

Taxi! Taxi!: Driving Around with Regret

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5780 – 2019

I've always enjoyed the music of Harry Chapin. I love how his songs play out real stories of real people in all their frailty, with all their flaws, with all their regret. One of those songs is "Taxi" from Chapin's 1972 debut album. In the song Harry is a taxi driver in San Francisco driving in the rain. An elegantly-dressed lady hails his cab and gets in, her long dress sopping wet. As the ride progresses, each of them realizes that they know one another – old flames from their youth. They had parted ways to follow their dreams, Sue longing for the spotlight of stardom as an actress and Harry hoping to learn to fly and become a pilot. Now in their present lives, they both realize that life has a way of not going as planned. The only acting Sue is doing is pretending she is happy in her marriage, and the only flying Harry is doing is driving a taxi while getting stoned. The song captures the angst of realizing he still has a flame flickering inside of him but he has just had to settle for what came about. He sings: "Oh, I've got something inside me/ Not what my life's about/ 'Cause I've been letting my outside tide me / Over 'til my time, runs out."

The taxicab is a kind of cultural symbol for us and holds a prevalent place in our psyches. It features prominently in movies and television. The taxi often picks up someone in the rain or after an argument. Oftentimes the person getting into the taxi is leaving a negative situation or running away, tears streaming down their faces.

The taxicab can be a symbol for dreams not realized, for the regret of a wrong decision, or of the wrong path taken. It's a transition from one state to another, or a transitory existence.

The cab driver has very little interaction with the passengers and drives about the city from place to place with only loneliness as a companion. Think of the television show *Taxi* that ran from 1978 to 1982. None of the characters thought of driving a taxi as their career (save Alex, played by Judd Hirsch), as in this scene from the pilot episode:

Elaine Nardo, the beautiful divorced mom says: *I'm only going to be working here part-time. I'm not really a taxi driver.*

Alex the "Everyman" character says: *Oh yeah, I know. We're all part-time here. You see that guy over there? He's an actor. The guy on the phone, he's a prize fighter. This lady over here, she's a beautician. The man behind her, he's a writer. Me? I'm a cab driver. I'm the only cab driver in this place.*

For OUR purposes, let's pretend that WE are cab drivers. On this evening, it's kind of slow, not too many passengers, traffic is creeping. You are all alone with your thoughts. Out of the corner of your eye, you notice someone standing on the corner waving you down, so you sigh and pull over. The door is pulled open, and you realize that God has taken a seat in the backseat of your taxicab. God greets you with a "Good evening, Yideleh... Nu? I think we should have a talk – just you and me." In classic *Taxi Driver* style, you ask, "You tawkin' to me? You tawkin' to ME?" And God replies, "Yideleh, is there anyone else in here besides you and me? Micha'el roll the tape."

There before you flash images of your life to this point. School. Friends. Family. Relationships. Children. Your career. The time your mom was in the hospital, but you didn't have time to visit. Those times the children asked to play, but you had to work. The times you played on your phone when your parents were trying to engage with you. The times you settled for a job instead of a career. The times you could have volunteered to help but chose not to. The time you refused to speak to your brother and he died before you could apologize. The times you laid around and watched TV instead of getting out into nature with your family. So many mistakes, so many regrets... Did you realize that you had been carrying these regrets around with you every day in your taxi? THEY have been your passengers, your companions. So what would you say to God? What do you think God would say to you?

This time of year is the time during which our tradition bids us to confront these regrets, to revisit our mistakes. Watching God's video montage is difficult. Each image is more difficult to watch than the next, so we close our eyes or fast-forward to another part. There is so much we haven't done correctly and much that we haven't even TRIED to do. There are dreams that have gone unrealized and visions that have long faded. So many missed opportunities... We are filled with regrets, but, most of the time, we harden our hearts, closing them up impenetrably, turning our heads away, and covering our eyes and ears.

Do you ever listen to TED talks? I like listening to the TED Radio Hour on NPR, and one time – it's been a while ago now, there was a woman talking about regret. I found it rather interesting and kept her talk on the back burner. As I researched to write my sermon, I recalled that her name is Kathryn Schultz, a writer for the New Yorker magazine. She calls herself the “world's leading wrongologist,” and she talks about her deep feelings of regret, which began with her getting a tattoo in a shop on the Lower East Side of Manhattan when she was 29 years old. Perhaps you know some people who have gotten tattoos and then later came to regret their decision. You may recall Johnny Depp, for example, who was engaged to actress Winona Rider. To express his everlasting and abiding love, he got a tattoo on his arm that said, “Winona Forever.” Three years later, just three years later (a long time by Hollywood standards certainly), their relationship ended, so he had “Winona Forever” surgically altered to say, “Wino Forever.”

And there is Tom Arnold who while married to Roseanne Barr, got her face tattooed on his chest. When their marriage ended, he had it removed. When it came to *her* tattoo, however, Kathryn Schulz says that she began to feel regret immediately, not a few weeks afterwards or a few years, but as soon as she stepped out of the tattoo parlor. She absolutely hated it and wanted it to just vanish, never to be seen again.

There are actually phases that we go through when we experience regret. Typically, our first response to realizing we've done something that we wish we had not, is just like Schultz's reaction.

“Make it go away,” she had said. “Just make it disappear!” If only we could just make a wish and make the incident and the pain it caused to go away. We aren’t generally interested in going over why we did the egregious thing, nor do we want to analyze what our motivation was for doing it. We just wish that it could all go away and that we could take everything back.

After that, most people come to the second phase in feeling regret, which is incomprehension. We wonder, “Did I really DO that? Yikes! How did I do that? What on earth was I thinking?” Totally incredulous, we are neither curious nor eager to find out *why* we did what we did. We almost enter a sense of denial, and we try, as Kathryn Schultz says, “to distance ourselves from ourselves.” In doing so, we end up being unable to forgive ourselves and, thus, seek to punish ourselves. This is where our negative self-talk consumes our consciousness. “Ugh! I’m so stupid! What an idiot!”

The next phase of regret is that we continue to think and rethink and overthink and obsess in a continuous-playing loop about the mistake we made. And regrettably (pun intended), most of us become stuck right there, mired in the guilt and remorse. The regrets lodge themselves in a deep place inside the pits of our stomachs, where they sit – heavy and bloated. The regret doesn’t help us in any way. We don’t learn anything from it or find a way to transcend it. We’re just stuck – with regret inside of *us* and *us* inside of *it*, and it holds onto us, like a sticky, glutinous mass. So, we do our best to elude it, trying to drive it away, again and again, over and over, whenever it tries to come to the edge of our awareness.

One time quite a few years ago, a congregant asked to meet with me to talk about a situation at her work that had made her feel really bad. She had yelled at her co-workers. They were angry with her and were ignoring her, so she wanted to ask me what she could do about it. We talked about how she could apologize to her office staff, how she could speak more softly, more carefully, and with more respect. She seemed relieved when she left and promised she would make amends with her co-workers. But something happened within her in the days that followed our meeting. She sent me an email, now angry with *me*. I had no right to tell her how to behave, she said, proceeding to actually defend what she had done. No longer feeling regret, she decided that what had happened was *not* her fault. To avoid feeling embarrassed and to not have to own up to what she had done, she, instead, hardened her heart as did Pharaoh, and put up a wall of defense. By doing so, she remained stuck in that never-ending cycle of regret and denial.

Let's take a moment to put our hands on the steering wheel of our taxis, to take a deep breath, and to confront one of the regrets lodged deep within us. Think about YOUR heart. Is it hardened like Pharaoh's? Is it locked up, sealed up like a vault? Can you look at the next slide in God's video montage?

On Yom Kippur, we will recite "*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha* – for the sin we have committed before You." Each year we beat our chests as we say "*Al cheit*," our fists striking our hearts. Let us do so, not only in anguish, but to break the stone that surrounds our hearts. Let our hearts open and release the pain of our actions.

With each “*Al Cheit*” let our hearts open wider and wider. Yes, we will feel the pain that we have sealed off and justified, thus, inoculating ourselves against the grief and remorse. But let the pain we feel motivate us to soothe these wounds through *t’shuvah*, *t’fillah*, and *tz’dakah* – returning to what we know is right and making amends with those whom we’ve wronged in the best way we can. In Psalm 90 we read: “So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.” Each day is of utmost importance. We have a finite number of them. Each day can bring us closer to being too late, or each day can bring us closer to making things right with those we have wronged.

Friends, we live in an age of self-gratification and feeling good about ourselves. Let it go... Do what makes you feel good. Only you can make yourself happy. In doing so, we have buried our regrets, and so many in our society are addicted to heart-numbing drugs to relieve themselves of the pain and trauma they feel. Our regrets are real. They are going to hurt. Feeling remorse and having regrets, doesn’t make you a failure, but harboring them and burying them will only lead to hardened hearts and the failure to learn from our sorrow. We can choose to make things different. We can break the hardened shells around our hearts and open them to love and forgiveness. We read in our prayer books, “Turn away from evil and do good. Seek peace and pursue it.” We can transform something bad into something good, redeeming us from the bonds of regret and finding peace. The gift of *t’shuvah* is right here, disguised as God in the back seat of your taxi.

T'shuvah can help us find healing and blessing when we choose to reconcile with our regret and with those for whom we feel regret.

Towards the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers, the brothers have come to Egypt for bread, and through Divine orchestration are reunited with Joseph whom they had thrown into the pit and sold into slavery. After their father Jacob dies, the brothers travel back together to the land of Canaan to bury their father. The Midrash tells us that on the way back to Egypt, Joseph takes a detour to visit the pit into which the brothers had thrown him all those years ago, where they had sold him into slavery, and decided to lie to their father, telling him Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. The decision to commit this act changed all their lives forever. Surely the brothers (and certainly Joseph) would not want to return to this place of pain and regret. Why would they do this? It would have been so much easier to just take another path and forget about all that. But the Midrash says that they intentionally went there to confront and make amends with those memories. The brothers stood there together, says the Midrash, embracing one another. They opened their hearts, and they did *t'shuvah*, forgiving themselves and one another. The Midrash closes with a poignant and beautiful moment. As they all stand there, Joseph leads all his brothers in reciting a blessing:

"Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, she'asah li nes ba-makom ha-zeh. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the world, who performed a miracle for me in this place."

Huh? What could this miracle be? It could be that God ordained these events to happen, to bring Joseph to Egypt to become a viceroy, thus, granting him the ability and power to help the Israelite people in their time of need. Or maybe the true miracle was that, by confronting their painful past, Joseph and the brothers were able to obtain release from the actions which had caused such unfathomable pain, and thus, turn that pain into love for one another. Let us, too, go to the pit – that place inside of us where regret sits and festers. Let us learn from our errors, lift them out of the depths, and transform them for good, thus renewing ourselves and opening our hearts.

On the eve of Yom Kippur 1936, in Berlin, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel notated these words:

The most unnoticed of all miracles is the miracle of repentance. It is not the same thing as rebirth; it is transformation, creation. In the dimension of time there is no going back. But the power of repentance causes time to be created backward and allows re-creation of the past to take place...

So, tonight as our Ten Days of Repentance begin, let us once again return to our taxis, to the video montage that God showed us. Watch as the images flood your senses. What is it that is weighing heaviest upon you? How can you open up your heart and release the pain that has been lodged so deeply within you? Let tonight be the moment that real *t'shuvah* begins to takes place.

So speaking of *t'shuvah*, what became of Kathryn Schultz's tattoo that she hated so much after getting it? Well, after all these years, she still regrets that she got it, but she looks at it differently. She says she got the tattoo when she was feeling a bit lost in her life. The tattoo she got was an image of a compass, and she was hoping it would give her some direction in life. When she looks at it, she (like Harry in the "Taxi" song) remembers that she has goals and dreams and the desire to achieve them. She says, "We need to love the imperfect and flawed things we create, and to forgive ourselves for creating them, because regret shouldn't remind us that we did badly. Regret should remind us that we can do better." And isn't that what these Ten Days of Repentance are all about? Shanah Tovah!