig’s intriguing story got me thinking about regret, choices, and possibility. What if each of us had a personal librarian to guide us through our own Book of Regrets?

The origin of the English word regret comes from Old French meaning “to look back with distress or sorrowful longing.” “A wish that something had or had not happened.”<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, it’s not uncommon to hear phrases like: “If I could do it all over again, I wouldn’t change a thing.” Or, “I’ve lived a life of no regrets. I never look back, only forward.” These are nice sentiments, but not to be taken seriously. We all have regrets. Regret is a common and familiar emotion. Especially this past year during the pandemic. I’m guessing that we all have a lot to look back on with distress or sorrowful longing. So many missed experiences and opportunities.

Even in normal times, there is a lot that we can learn from regret. On this Yom Kippur morning, I would like to explore several ways of understanding regret. How can regret help us become

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<sup>1</sup> Webster’s Dictionary

better people and enter the New Year feeling a little less weighted down and more hopeful about the future? How can we move from *no* regrets to *yes* regrets?!

Author Brene Brown captures this shift in thinking well. She writes, “I’ve found regret to be one of the most powerful emotional reminders that change and growth are necessary.... Like all emotions, regret can be used constructively or destructively, but the wholesale dismissal of regret is wrongheaded and dangerous.” ‘No regrets’ she continues, “doesn’t mean living with courage, it means living without reflection. To live without regret is to believe that you have nothing to learn, no amends to make, and no opportunity to be braver with your life. I’m not suggesting that we have to live with regret, but I do think it’s important to allow ourselves to experience and feel it.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, regret does not need to be negative, associated with shame or guilt. It is courageous reflection. It is an admission of fallibility. Regret is opening our hearts and minds to a better path forward. For kids and teens listening, while regret may seem like an adult word, psychologists actually say that it is good to learn at a young age. It is beneficial to cultivate some degree of sadness and recognize a mistake made or a behavior that you would like to change. Regret can lead to a “growth mindset,” an understanding that we can grow from an experience. Psychological research shows that feeling regret can lead to making safer choices and can result in children acting more kindly. How much more so for adults.

One scientific study references “twelve life domains,” or twelve categories of regret: career, community, education, parenting, family, finance, friends, health, leisure, romance, spirituality, and self. Their findings show that the greater perceived opportunity within life domains evokes more intense regret... People’s biggest regrets are a reflection of where in life they see their greatest opportunities; that is, where they see tangible prospects for change, growth, and renewal.<sup>3</sup>

Judaism of course understood this contemporary thinking thousands of years ago. Regret is an essential component of Yom Kippur. In his Medieval Code of Law, the *Mishnah Torah*, Maimonides spelled out six steps of *teshuvah*, complete turning:

1. Recognize and stop doing the action
2. Regret the action
3. Confess the action
4. Apologize
5. Make amends
6. Determine not to repeat the action

It is a package deal. Confession without regret is empty. Reconciliation without regret is simply a band-aid. Regret is essential to healing broken relationships. We cannot let regret become an overwhelming stumbling block. It requires action and change.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stop-saying-you-have-no-regrets\\_n\\_560d6e53e4b0dd85030b136c](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/stop-saying-you-have-no-regrets_n_560d6e53e4b0dd85030b136c)  
& Interview for “SuperSoul Sunday”

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2394712/>

The third century philosopher, Plotinus, defined repentance as the task to constantly re-make yourself in the divine image, in his words: “Withdraw into yourself and if you do not like what you see, act as a sculptor. Cut away here, smooth there, make this line lighter, this one purer. Never cease carving until there shines out from you the Godlike sphere of character.”<sup>4</sup> What a beautiful image of how we can shape missing pieces in our lives into holy possibility.

Throughout this day of Yom Kippur, we recite our communal litany of regrets aloud. All our missed marks, all the should haves and could haves. We will say the words in the prayerbook, but will you take a moment to consider the regrets in your life book? My colleague Rabbi Amanda Greene teaches, “Today isn’t about hiding from our regrets or dwelling in them – it is about transforming them.”

The Hebrew word for regret offers one other lens. In biblical Hebrew, *nachem* means both regret and comfort. This may seem strange, but our tradition connects regret with comfort. With sincere regret, we can gain a sense of comfort, as it points the way towards a different future, a different ending to our story. Poet David Whyte adds, “To regret fully is to appreciate how high the stakes are in a human life.”<sup>5</sup>

I have been ruminating about regret lately. As some of you know from personal experience, and as the novel *The Midnight Library* affirms, sometimes it takes an end of life experience to truly reflect on regrets and what matters most. I have shared with some of you that over the summer my sister and I have been managing our stepfather’s health care, after he was diagnosed with ALS in May. On Rosh HaShanah, we made the difficult decision for him to enter hospice care. With the timing of things beyond control, I have been sitting by his bedside throughout these *aseret y’mei teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance. I witnessed the outpouring of love, visits, emails, and texts from family and friends.

Although I don’t know for sure, it strikes me that my stepfather is not weighed down by regret as his life ends. This does not mean that he didn’t make poor decisions or experience sorrow in life, he did. A couple weeks ago we were discussing 4 letter words to describe his declining situation. While my sister and I verbalized certain ones that I cannot say here, he wrote down on his tablet: LOVE. Joe’s actions and incredible kindness continue to shine through this ultimate moment of sculpting life and death. This experience has made me think about my own days, and how as a rabbi I can help guide you through yours. How we face regrets in life so that they are not a burden at the end?

The Talmud teaches that when a person comes before the day of Divine judgment at the end of life, he is asked six questions: “Did you deal honestly in business? Did you set times for studying Torah? Did you produce a legacy? Did you hope for and work toward redemption? Did you seek wisdom and discern one thing from another? And finally, Did you live in awe of Heaven?”<sup>6</sup> These questions are God’s bucket list. Reminders of the most essential things that we should do in life in order to be able to look back without dwelling on regret.

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<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins in *Yom Kippur Readings*

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jul/25/david-whyte-ideas-modern-living-regret>

<sup>6</sup> Talmud Tractate Shabbat 31a

The questions are important, but each of us will answer them differently. The important thing is to ask the questions now and not wait. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke offered sound advice: “I want you, as much as you can... to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not seek the answers that cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”<sup>7</sup>

And so we return to the image of the book. The books on the moving shelves in *The Midnight Library*. If only Nora could have heeded Rilke’s advice. Perhaps you are wondering which parts of her Book of Regrets Nora chose to dwell on? And which books, which other versions of her life she chose to pull off the shelves? I don’t want to give the whole story away. I will tell you that over time her Book of Regrets became lighter. She experiences love and pain. She learns gratitude. She wonders if her librarian is God. She says, “We only need to be one person. We only need to feel one existence. We don’t have to *do* everything in order to *be* everything, because we are already infinite... Yesterday it was impossible for me to accept my life as it is now. And yet today, that same messy life seems full of hope. Potential. The impossible, I suppose, happens via living.” Her character holds up a mirror for how to move from no regrets to yes regrets. That is how she becomes okay.

Near the end of the novel, Mrs. Elm hands Nora a blank volume and an orange plastic fountain pen. “You’ll need this,” she says. “This one isn’t already written. You have to start this.” What a powerful Jewish idea. During this season, we cling to the liturgy and poetry of the Book of Life, the book is that is open for us to write our own chapters. We get to write about our messy imperfections, mistakes and regrets, core values, hopes and wishes. I have always loved this comforting image each year during the High Holy Days.

Today, our bodies hungry, our souls bare, we let go of what we want to leave behind. As aspiring angels, we pray to be inscribed, even sealed, into *b’Sefer Chayim*, the Book of Life, so that our lives may shine brightly with meaning and with love. We say, “*G’mar chatimah tovah*” – this Yom Kippur, may our souls be inscribed and sealed in God’s Book of Life.

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<sup>7</sup> Letters to a Young Poet, in *The Seven Questions You’re Asked in Heaven*, Dr. Ron Wolfson, 1903