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Congregation Bet Haverim
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NO REGRETS! NO GROWTH!

I don't want to brag, but in high school, I was an active participant in our theatre department. Although my first two years were spent as a dedicated athlete, I dove right into drama for my junior and senior years. Truth be told, I was a terrible actress. I recently had the great (read: Horrifying) experience of seeing a video recording of our production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, in which I attempted to mimic Bea Arthur's voice as Yente. And no, I won't be doing a reprise now. Watching that 20-year-old recording of me doing something I loved was a time warp back to that moment. Although fully-adult me was a bit mortified, I remember that 17-year-old young woman who looooooved being part of that show.

In thinking about this time in my life, I realized what I loved about it was actually the rehearsals: dividing the show into various scenes and working and reworking them again and again until we got better. Often we would stop to study, delving into what shtetl life at that time was like. We attempted to put ourselves into the shoes of our characters, attempting to understand their motivations and behaviors. It was never the final performances I longed for, I lived for the work inbetween and I think, perhaps, it was because when we were in rehearsal, there was still a chance of doing better and of getting better. Once the performance arrived, time was up, whatever we offered that

night was it. And while I am a huge proponent of the “good enough” philosophy, I did not enjoy the finality of it.

Rehearsals are comforting. They leave open the possibility for improvement, of repair, of lessons to be learned. Maybe it is no surprise that I became a rabbi, so much of what we do feels like excavating meaning from the lives of others, namely our biblical ancestors, as rehearsals for our own lives. We, all of us, as students of Torah, are endlessly grateful that our holiest of texts is filled with stories of incredibly flawed and problematic people. People who lie and cheat, people who pick power over familial relationships, people who lose their temper and erupt at others. These characters, blemishes and all, remind us time and time again that some of our human experiences are universal. As Ecclesiastes wrote, there is truly “nothing new under the sun.” It’s almost as if we read our texts trying to understand the regrets of the matriarchs and patriarchs so that we can learn from them and also see ourselves in them.

Even God (for Godsake!) is shown as an imperfect deity: Destructive and power hungry, inappropriately demanding and controlling, the God who has to be mollified to stop from destroying humanity time and time again.. Don’t get me wrong, the God of the Torah has many positive attributes portrayed as well, but I only want to emphasize that even our God, the one whom humans are made in the image of, exhibits behaviors that all of us would be ashamed of if we were to do them ourselves (and sometimes we do). But what a radical

concept, that perhaps we are imperfect because God is imperfect. So maybe it is no surprise that many of the emotions we see God exhibit in the Torah, we see them in ourselves too.

The first time the Torah names an emotion God is feeling is in Genesis Chapter 6, verse 6, at the very end of the very first Torah portion. Up until that point we can deduce that God has felt pride (after each day of creation) or maybe anger (after banishing Adam and Eve from the garden) and so on, but this is the first verse that states *clearly* what it is that God was feeling. It reads:

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ

“And יהוה **regretted** having made humankind on earth.”

[Pause] Well, doesn't that knock the wind out of you just a little? We'll put aside our own feelings and try not to take it personally that within a little over six chapters since creating the world, God regrets our existence, and we'll continue on.

Regret is the first divine feeling named in Torah. When we study Torah, we make the assumption that nothing included or excluded is by accident, that its appearance (or not) has something to teach us. What does it mean for regret to be the first emotion named in our Holy Book? I'd argue it's because regret is our biggest and best teacher.

In her book, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing*, Bronnie Ware, who worked in palliative care, end of life, after struggling to find meaning in her own life, sets forth the lessons she learned from her patients. As her book title suggests, she found five regrets that were nearly universal for the dying. As I read them, I want you to ask yourself if these regrets resonate with you right here, right now.

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. [Pause]
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard. [Pause]
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. [Pause]
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends. [Pause]
5. I wish I had let myself be happier. [Pause]

If any of these five regrets resonated with you, GOOD. Yom Kippur is our chance to imagine ourselves on our very own deathbed, engaging in Cheshbon HaNefesh, an accounting of our souls, yes thinking about what we are grateful for, but more than that, thinking about what we are regretful for. Regret is our best teacher. It informs us of where we missed the mark. Yom Kippur reminds us that it is not too late to change.

Of these five regrets, they are mostly about things people didn't do. In the research presented in Dan Pink's book, *The Power of Regret: How Looking Backward Moves us Forward*, he confirms this phenomenon. People regret not following a path they spent much of their life thinking about, they regret

not taking time for their family or loved ones, they regret the things they did not say, they regret not picking up the phone or not showing up for friends, and they regret not leaving enough space for happiness/silliness.

I hope that the reason for this is that the actions we regret, the things we said that we shouldn't have, the way we behaved that was atrocious, the things we did to, these are things that hopefully, we addressed or will. Those regrets matter too, but it's much easier to apologize for something you have done rather than something you have not done. When we put our regrets in the language of "I wish", as Bronnie Ware did in her work, we have the opportunity to translate that into action.

I'll give you two personal examples. As a young 20-something, I caught myself saying, outloud, to many people "I think I'd be happier if I played the guitar". At a certain point it clicked. Why on earth would I articulate something that I know would make me happier and not take action on that. I think you know by now how that ended up - I play guitar. Second example from the same period in my life. I had just moved away from my family for the first time to set out as a young professional. I recalled having the thought "I wish I had a family that called each other every Shabbat to say Shabbat shalom". Again, it clicked. I was an adult and I could make that wish come true, so for many years, my mother, sister, and I spoke on Friday afternoons. Unfortunately, I picked a career path that made that specific timing not work the best, but these two experiences have attuned me to pay attention to the

times I utter the words “I wish...” and to evaluate what I could do to turn that wish into reality.

I realize these are simple examples, ones in which I didn't have to calculate the worry of what someone else would think. Which, according to Dan Pink, was the biggest reason people choose to keep the status quo – they were concerned about how their choice would be perceived by others. And yet, at the end of life, suddenly the idea that what other people think stopped you from apologizing for a wrong, reconnecting with a long lost friend, changing course, seems absurd.

I said earlier that rehearsals are comforting. And we're all part of a rehearsal right now, today. Yom Kippur, this day of atonement, is a rehearsal for our deaths. I know, I started this paragraph saying that rehearsals are comforting, but hear me out. Today is a day for us to attempt to allow our lives to flash before our eyes, to confront the horrible truth that not one of us knows how many seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, or years we have left. We fast, if not literally due to health concerns, than physically, we try to avoid the things that bring us joy, we sit with our feelings, all of them, especially our regrets.

The rest of the year, we are living. Mostly able to ignore our own mortality until we are confronted with it head on through the death of someone we loved. But for one day a year, we get to rehearse for what it *will* be like when it *is* our turn. Each of us have moments that swirl through our

minds, the ones that haunt us in the night, the words said or unsaid, the love shown or withheld, the memories that bring that deep sinking feeling or the punch to the gut of what we have done or what we avoided doing. And we are gifted this day to remind us *this is only a rehearsal!* You still have time! So what do we do with this rehearsal, with this time? REGRET.

If rehearsals are comforting, so is regret. Looking back at the biblical word used: Vayinachem, it has two translations. One is that of Regret as this verse is commonly translated. And the second is “comfort”. We may look at regret as a negative, but addressing our regrets can actually lead us to a place of comfort. As Dan Pink writes, “Feeling is for thinking, and thinking is for doing.” And that, in one nine word sentence is what I hope this holy day of reflection gives you the space to do - to feel, but not for feelings sake, in order to think, to move our emotions into the realm of thinking about what we could have done differently and then take those thoughts and turn them into behaviors. Take a leap, call a friend you haven't spoken to for twenty-five years, take a day off, do something silly.

Make the most of this rehearsal for our deaths. If you're having a hard time deciding where to start, let me share a piece of research from the Harvard Gazette from 2017. The research showed that “Close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives...those ties protect people from life's discontents, help to delay mental and physical decline, and are better predictors of long and happy lives than

social class, IQ, or even genes. That finding proved true across the board...” they write. Meditate especially on the relationships in your life, what regrets do you have (I am not asking you what you think other people should regret), who do you miss in your life? Who would you like to reach out to either following this service or Yom Kippur?

To bring it to another level, the “Harvard study, almost 80 years old, has proved that embracing community helps us live longer, and be happier.” If that isn’t a vote for opting into community, I don’t know what is. We all have regrets (or at least we should). Part of being in Jewish community is creating opportunities to constantly hold a mirror up to ourselves so that we do not get to our last day filled with regrets. It may seem counterintuitive that processing regret makes us happier in the long run, but it is backed up by science. Dan Pink again shares that even the mere act of disclosing your regrets either by writing them down or telling them to someone else resulted in “overall life satisfaction and improved...physical and mental well-being in ways that merely thinking about it did not.” (p. 209) Being in community allows us the opportunity to process together. The confessions we have or will have uttered this Yom Kippur, of literally saying out loud, I HAVE DONE WRONG. Also, remind us to reflect on each one, admitting that we too have failed in these ways.

God may have regretted creating humans back in Genesis, but thankfully our tradition holds within it the tools so we don't have to regret having been created. May you be comforted by where your regrets lead you..

G'mar Chatima Tova, may you be sealed for good (regrets).