

From the Rabbi's Desk

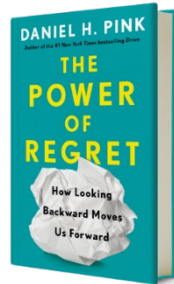
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The Power of Regret

D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah

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"No regrets." You've heard people proclaim it as a philosophy of life.

"I don't believe in regrets," says Angelina Jolie. "I don't believe in regrets," says Bob Dylan. "I don't believe in regrets," says John Travolta. The U.S. Library of Congress contains more than fifty books in its collection with the title No Regrets. Embedded in songs, emblazoned on skin, and embraced by sages, the anti-regret philosophy is so self-evidently true that it's more often asserted than argued. Why invite pain when we can avoid it? Why summon rain clouds when we can bathe in the sunny rays of positivity? Why rue what we did yesterday when we can dream of the limitless possibilities of tomorrow? This worldview makes intuitive sense. It seems right. It feels convincing. But it has one significant flaw. It is dead wrong."¹

This is the main idea behind Daniel Pink's latest bold and inspiring book, *The Power of Regret*.

Daniel Pink suggests that everybody has regrets. They're a fundamental part of our lives. And if we reckon with them in fresh and imaginative ways, we can enlist our regrets to make smarter decisions, perform better at work and school, and deepen our sense of meaning and purpose. By understanding what people regret the most, Daniel Pink argues, we can understand what they value the most and we can transform our regrets in a positive force for living better lives. ²

¹ ibidem.

² <https://www.danpink.com/the-power-of-regret/>

And yet, we don't like to think about regrets.

When we are young, we believe that everything we do is right. When we are adults, we are too busy trying to make a living and living our complicated lives, and we don't have the time to pause and to ponder what we did wrong, what we wish we did differently. Finally, when we are older, when we have all the time in the world to look back reflectively at our lives, we might either be afraid to confront the mistakes of the past or think it is useless.

And so we proclaim, perhaps more like a self-defense mechanism than because we really believe it: "no regrets!"

When I told a colleague of mine that I was planning to speak about regrets, he shared with me: If we have nothing to regret, we are not looking hard enough.

So, in preparation for this dvar Torah, I was forced to look back, and to look harder to confront my own regrets. Usually a regret begins with the words "I wish I had..."

- I wish I had brought my parents to America when I could...
- I wish I had validated my psychology degree when I arrived in America 24 years ago and had more time and energy to do so...
- I wish I had stayed longer with my father the last time I visited him in Israel, a month before his passing....
- I wish I had traveled more throughout Argentina and the Dominican Republic when I lived there...
- I wish I had established a routine of exercising when I was younger, so it wouldn't be so hard to do it now...
- I wish I didn't spend all the time I spent worrying about petty, meaningless, and trivial things...

And the list goes on....

Regrets are deeply unpopular, because they force us to face decisions we made and we wish we didn't, or decisions we didn't make and we wish we did. Regrets are also

deeply unpopular because they remind us of a time in our lives when we lacked the courage, the determination, the strength, or the sensitivity, to do what needed to be done.

The Torah reading of the first day of Rosh Hashanah talks about one of these instances, about a man who perhaps wished he acted differently...

After the birth of Isaac, we read (Genesis 21:8-12):

The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham playing. She said to Abraham, "Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." The matter distressed Abraham greatly, for it concerned a son of his. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you."

And then we read (Genesis 21:14):

Early next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulder, together with the child, and sent her away. And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba.

The matter of sending away Hagar and Ishmael distressed Abraham greatly, and yet, he did send them away. Perhaps Abraham didn't have the strength to challenge God's decision one more time as he did regarding Sodom and Gomorrah; perhaps he didn't have the courage to challenge his own wife. As many times I find myself telling my congregants and myself: we don't always do what we have to do, but what we can.

Now, while the Torah doesn't articulate Abraham's regret, our Sages tells us that Abraham remarried Hagar after the passing of Sarah. They even suggest that Isaac went to bring back Hagar from Beer Lachai Roi to gladden his father's heart and perhaps to bring some healing to Abraham, to Hagar, and to Ishmael.

Personally, I would like to suggest that Abraham regretted sending away Hagar and Ishmael, and perhaps attempting to sacrifice his son, and lying to Avimelech telling him that his wife Sarah was his sister.

Regrets fall into two categories: regret about the things we can fix, at least in part and the things we can't.

We show regret about the things we can fix, by fixing them. For some people it is too difficult to say out loud "I regret this" - so they "say" it by fixing it. I guess Abraham can't say out loud, I wish I hadn't listened to my wife [when she told me to cast away Hagar and Ishmael]. Perhaps as a man (somehow it seems more difficult for men to name regrets than for women) Abraham finds it difficult to say out loud "*I made a huge mistake* by casting out my son, it is the biggest regret of my entire life," so he shows regret through action, by bringing him and his mother back. True, it is late in life. He cannot undo the years of pain and sorrow he caused them, and perhaps himself as well, but this is what he can do now, and this is how he shows his regret and desire to make things right.

Now, for the things you can't fix -- wishing you spent more time with a parent who passed away, for example – we must muster the courage to name our regrets out loud, so that the people we love can learn from our mistakes. It is the only thing we can do, but it is not a small thing.

Speaking again about the power of regret, I would truly like to recommend to you Daniel Pink's book. The author is right that looking backwards, not with despair but with self-reflection, can move us forward. Again, while we cannot undo the past (nobody can), we can use the power of regret to highlight what is important to us, what our deepest values are, and to fix what can be fixed. Even if it is too late for us, although many times it isn't as late as we think it is, our children, our loved ones, should know what is in our *regret list*. Perhaps it will help them work on their own lists.

Last but not least, there is another reason to confront our own regrets.

You see, saying we have nothing to regret, implies we lived perfect lives, we always made the right decisions, we never hurt anybody. Asserting we have nothing to regret is an indication of arrogance, arrogance nobody can afford when standing in front of מלך מלכי המלכים, the King of all kings, on the Day of Judgment.

And speaking of the King of all kings, in fact, the first mention of regret in the Torah involves no other than God.

"God saw how great was human wickedness on earth—how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time. And God regretted having made humankind on earth and became sad in His heart. And God said ... I regret that I had created them." (Genesis 6:5-6)³

Even God has regrets!

Indeed, if we have nothing to regret, we are not looking hard enough.

Rosh Hashanah is a day of introspection. We are invited to probe our hearts, to search deep inside for our shortcomings, and to make a resolution to properly address what can and should be changed, which is usually more than what we wish to admit.

Journeying back into the land of our own regrets, can help us move forward, providing us, if nothing more, with the humility needed to soften our hearts and the resolution to make amends where necessary.

Rosh Hashanah, when we strip away the honey cake, the gefilte fish, the long services, and the family reunions, is nothing more or less than a journey into the past, a journey that has the potential to transform our future. I invite you to accompany me in this journey.

And so we pray:

"King of all kings, Master of the Universe, may we have the courage to name our regrets and the humility to admit that our lives have not been free of imperfection."

Yes, reflecting on the "I wish I had..." of our lives, can bring back sad memories of past decisions that cannot be undone. However, the same sad memories have the

³ I am grateful to Rabbi Claudio Kupchik who reminded me of this source.

power to move us and those we love forward and to give us the strength and determination to change what we can, and should change.

Dear God, as we embark in this 10-day journey of introspection, give us the courage to go back, that will allow us to move forward.

And in your kindness, bless all of us and our loved ones with a year of positive and meaningful change, with a year of peace and joy, with a healthy, good and sweet year.

Amen.