**Growing from Our Regrets**

A blackboard stood in a park in Brooklyn with the following question: What is your biggest regret? For an entire day, New Yorkers picked up pieces of chalk and opened up about some of the deepest, most intimate parts of their lives. As the day went on, the blank blackboard quickly filled up.

“Not saying I love you.”

“Burning bridges.”

“Not staying in touch.”

“Not being a better friend.”

By the end of the day, the production team who created this project noticed a common theme among nearly all of the responses. The regrets people shared were all about chances **not** taken, words **not** spoken, dreams **never** pursued.

Of course, regrets aren’t the sole preserve of New Yorkers. We all have them…

Today, this day of Yom Kippur, is the Jewish people’s collective Blackboard Project—the time in which we get to recite our litany of regrets.

Today, we proclaim our communal regrets out loud. Al Chet Shechetanu l’fanecha, for the sin we have committed against you — by hardening our hearts, by speaking maliciously of others, by dishonesty in our work. We’ve lied, we’ve cheated, we’ve avoided responsibility.  And we wish we hadn’t. We regret things we’ve done. But today is about much more than simply listing regrets for the sake of a social science experiment—we do it for a **purpose**.  Today isn’t about **hiding** from our regrets or **dwelling** in them—Yom Kippur is about transforming them.

We know that it is tempting to try to **hide** from our regrets. Pretend that the hurtful actions that we have done never happened; or imagine that the kindness we wish we had offered never really mattered all that much in the end. When those who created the blackboard project came to the end of the day, after they had recorded all the regrets that had been posted on the blackboard, they erased the regrets and wrote at the top: “Clean slate.”

We, too, might be tempted to believe that we can just erase our worst moments. Facing our personal failings is hard work, and so we, too, are tempted to try to erase our metaphoric blackboards. But we know all too well that simply erasing our mistakes won’t make them go away. We might try to **bury** our regrets, but they never disappear—they keep on popping up. They weigh heavily on us.

And that is why we come together on Yom Kippur. Because we are part of a tradition that reminds us that actions **do** have consequences. We can’t simply **wash away** our regrets without a **trace**—thinking that we get a chance to start over as if nothing had ever happened. Yom Kippur is **not** about blotting out our mistakes—but about confronting them. Our job today is to express our regret so that we can make **different** choices—so that we can make **better** choices—in the coming year. This is how we heal the hurt—for the pain that we have caused—and for the regret that still weighs us down. That image of an erased blackboard is helpful here. If you think about erasing a chalkboard, you can still see the remnant of the words—they don’t fully disappear. Regrets don’t simply vanish into thin air because they **cannot** simply be erased.

Nor should regret become an end in itself. In fact, just **feeling** regret, without **doing** anything about the regret, actually causes more harm. Dr. Kathryn Schulz, a Pulitzer Prize winning author, spoke recently in a TED talk on the subject of regrets. In it, Schulz identifies self-destructive things that we may do as a result of **feeling** regret: The first is **denial**…whatever it is we regret having said or done, we just want to make it go away. We try to bury our regrets underground hoping that the emotion will simply disappear. But of course, that is rarely possible. You can’t un-speak hurtful words, or un-do a misdeed once it’s occurred.

The second is **bewilderment**. It’s the gnawing question ‘How could I have done that?’ That sense of not even knowing yourself or the part of yourself that made that inexplicable decision—or allowed those unconscionable words to leave your lips.

And the third and final unhelpful line of thinking is **perseverating**, and getting lost in the regret itself; taking a behavior and replaying it over and over again. We obsess about it, lose sleep over it, can’t stop thinking about it day and night, wishing it had never happened. We can’t undo it; we can’t unfollow it; we can’t unfriend it; we can’t throw money at it and make it all go away, so we turn regret into guilt, and guilt into shame and shame into self-loathing.

The problem with all of these strategies is that they let regret *become an end in and of itself*. None of these three responses are **productive** uses of regret. Instead of leading us to change, each of these strategies simply leaves us in a state of **remorse**. The healthy way to live with regret is found in Maimonides’ *Hilchot Teshuvah*, the Laws of Repentance. For those sins that we have committed against other people, the Rambam teaches that the first step in achieving forgiveness begins by **verbally confessing** the sin we have committed. Maimonides even gives us a little script to follow. We are to say: “I implore You, God, I sinned, I transgressed, I committed iniquity before You by doing the following [insert sin here]. Behold I REGRET and am embarrassed for my deeds. I promise never to repeat this act again.”

And then we take that resolve, we approach the person we have wronged, and we ask for forgiveness. We use our **regret** as a vehicle to make amends and to make restitution if necessary. And then we avoid repeating the behavior in the future.

What Maimonides is teaching is that the reality of regret should be a part of our lives so that we can **do** better—and **be** better—the next time around. The key is **not** to become paralyzed with our regrets. Instead, we strive to channel our shame and remorse into the absolute conviction that we **can** do better—that we **will** do better—if we are given another chance.

Here is an example of a person who channeled his regret into positive and productive action. John Koufos was a successful defense attorney in New Jersey—he owned his own practice and was often described as a “rising star” for his legal prowess. But John also struggled with addiction to alcohol. After he caused a hit and run car accident while intoxicated, he was sentenced to six years in prison.

When he was released, Koufos found himself disbarred by the state and unable to practice law. John decided to dedicate himself to a new mission: helping formerly incarcerated people transform their lives and successfully re-enter society.

Today, Koufos is the Executive Director of Safe Streets and Second Chances, a new project focused on programs that help recently released incarcerated citizens to successfully re-enter society. Koufos’ regret became the foundation for his second chance that brought something meaningful and positive into the world.

Indeed, this very day of Yom Kippur is understood by Jewish tradition to be the anniversary of second chances. According to the Midrash, today marks the anniversary of the day that God forgave the Israelites for the sin of the Golden Calf. You remember the story. While Moses was up on Mount Sinai receiving the Ten Commandments, the Israelites became impatient.  As they awaited Moses’ return, they built a Golden Calf, an idol to worship.  When Moses returned down the Mountain with the Two Tablets, Moses, in his extreme anger, threw the tablets down and shattered the *luchot ha’brit—*the tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

When Moses returned to the mountain, he told the Holy One of Blessing that the Israelites wanted to atone for their sin. He pleaded with God to give them a second chance. By acknowledging their failures and by learning from their mistakes, the people engaged in the first act of collective Teshuvah, which initiated the process of forgiveness. Eventually, the people were given a second chance, and Moses was given a second set of tablets. According to the Midrash, Moses’ return to the Mountain for the second set of tablets occurred on the very first day of the month of Elul, the month preceding the High Holy Days. And it was on the 40th day from that date while he was still on the mountain—the 10th day of the month Tishrei—that Moses received the second set of tablets. That day, the 10th of Tishrei—this very day—became the very first Yom Kippur, the day of second chances.

And what happened to that first set of broken tablets?

Those broken tablets could not be repaired.  But they weren’t thrown away either. Those broken tablets were placed in the *Aron Kodesh—*in the Holy Ark—right beside the second complete set.  Even after our ancestors suffered the consequences of building a Golden Calf, they were given the opportunity to reconnect with God. At the same time, they were also given the responsibility never to **forget** their past. The scattered fragments of the broken tablets would remain with the Israelites throughout their years of wandering in the wilderness, reminding them that the imperfections of our past are not determinative. We carry our regrets within us. They become a part of who we are.

But those vulnerable and broken places, those parts of ourselves that we wish that we had done differently, do not determine the **essence** of who we are. Each of us carries our own set of tablets—one broken, one whole. Like our ancestors, we can build a better future out of a painful past. We can learn from our mistakes. We can take our regret and turn it into resolve.

In fact, you may be surprised to learn that the first **emotion** ever expressed in the Torah is **regret**—and the first character to express that emotion is *Ha’Kadosh Barukh Hu,* the Holy One of Blessing. God’s **regret** occurs six chapters into the Book of Genesis. It occurs after a series of disappointments that God had experienced after the wonder of Creation. Almost in the blink of an eye, we humans began to sin. Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit; Cain murdered Abel; the evil of humans was so great that God contemplated destroying the world. The opening of the second portion in the Torah—*Parashat Noakh—*begins with these words: ***Va’yina’chem*** *Adonai ki asah et ha’adam ba’aretz.* “And God **regretted** having created humankind on the earth and God’s heart was saddened.”

The word here in the Hebrew is *Va’yinachem—*and in this context it clearly means “And God regretted.” But **why** did God regret the creation of human beings? According to the Midrash on this verse in *Bereisheet Rabbah,* Rabbi Yehuda explains, as he channels the voice of God: “It was a regrettable error on My part to have created humanity out of **earth**, for had I created humanity out of only the **heavenly elements**, human beings would not have made mistakes.”

Rabbi Yehuda imagines God regretting having created human beings from the earthly realm. Because in **this** world, unlike the heavenly realm, we finite human beings regularly encounter failure; we regularly miss the mark. Had God created human beings only from the heavenly elements, we would have been like angels, infallible, free of any error or mistakes. This, according to Rabbi Yehuda, was God’s regret—creating imperfect human beings.

But that is only **one way** of understanding the text. There is an equally plausible way of understanding the story if we translate the verb *Va’yinachem* differently. The root of that Hebrew word—*nachem—*is used to mean something very different in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. In fact, the more common association of *Nachem* resonates deeply with these Days of Awe. *N*achem does not only mean **regret**; it is also the Hebrew word for **comfort**. For these last seven weeks leading up to the start of the New Year, we have been reading the *Shiv’ata de’nechemta—*the seven *haftarot* of **comfort.** Every Shabbat morning, for the last seven weeks, we have heard the same message: God is here to comfort us despite our human weaknesses.

What if we believed that God did not **regret** making us human and prone to mistakes? What if we believed that God knew that we would make mistakes? That God needed us to be less than perfect so that we could **grow** from our failings? How might that change the nature of our relationship to our **regrets** to believe fully that there is a God who is big enough to **comfort** us in our failings?

Now God would be saying: “It was a comfort on My part to have created humanity out of **earth**, for had I created humanity out of heavenly elements, human beings would not have made **mistakes**.”

What if God found **comfort** in creating humanity from earth instead of from the angels?

What if God found **comfort** in knowing human beings are not celestial beings?

What if God found **comfort** in the ability for human beings to make mistakes, to **regret** those mistakes, and then to go **learn** from them?

In this understanding, human mistakes were part of the divine blueprint. What God is waiting to see is whether or not we can transform our **regrets** into a commitment to grow from our mistakes. By granting us free will, God knew that we were not going to be perfect, and therefore, we would make mistakes. And because we regret, and because we can use regret to make change and repair, we do not need to be **imprisoned** by our **misdeeds**. Though we may yearn for perfect lives and clean slates, we can find comfort in the *holiness of our pain*. We remember that like the Ark of the covenant, we can hold both our wholeness and brokenness together.

Regret is transformed into comfort **not** because we can go back in time and relive the past, but because our Teshuvah allows us to change the future. We can make different choices when faced with the same situations.  We can say the words we meant to say. We can become the friend that we wish we had been. We can stay in touch. We can be honest with our business partners.

Yes, we are human, and yes, we will continue to make mistakes. But we can also make change. We can both choose to **do** better, and choose to **be** better.

Today, we don’t just stare at a blackboard full of our regrets.  Instead, let us stand today ready to make those regrets the first steps on the road to repair. When we do the work of Teshuvah, those same regrets become the foundation of our greatest strengths.

In this New Year of 5784, may we gain the strength and the courage we need to transform our regrets into meaningful change. And may we create new worlds—in which we offer comfort—and are comforted—by the power of this transformation.

*Kein yi’he ratzon.* So may it be.

*G’mar Hatima Tova—*May we be sealed for many blessings in the Book of Life.