

Healing Regret

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Hayom harat olam. Right after the shofar blows, we find an ancient prayer that tells us today, hayom, Rosh Hashanah, the head of the year and a time of spiritual beginnings, also marks harat olam, the birth of the world. Rosh Hashanah launches into a new year while simultaneously pointing us back into the past. Rosh Hashanah is also called Yom HaZikaron, Day of Memory. Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman notes that the root z.c.r has a fundamental meaning of “pointing”. A memory points us towards moments in our past, and those memories might also give us pointers for how to live in the present and walk into a better future.

In a sense, most Jewish stories aren't history exactly, even if they happen to record facts. Jewish stories aspire to become guiding memories, even for people who didn't live them.

This is true even for stories that exist before people were created, like this myth about how everything came into being, as retold by master storyteller Rachel Naomi Remen.

In the beginning, there was only the holy darkness, the Ein Sof, the source of life. And then, in the course of history, at a moment in time, this world, the world of a thousand, thousand things, emerged from the heart of the holy darkness as a great ray of light.

And then, perhaps because this is a Jewish story, there was an accident, and the vessels containing the light of the world, the wholeness of the world, broke. And the wholeness of the world, the light of the world was scattered into a thousand, thousand fragments of light, and they fell into all events and all people, where they remain deeply hidden until this very day.

Now...the whole human race is a response to this accident. We are here because we are born with the capacity to find the hidden light in all events and all people, to lift it up and make it visible once again and thereby to restore the innate wholeness of the world. It's a very important story for our times. And this task is called *tikkun olam* in Hebrew. It's the restoration of the world.

I really could end my sermon here. We know the whole story of our lives now. The world is broken, but contains light in unexpected places, and each one of us has a job - to find sparks of light and in doing so heal the world into wholeness. But there are questions: Why did God allow this brokenness to occur? Did God feel bad about the apparent accident? What exactly is this light? How do we find it? What does it mean to lift light up? What does wholeness look like?

So many questions, but the one I am most interested in tonight is, did God regret having made faulty vessels that broke under the intensity of the divine light? Most versions of this story don't specify how God felt, only that brokenness is the condition of the world we are born into.

But one powerful clue comes from a radical teaching in the Talmud that even before the world was created, God created teshuva.¹ Teshuva, repentance, return. Teshuva, the way we mend our mistakes, repair our relationships, fix what is broken or transform it into something even better.

There is a principle in Judaism that God creates the cure, the *tikkun*, before an illness even exists, that the possibility of redemption is baked into the brokenness we experience.²

¹ BT Pesachim 54a; Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 3:1; Zohar Vayikra 3, 69b.

² See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, <https://aish.com/292001731/>

If God created *teshuva* before the shattering that birthed the world as we know it, then I think God did not regret the accident, but rather intentionally set in motion a spiritual dynamic that, for better or worse, we cannot escape: in order to grow, in order to be the people we want to be, we will break things, some on purpose and some by accident, and *if* we learn how to repair them, *if* we practice *teshuva*, then we are also partnering with the divine in mending the original shattering.

Life isn't meant to be perfect, it is meant to be patched. Like the Japanese practice of *kintsugi*, where broken vessels are mended through a gold-infused glue that beautifully highlights where the cracks were, our life, and the very universe itself, is an intense, artistic, anguish-filled and awe-inspiring attempt to integrate all the imperfect pieces into something whole. To gleam golden where once we were shattered.

Teshuva is a *tikkun*, the tool we use to heal the universe that God prepared for us already-broken. But *teshuva* itself has a flaw. We don't always do it! We don't even often do it! Actually, we are exceptionally bad at *teshuva*. It's hard to admit we messed up. I get defensive, I rationalize, I ignore, I blame everyone and everything else. Just getting to the place where I'm ready to do *teshuva* is a whole process. *Teshuva*, the *tikkun* for the brokenness in life, is itself in need of a *tikkun*. How do we motivate ourselves to do the hard work of improving?

A few weeks ago I realized I hadn't yet blown my shofar during the month of Elul. I wanted to demonstrate to my nearly two-year-old son Ami this really cool instrument made out of animal horn. I thought he'd be so excited to hear me sound out its raw voice, so I sat him down, and grabbed the shofar. Indeed, he was immediately drawn to its strange and curving texture.

But the moment I put the shofar to my lips and let out a blast, his face crumpled and tears started flying faster than a flash flood, and his wailing quickly drowned out the delight I had anticipated both of us feeling. I wanted him to hear the voice of tradition, to feel a sense of awe or at least curiosity, and in response he let me know I needed to hear how upset he was. I felt awful! How could I have let my enthusiasm overshadow my sensitivity to little ears that had no context for this frighteningly loud and wild sound?

I eventually realized my poor little toddler had reminded me of the potency of the shofar in a way I had forgotten. It is meant to be startling, to knock us out of thinking we are ok.

One sage, Maimonides, translates the sound of the shofar into words: “Awaken from your slumber! Look deep into your souls (habitu) and become better (hativu)...”³ A toddler only hears the sound and responds with crying, but an adult who understands the intent - who wouldn’t tremble⁴, called to look within and reckon with their own imperfect self? Who doesn’t hold some painful shard of regret in their past? Who doesn’t cry tears of frustration at how hard it is to grow into the person we know we could be, if only...

In author Daniel Pink’s new book, *The Power of Regret*, he defines regret as “the stomach-churning feeling that the present would be better and the future brighter if only you hadn’t chosen

³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Teshuva 3:4.

Even though the sounding of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah is a decree from God, it still contains a personal message: It is as if the shofar’s call is telling us, “Awaken from your slumber! Examine your actions, return to your true selves, and remember your Creator. Those who forget the truth in the vanities of time... Look inside yourselves. Improve your ways and your actions and abandon the negativity in your life...”

אע”פ שתקיעת שופר בראש השנה גזירת הכתוב רמז יש בו כלומר עורו ישינים משנתכם ונרדמים הקיצו מתרדמתכם וחפשו במעשיכם וחזרו בתשובה וזכרו בוראכם. אלו השוכחים את האמת בהבלי הזמן ושוגים כל שנתם בהבל וריק אשר לא יועיל ולא יציל הביטו לנפשתיכם והטיבו דרכיכם ומעלליכם ויעזבו כל אחד מכם דרכו הרעה ומחשבתו אשר לא טובה

⁴ Amos 3:6

so poorly, decided so wrongly, or acted so stupidly in the past.”⁵ If only, if only, if only.

Regret is sticky - regret can be so all-consuming that we get stuck there, wallowing in the painful awareness of a harmful choice or a path not taken.

Knowing that sticky things are, well, sticky, we often try to avoid touching them, or in the case of regret, getting in touch with them. Afraid of getting stuck wallowing in regret, or just out of a desire to minimize pain, we try to ignore our regrets, yell YOLO (you only live once) and get on with our lives because who has time to feel terrible? “No regrets” is a motto many people hold dearly. But as Brene Brown once noted, ““No regrets” doesn’t mean living with courage, it means living without reflection.”

Hayom harat olam. Today commemorates the beginning of our broken universe. Immediately after the blast of the shofar, the tradition hands us these words, as if to say - look deeply into your own brokenness, all the regrets, the actions or inactions that make you wince, or burst you into bitter tears, or leave you trembling with judgment - and then, these words insist, you birth a new world out of the brokenness. Don’t get stuck in regret! AND Don’t pretend you don’t have regrets! Making mistakes is literally encoded into the fabric of reality itself, and regretting them is simply human. But **rather, use your regret well!**

Whenever we say, “If only I’d done this, or if only I’d chosen differently,” we are acknowledging we have some power to choose as we move through life. Not with everything, and not all the time, but we do have many moments of choice. Sitting with our specific regrets and learning from them helps us make better choices in the future.

⁵ Daniel H. Pink, *Regret: The Power of Looking Back for Moving Forward*, p. 10

This is why the classic medieval work of Jewish ethics, *Orchot Tzaddikim*, called regret a *tikkun gadol*, a great healer, for all our deeds and character traits. If teshuva is how we heal things, regret is how we find the motivation to do teshuva, to push through the discomfort of pain, guilt, anxiety, awkwardness, defensiveness, denial, and every other way we find to avoid doing teshuva. Regret is bitter but the pain of regret sparks our deeply felt need to change, and fuels our actual practice of teshuva. If we soften judgment around regret, and listen compassionately for the lessons it teaches us, we can in fact grow towards love, wholeness, and happiness. Not that we can change the past, but we can let the lessons of the past change us.

In his book, Daniel Pink provides us with some ways to work with regret, to use it well, and - in my language - to fuel our teshuva. I'm going to mention three of them, but also encourage you to read the book as well for a deeper dive on regret, and this coming Shabbat morning we'll touch more on how to work with regret and teshuva at our Mussar (or Jewish virtue ethics) gathering.

So here are three ways you can work on something you're regretting. 1) Disclose the regret, 2) Bring in compassion; and 3) find a lesson.

Let me explain more.

Disclose the regret - we "relive and relieve" in Daniel Pink's words. "Language," he says, "whether written or spoken, forces us to organize and integrate our thoughts." So depending on what feels comfortable and appropriate, you can talk to a friend, a partner, to God, record yourself speaking on your phone, write a letter to yourself, or journal. Share what it is you are regretting. While disclosure doesn't solve any problems, it has been shown to relieve some of the emotional suffering that accompanies regret.

The second step is to bring in self-compassion. It is so easy to go down a rabbit-hole of self-judgment, in particular because regret only happens when we can imagine having made another choice. It was precisely our fault, and we deserve judgment. However, self-judgment usually distorts the fact that our mistakes, while our fault, are not evidence that we are uniquely awful. We are just human.

Self-compassion, according to scholar Kristin Neff, begins with replacing searing judgment with basic kindness. It doesn't ignore our screwups or neglect our weaknesses. It simply recognizes that 'being imperfect, making mistakes, and encountering life difficulties is part of the shared human experience.'

Having externalized our regret, and worked to reframe how we view it in a more honest and compassionate way, the third step is to lift up the spark of wisdom, the lesson from that experience. "You might imagine it is ten years from now and you're looking with pride on how you responded to this regret. What did you do?" (Pink, 225)

The poet John Whittier Greenleaf once wrote, "For all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.'"

Even without identifying a particular case, when I say the words "if only" I can feel my stomach drop and tears threaten to well up. In my sacred imagination, I feel God looking out at everything that has ever been, feeling the sadness and the urgency of every human's bundle of "if onlys", yearning for us to find our way back, to return to the greatest task we've ever had - mending, fixing, healing.

When we hear the shofar tomorrow, let it break you open to encountering regret, and let it rouse you to courage. Let us use our painful "if onlys" to fuel our drive to change, to do teshuva to

return to our aspirations for ourselves, our connections to others, and our highest ideals of how this world could be.

Working with regret as a tikkun gadol, an agent of healing rather than simply a source of suffering, looking deeply into where we could have been better, we can lift up sparks of wisdom from those bitter moments and build our world anew, hayom, today. Shana tova umetukah - may the bitterness of past regrets guide you to sweetness in the year ahead.