Through Regret
Second Day of Rosh Hashanah 5784/2023
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There's a saying in my house: *You can't argue with feelings.* I didn't coin this saying. I am the reason the saying was created. I think I'm getting the hang of it, and now I say it to other people in many situations, as I am right now to you: You can't argue with feelings.

Hold onto that saying, which I want to pair with something my friend Rabbi Rebecca Rosenthal likes to do as a group ice-breaker. It's called a "vent diagram." You may be familiar with *Venn* Diagrams, where you try to find the overlap between two or more distinct sets, like people who love Taylor Swift and people who love Monty Python. (I'm thinking of starting a club!) The "vent diagram" was invented by Elana Eisen-Markowitz and Rachel Schragis, who describe themselves as "two queer white Jews from Turtle Island." It's two statements that can be seen as total opposites – no overlap on a Venn Diagram – yet they also both seem true. I love Taylor Swift – it would be great if every so often on the radio they played a song by someone other than Taylor Swift!

The really meaty vent diagrams are where the statements are *ideas* that are also a lot about *feelings*. Rosh Hashanah itself is a vent diagram of that nature. The most important thing about this holy day is accountability in our lives – the most important thing about the day is forgiveness.

Or: I hate the prayer coming up that says "On Rosh Hashanah it's written who will live and who will die" – I love the prayer coming up that says that "teshuvah, prayer, and tzedakah can change our entire destiny for the good." It's of course the very same prayer.

One very specific Rosh Hashanah example of a vent diagram, which includes a feeling that seems to argue with, is: *Regret*. Regret is how the drama of judgment and forgiveness plays out inside ourselves, even once we've done the work of teshuvah to reconcile with another person.

Regret is when we wish we had done X instead of Y, or we wish we could take back something that we did – but also when we judge ourselves for the choice. I *could* have done differently, and I *should* have known to. Regret is an affirmation of the concept of free will that feels crummy. A vent diagram indeed.

Some people advocate a life philosophy of "No Regrets." Life is full of decision points, we do the best we can at any moment; we live with the consequences, learn if possible, and move on. Don't cry over spilled milk – clean it up and then forget about it.

According to my household rule, I shouldn't be able to argue with the person who says: No Regrets Ever. But regret, to use the immortal words of Boston – *it's more than a feeling.*

Regret can be a long story. It's like a relay race around the same track over and over. Even after you pass the baton, you run along next to it for a while. That's what regret feels like after we've chosen one path over another, or after we've overlooked a person in our lives and drifted apart. It's not in our hands anymore, but still it feels like we're next to it, as though we should be running the next leg. From time to time we find ourselves on our own circling around to the same spot on the track, to the memory of a decision point, where we relive a bit the moment we let go of the baton.

And regret is unstable – it's a harsh self-judgment, and a forgiveness we think we might grant ourselves. It has to be resolved in one direction or the other. Maybe you can't argue with feelings, but what if you have two feelings arguing with each other? Regret is that argument, within you. How do you settle it?

It would help to nail down better what regret really involves, and I wouldn't be speaking about it if there weren't some interesting Torah and some interesting research. First the research: Would you believe that there's actually a World Regret Survey? It's the brainchild of author Daniel Pink and fed into his recent book *The Power of Regret.* You can still take the very short survey online, and also read the anonymous regrets of people in different places in the world. Click on any country or state in the U.S. Interestingly, one state with no public recorded entries in the World Regret Survey is New Hampshire! Our new state motto: *Live Free, No Regrets.*

Digging in to about 16,000 responses, Daniel Pink found four varieties of regret. Two categories are about the practical path we choose in life – jobs, financial decisions, what to study or train in, things like that. One set of these he calls *foundation regret*s, which involve not being prudent or responsible in life planning.

More frought are *boldness regrets,* which are often about roads not taken. Big things like not taking a chance on a harder career or one with less certain financial prospects. Smaller things like giving up an instrument. Or, as one middle-aged person from Manitoba wrote in more generally: "I did not try to grow as an adult; I am a 55-year-old child."

It should be said that these kinds of regrets usually involve believing we know what the alternate future would have been. These are often fantasies disguised as rational analysis of our lives, piled up with the feeling that our younger self could have and should have known what our older self learned only later. We should have compassion on ourselves because we can never know if the what-if would have really happened – and if there's nothing concrete to do, we should try to let go of such regrets.

Most painful, Daniel Pink found, are what he calls *moral regrets* and *connection regrets.* Moral regrets involve not standing up for someone, or not committing one's life to a higher cause. He was amazed to find how many people in their 40s and 50s continue to express regret about bullying someone in middle

school or earlier. But many people talked about their own bad behavior at their current job as well. People who felt patriotic regretted not serving our country in one way or another.

And the most frequent kind of regret he found was *connection regret.* A sixty-two-year-old who described herself as coming from a not very emotionally demonstrative family regretted not spending more time with a dying parent, "holding hands and speaking about the lovely moments they gave me." Daniel Pink reports that more frequent than "rifts" are "drifts", the ways people lose track of each other or someone stops investing in a friendship.

Such regrets have a long shelf life, often more than just the life we led this past year. So many of the things people truly still regret happened long ago, or are about people no longer part of our lives. Our regrets help us tell our story, give continuity to our lives.

I'm sure you're already thinking of your own regret that one of these reminds you of. But my point is not to bring you back to a bad feeling. Instead, it's to help us realize that regret is actually a special window into our souls – and it's why I would argue that if you say *No Regrets,* you're actually missing out on an experience of great moral value. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook taught that just reciting the things we regret opens up an immediate channel to the Divine. This is the practice known as *viddui.* It's often translated as confession, but it's

much richer than just that. Rav Kook suggests that the regrets we deeply feel help us understand what we actually value most. Regrets show us the ideal self we already believe in, the person we want to live up to being. Regret is one of the most important reminders of who and what we care about. It's one thing to articulate a life philosophy – regret shows us concretely what philosophy we already are striving to live by.

What does Judaism say we should do with regret? I want to make clear that this is separate from what we owe other people we've actually hurt or let down. We can't even think of addressing our own regrets on the inside without repair and teshuvah toward other people. Though exploring our regrets on the inside is part of figuring out if there's something we ought to do toward someone else.

The very first regret in the Torah belongs to God. That should tell you how important regret is in the scheme of things: God is our first model for regret. God's earliest regret was, I hate to say, creating us. In the tenth generation of humanity, the time of Noach, God looked at all we were doing and thinking, and the Torah says: *Vayinachem Adonai ki asah et ha-adam ba'aretz, vayit'atzev el libo* – God regretted making humans on the earth, and was sad in God's heart (Genesis 6:6).

The Hebrew root for regret, in this story and throughout the Bible and Talmudic literature, is *nacham,* and it's a fascinating word because it has other

meanings that seem at first like they are not connected at all to regret. The same word in the same form can also mean to change your mind or change a course of action. Fast forward to another Torah catastrophe, the Golden Calf, and God is ready for another Noach-like move, getting rid of the Israelites and leaving just Moshe to start over with. But Moshe argues God out of destroying them, and the Torah says God changed God's mind– *Vayinachem Adonai.* The same word and the same phrase as back in the time of Noach.

This Hebrew connection between the feeling of regret and the changing of one's mind echoes a distinction offered by the ethicist John Danaher. First-order regret is an immediate reaction, a feeling of judgment and remorse – and you can't argue with first-order feelings. Second-order regret is thinking about first-order regret, and deciding whether to discard it or to keep it and do something with it.

I can imagine Moshe said to God: I see why You regret your covenant right now. But don't be so hard on Yourself. Don't regret rescuing this people, entrusting them with the Torah, believing they could live up to their ancestors' dreams. This is not on you – it's human nature, it's still the legacy of Pharaoh. The Golden Calf was their choice. *You* don't have to regret.

And God indeed changes God's mind about what comes next in the desert. And not just *Vayinachem Adonai* for the moment, but God decides to move fundamentally from regret to compassion, and to announce that as synonymous with God's own name. The midrash says this season of the Days of Awe is the anniversary of that transformation of Divine regret.

Later on still, the prophet Yonah, Jonah, will throw this word back at God kind of sarcastically. We'll read this on Yom Kippur afternoon – Yonah says: I didn't want to bother with your sending me to Nineveh, because I know you are a God who is *nicham al ha-ra'ah,* you change your mind about harsh judgments all the time.

That's quite a change for God from the time of the Torah. The very best way to respond to our regrets is to do teshuvah, to change. I like to think of God's response to the Golden Calf partly as God's teshuvah for the Flood. God's regret over what God did back then to humanity lasted for a long time, at least in human years. Yet the flip side of regret that lingers for a long time is that the opportunity for teshuvah, for learning from our regret, lasts just as long. And even if a regret we have stems from a particular time and place that we can't go back to – a particular friendship, or a time we felt we let someone down – one way to do teshuvah is to handle it differently with the next friend, or the next time we have a chance to show up for someone in our family.

But what about other regrets we hold, which can't be dismissed as irrational thinking about what-if's, or which we can't discharge by changing something. Or maybe we even have, but we still have this feeling?

That's where the third meaning of the Hebrew word *nacham* comes in. In addition to regret, and a change of heart or mind, *nacham* can mean *to comfort*. The mitzvah of comforting mourners is called *nichum aveilim.*

What does comforting mourners have to do with regret?

Regret can be like mourning, especially when it comes to moral regrets, or regrets about connections. Some gates do close and are forever locked. We mourn for a relationship that is no longer, or I mourn a version of myself or my career that I really hoped I might be or become. We even feel regret for things we actually shouldn't because they weren't in our power in the first place. Or, we even feel good about a positive change we've made, but there is still this feeling, the lingering regret.

For all these, we need comforting.

Just as mourning has its cycles, I am wondering if for our biggest regrets there might be a kind of yahrzeit process. Just as after a time, after the intense and immediate process of mourning the loss of a loved one, we allow and actually encourage ourselves to revisit that loss and that feeling in a bounded way so

we lose ourselves in it entirely, a way that honors our loss, and also where we've come since.

Maybe that's one of the things these annual Days of Awe are all about, a yahrzeit for our regrets, to take note of them and find forgiveness from ourselves. Long after the relay, when we return to the track and face the scene of regret, we could find comfort.

Our tradition teaches that even God needs comforting in this way. Every time we say any version of the Kaddish, we invoke this same word *nacham* when we say *tushb'chata v'nechamata.* We offer praise to the name of God and the dreams it represents, that's *tushbechata.* And we offer God words of comfort, *nechamata,* for the Flood in the time of Noach, the ordeal of the Binding of Isaac, the exile of our people, the long history of suffering that we Jews have experienced as a people.

Just as we imagine God having regrets, and changing course in teshuvah, so too we imagine that even God needs comforting.

When God faced God's first regret, in the time of Noach, God's first response was destructive. But then God turned regret to teshuvah, setting to work to establish a new relationship first with Sarah and Avraham, then with Am Yisrael, our people. And even from the start of that, God tries to transcend regret. God symbolized God's own change of heart and action in a rainbow.

God turned the many layers of regret into layers of color, something beautiful arching through the heavens to touch the earth, as a reminder especially on the cloudiest days.

In that way, God turned regret into hope. So too may we look at our own regrets, and transform our self-judgment into more than self-forgiveness -- into hope.

Shana Tova!