

The Sabbath of Return

Shabbat Shuva | September 29, 2022

A fascinating article in the *Wall Street Journal* by Daniel Pink titled, “No Regrets Is No Way to Live,” argues that feeling regretful about past mistakes or missed opportunities is essential, and that the model of “no regrets” is profoundly incorrect. Pink writes,

Regret is not dangerous or abnormal. It is healthy and universal, an integral part of being human. Equally important, regret is valuable. It clarifies. It instructs. Done right, it needn't drag us down; it can lift us up.

Granted, regret feels awful. It is the stomach-churning sensation that the present would be better and the future brighter if only you hadn't chosen so poorly, decided so wrongly or acted so stupidly in the past. Regret hurts; it makes sense that we'd try to shut it out.

But if regret is hard to take, it's even harder to avoid.

Daniel Pink is right, and his article cuts to the heart of what repentance is all about, which in turn allows us to study the prophetic passage most famously associated with the penitential season.

The end of Hosea provides us with the *Haftarah* (the prophetic reading) for the Sabbath before Yom Kippur, and it gives us a clarion call to repentance. Its opening word, “*shuva*,” serves for many Jews as the source of a name given this day: “*Shabbat Shuva*,” the “Sabbath of Return.”

O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast fallen by thine iniquity.

Take with you words, and turn to the Lord: say unto him, Take away all iniquity, and

receive us graciously: so will we render the calves of our lips.

Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride upon horses; neither will we say any more to the work of our hands, Ye are our gods: for in thee the fatherless findeth mercy.

I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for mine anger is turned away from him. (Hosea 14:1-4)

The prophet exhorts Israel to repent, and Israel is guaranteed by God that with repentance will come forgiveness and love. But how does repentance work? How is the penitent supposed to look upon past sins?

One possible understanding of repentance is as a process through which one becomes a different person, forever disconnected from past failures. A literary example of such a description can be found in the repentance of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, where he weeps and studies his past life as if he were not the villain that performed his own misdeeds. This is how Victor Hugo describes it:

As he wept, daylight penetrated more and more clearly into his soul; an extraordinary light; a light at once ravishing and terrible. His past life, his first fault, his long expiation, his external brutishness, his internal hardness, his dismissal to liberty, rejoicing in manifold plans of vengeance, what had happened to him at the Bishop's, the last thing that he had done, that theft of forty sous from a child, a crime all the more cowardly, and all the more monstrous since it had come after the Bishop's pardon,—all this recurred to his mind and appeared clearly to him,

but with a clearness which he had never hitherto witnessed. He examined his life, and it seemed horrible to him; his soul, and it seemed frightful to him. In the meantime a gentle light rested over this life and this soul. It seemed to him that he beheld Satan by the light of Paradise.

This is one form of repentance: one changes so much that one is no longer identified with the person who performed those original acts. But there is another approach to repentance in which we don't seek to forget our mistakes, our faltering, our failures: we bear them with us through life; we remember them; we learn from them.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik describes this approach as follows:

Sin is not to be forgotten, blotted out or cast into the depths of the sea. On the contrary, sin has to be remembered. It is the memory of sin that releases the power within the inner depths of the soul of the penitent to do greater things than ever before. The energy of sin can be used to bring one to new heights.

Indeed, it is perhaps just this sort of repentance to which Hosea refers "*Take with you words*," he says. Many understand this as the prophet describing confession, open enunciation of one's past misdeeds.

As Daniel Pink notes in the *Wall Street Journal*, openly confronting one's failures is very important:

The research shows that by acknowledging past regrets we can avert future ones. In a 2008 study in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, Keith Markman of Ohio University and his collaborators discovered that prompting participants to ponder their regrets after a problem-solving exercise enhanced their persistence, strategic thinking and performance on subsequent exercises. A 2021 Bentley University study published in the *International Journal*

of Organization Theory and Behavior showed that encouraging corporate executives to reflect on their regrets, rather than elide them, gave them greater "clarity of thought regarding their current business challenges."

Pink adds later in the article that:

Using language, whether written or spoken, forces us to organize and integrate our thoughts. Describing regrets to others converts those abstract, stomach-churning feelings into concrete, less fearsome words. Instead of those unpleasant emotions fluttering around uncontrollably, language helps us to capture them in our net, pin them down and begin analyzing them.

We are now able to begin to understand how bearing memory of past misdeeds into the future can actually engender profound moral and spiritual progress. But regret's connection to repentance is bound up with penitence beyond the process of learning from one's mistakes. The word for repentance in Hebrew is "*teshuva*," literally meaning "return." Hosea's cry is "*Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God.*" To engage in sin is to distance oneself from God, and return is described as being ensconced in the Almighty's embrace:

I will be as the dew unto Israel: he shall grow as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon.

His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon.

They that dwell under his shade shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and grow as the vine: the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. (Hosea 14:5-7)

Repentance, then, is driven by a desire to feel close to God once again, or, to paraphrase Hosea, to be under the comforting "shade of God" once again. It is with this in mind that we can better understand how regret can drive this return of which the prophet speaks. Here, we draw on one of the most remarkable passages

in Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's lectures on repentance. In order to describe how connection with the past can form penitence in the future, Rabbi Soloveitchik, as an analogy, reflects on one's reaction following the death of a loved one. No matter how fulfilling a relationship may have been, no matter how much one honored one's connection to parent or spouse, when a loss occurs the bereaved looks back on missed opportunities and longs for one more moment of that loved one's presence. One more moment of that closeness. The same can be said for others in our lives. Thus, the Talmud describes Rabbi Ada bar Ava mourning after his teacher and mentor passed away, regretting that he did not seize every moment that was available to learn from him.

And in perhaps the most moving passage in all of his pre-High Holiday lectures, speaking of his parents and also of his wife, both of whom had at that point passed away, Rabbi Soloveitchik said as follows:

Just before Rosh Hashanah, I imagine that my father, of blessed memory, was standing beside me. He was the one and only *rebbe*, master and teacher, that I ever had. I put my life down before him and said: "My father, my teacher, I have had so many new insights concerning the laws of the Day of Atonement... certainly there are amongst them some which would have pleased you, and also some which you would've rejected..." That was how I imagined myself speaking to my father, knowing that I would receive no response. Oh, what would I have given to be able to discuss Torah with him, if only for five minutes! But I knew that my beloved father, who had once been so close to me, was now far away, and my heart burst with a desire to talk to him for even five minutes, which had not seemed so valuable while he was still alive.

The same is true regarding my mother and my wife. Several days ago I once again sat down to prepare my annual discourse on the subject of repentance.

I always used to discuss it with my wife, and she would help me to define and crystallize my thoughts. This year, too, I prepared the discourse, while consulting her: "Could you please advise me? Should I expand upon this idea or cut down on that idea? Should I emphasize this point or that one?"

I asked, but heard no reply. Perhaps there was a whispered response to my question, but it was swallowed up by the wind whistling through the trees and it did not reach me.

It is with this in mind, Rabbi Soloveitchik further said, that we can understand how repentance can be driven by regret. We will not be fully reunited with those we loved and lost while we are still in this life. But if sin has distanced us from God, we can indeed be driven by our regretting the distance we have placed between us and the Almighty; and then God can be found again wherever we are.

Rabbi Soloveitchik put it this way:

No matter how old he is and what stage he has reached in life, a Jew begins to long again for the Master of the universe, in the same way as Rav Ada bar Ava longed for his master and I long for my wife. But while our longings are a fantasy, since one who has died will never return, longing for the Master of the universe is realistic, and man is drawn to Him and rushes toward him with all his strength. He runs faster than he used to before he strayed afar. The intensity of the longing that bursts forth after having been pent up for so long impels him forward. For example, were I actually to see my father, would I not run after him as fast as light itself?

So, too, the sinner who has repented runs after the Creator, with all his might and strength.

This impulsion of longing raises the individual who has repented to a level above that of the thoroughly righteous man. He has not forgotten his sin—he must not forget it. Sin is the generating force, the springboard which pushes him higher and higher.

Repentance is the call of Hosea. The call with which the prophet concludes. It is not an easy endeavor. It requires confronting mistakes. But the *Wall Street Journal* article elucidates why this confrontation can be so valuable, and Daniel Pink concludes his piece as follows:

Looking backward can move all of us forward, if we respond correctly. That demands thinking clearly about this indispensable emotion. In 1967, in an essay for the *New York Review of Books*, James Baldwin demonstrated that clarity when he wrote: “Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal.”

More than a half-century later, as we start to emerge from a period that has forced many of us to face our own mortality, we are learning that regret can offer one of the clearest paths to a life well-lived.

Hosea’s call for return is sounded on the Sabbath before Yom Kippur. But for Judaism, if we are ever distant from the Divine, there is no moment in our lives when God cannot be encountered once again.

Discussion Questions:

1. Rabbi Soloveichik describes two contrasting ideas of repentance—a complete wiping away of past sins and a focus on past transgression as a way of propelling one into a more righteous future. What are some examples from the rituals and liturgy of Yom Kippur that speak to each of these visions of *teshuvah*?

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