

YOM KIPPUR 5784
Rabbi Amy Schwartzman – Temple Rodef Shalom

First 30 seconds of Kol Nidre is played.

Kol Nidre - powerful, evocative, chilling. It is the emotional anchor for this day, the centerpiece of our observance. It resides deep within us, and Yom Kippur would not be complete without this melody. On cello, violin, in the voice of our Cantor; it is the Sound of Atonement.ⁱ

While the music is so profoundly meaningful, the words are not. To our modern ears, to our logical minds and ethical souls – they fall short at best and at worst, they are completely senseless.

(We read...)

“For all the vows we have made in this last year and those we make between this day and next Yom Kippur, all of these we publicly renounce. Let them be relinquished and abandoned, null and void. Let our vows, pledges and oaths be considered neither vows nor pledges nor oaths.”

While the music of *Kol Nidre* may grip our hearts, for most of us, these words trouble our minds. Would we blithely cast away the commitments we have made this past year? Do we actually believe that next year’s promises come with a footnote dismissing them in advance? This prayer makes little sense – which is probably why most Reform Congregations never read the English aloud.

For years, our people have struggled with this liturgy. Over the centuries, there have been attempts to remove it from the prayerbook - *obviously, unsuccessfully*. Some scholars have tried to explain these difficult words by attributing them to the Jews of Spain who, during the inquisition, feared they might have to vow to convert to Christianity. But in fact, these very

words appear in prayer books long before the 1400's. So, one must wonder, what are their origins? What was the intention of the author of this prayer?

Last month, looking for a distraction from my holiday preparations, I went to the movies to see Oppenheimer. This excellent film tells the story of the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and his role in the Manhattan project. He is known as the father of the atomic bomb which was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ending WWII. While the movie is mostly about Oppenheimer's leadership in the creation of the bomb, the ending portrays his painful fall from grace. After the war, understanding how the bomb forever changed our world, he advocated against further nuclear research including trying to stop the creation of the hydrogen or H bomb. Oppenheimer's ideas were not well received by his peers; he lost his security clearance and sadly became unpopular.

While I went to this movie for a night off, I did anticipate that it, *a story about the atomic bomb*, might leave me with some thoughts on our main theme for today – teshuvah - repentance. Surprisingly, that didn't happen. I left the theater thinking not at all about atonement, but rather sensing, very deeply, something different. For me Oppenheimer was a film about regret.

In truth, Oppenheimer did not regret creating the bomb. He did regret, however, the second time it was used on Nagasaki and, even more, the chain reaction his invention triggered for posterity. This, and more personal regrets, propelled Oppenheimer in a new direction and he spent the last half of his life campaigning and lecturing against the threat of nuclear weapons on the future of humanity.

When I returned to my desk the next day, the previously confusing message of *Kol Nidre* came into focus for me and I saw, with new clarity, the intention of its words. Kol Nidre is a prayer whose purpose is to help us address, navigate, learn from, work through, and even embrace regret.

Opening 30 seconds of Kol Nidre played softly under these words:

For all our unfulfilled vows, we regret that we made them in haste, that we weren't more thoughtful before saying the words, that we ran out of time, that we lacked the motivation, that we failed to follow through. And the only way we can address the damage, repair the past, do better in the future, - the only way to make them null and void is to harness the power of regret, embracing this indispensable emotion and using it for good.

Yom Kippur begins with *Kol Nidre* because the work we are called to do today, repentance, forgiveness, and change, cannot begin without regret. Today, we practice atonement, which effectively calls us to examine our deeds, mourn them and to ultimately make a shift in our lives.ⁱⁱ The fuel for this work is regret: those feelings of disappointment, pain, embarrassment that emerge with the realization that we did something wrong, that we missed an opportunity, that we should have made a different choice. Regret comes from our uniquely human ability to imagine that if we had done this one thing differently, we or someone else, would feel better, safer, happier. Regret is powerful. It is valuable and it is the first step we take into our Day of Atonement. Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker, put his finger on it when he said: confession without regret is hollow and reconciliation without regret is just a band-aid.

I'm sure you've heard people say: '*I have No Regrets.*' Or Frank Sinatra sing: '*Regrets, I've had a few – but then again too few to mention.*' Really? Could that be true? Is that healthy? The oft-quoted psychologist Brene Brown writes: "*No Regrets* doesn't mean living a life with (exceptional) courage (or wisdom), it means living a life without reflection. To live without regret, is to believe you have nothing to learn, no amends to make and no opportunity to be braver and do better in your life."ⁱⁱⁱ

Fun Facts – 74% of Americans have financial regrets. 40% of us regret the major we chose in college. 20% of people regret having gotten their tattoo!

Intrigued by this theme, I read Daniel Pink's book *The Power of Regret*. Pink is a social scientist who became fascinated with this topic when he found people were surprisingly eager to talk with him about their personal misgivings. In response, he launched the American Regret Project where he interviewed over 4 thousand people about their regrets. Then he created the online World Regret Survey (which I took, and you can too) where over 22 thousand people shared a weighty regret in their lives.

Through these two ventures, Pink learned some fascinating things about how we manage our regrets, how we live with them, and learn from them, and how they can, as they did for Oppenheimer, help us change our direction hopefully making us better, kinder, wiser people.

After reading all those thousands of responses, Pink saw a pattern. Regrets, he reports, generally fall into several categories^{iv}. Just to name a few – there are regrets about not taking risks – Boldness Regrets, and there are regrets about not stepping up to do the right thing – Moral Regrets. There are regrets for choices that have had lasting and often irreversible impacts on our lives. But the majority of regrets fall into a category Pink calls Connection Regrets. These are the ones about our relationships. Like not spending enough time with a grandparent, letting that friendship slip away, missing the chance to speak with someone before they die. Failed connections fill most of the space in the landscape of remorse.

Pink also noticed that most of regrets we are carrying around are not for things we did, but for things that we did not do. That is – for our inaction, the times that we held back, didn't get involved, didn't pick up the phone, didn't cast the vote, didn't speak up.

Any of this sound familiar? I am sure each one of us has regrets like these. I do. Thankfully, Judaism allows us to be fallible, imperfect. And feeling bad about our errors is part of being human. Feeling regret means that we are sensitive souls who are distressed when we don't live up to the image we have of ourselves and when we let others down. Thank you, *Kol*

Nidre, you call us back to our unkept promises, to our inaction, to the hurt we have caused. Despite its off-putting words, we know we are responsible, and we know we must work to make right our misdeeds and improve our ways.

Kol Nidre later section – 10 seconds.

I have many regrets – some from my youth, some about my family, some about my rabbinate, some are very significant. But the one I think about more than any other happened on my wedding day. I was married here at our Temple. About an hour before the photos, my best woman-best-friend, Shelley, and I went to my office to get dressed. Just the two of us, you know - the dress, the shoes, the hair, the make-up. About 30 minutes into our primping, my mother showed up. And in an instant, I understood that she had wanted to be part of that special moment. I have always regretted not realizing that I should have included her. Some time, long after the wedding, I apologized. But this Regret of Connection, this inaction, pains me greatly to this day.

Maybe you are thinking – come on! You apologized! I’m sure your mom forgave you. (She did.) Why are you still thinking about this?

I continue to think about this because this regret and so many others, are for me, for all of us, a portal to personal growth and change. When we reflect on them, seeing the error of our ways and feeling the sadness, or hurt associated with that, we clarify what’s important to us. Our regrets shine a spotlight on what we value. Even more, they propel us forward to make different choices and fashion a new narrative. Because I regret my wedding day mistake, I now approach special family moments differently. I’m trying to avoid making this mistake again – I’m trying to ensure it will be - as Kol Nidre says – null and void.

As effective as it is for us to manage our regrets of the past, there is also value in looking into the future and picturing how we might feel in 1 year or in 10 years because of something we do or don’t do now. This is the wisdom of Kol Nidre when it instructs us to think of those

vows we might make between this day and next Yom Kippur. Our modern thinkers have given this exercise a name. It's called Anticipatory Regret. Foreseeing the feelings we might have, if we don't *-follow through with that plan, -aren't there for that child, or -neglect to save for that future need*, can be a powerful change agent. Experts say anticipating the regrets we might have in the future, inspires us to adjust our behavior more than dwelling on the present.

Oppenheimer eventually understood this. Kol Nidre has always understood it. *For the missteps, the unfulfilled vows we make between this Yom Kippur and the next*. Look ahead the prayer says. Anticipate your regrets of the future. Think about them today. Act differently and make them null and void, now!

Another section of Kol Nidre is played – 10 seconds.

The first recorded emotion in the Torah, is not Adam's or Eve's, its not Moses' or Miriam's. The first emotion in the Torah is God's and it is regret. In the story of Noah, when God is frustrated with humanity's behavior, we read:

וַיִּנָּחֵם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בָּאָרֶץ

And God regretted having brought people to the earth.

The line continues וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים. And God was sad, heartbroken.

I find this extraordinary! No matter whether I believe that the Noah story is true, no matter if I don't like what comes next (that is the flood), and putting aside God wants to destroy us, I am amazed by this text. This is not the God I learned about in Sunday school. This God reflects on the past, admits to a mistake, and is emotionally moved to remorse and even to great sadness. How Human!! If God can say, "I really wish I hadn't done that," doesn't that give us at least a bit of permission to regret our own (considerably less consequential) decisions?ʎ

Folded into this ancient story is a one last bit of advice for us today. The word in the Torah for regret is Nachum – spelled nun-chet-mem. Nachum means regret but it also means compassion and comfort.

This Hebrew word may be teaching us what modern social scientists like Daniel Pink and Brene Brown emphasize in all their writings. That is: to come to terms with regret, we need to be compassionate – with ourselves. If we beat ourselves up, if we judge ourselves harshly, we can damage our sense of who we are. We make it harder to do the work of repair and change. Worse, if regret remains within us, *perhaps even as a secret*, if it burrows deep into our souls and our psyches, it can transform itself and transform us. Where we once had remorse for what we did, we now have shame for who we are. Regret and gentleness must be intertwined. Self-compassion begins by replacing searing self judgements with a tender, clear-eyed self-kindness.

Opening 30 seconds of Kol Nidre is played

Kol Nidre – powerful, evocative, compassionate, comforting - the sound of atonement. As its music pierces our souls, so too, let its words move us to face and embrace our regrets, our remorse. *We made promises with good intentions and broke them without planning to; we wanted to do good but did harm without meaning to; we gave our word and meant it and then took it back without expecting to.* And we know we may do all this again - someday – but today we will try to thwart that. We will try to arrive here next year with less – less regret, less guilt, less remorse.

Kol Nidre calls us to do the work of exploring and learning from our regrets – those of the past and those of the future. It is hard work; it's also sacred work. It requires vulnerability and honesty, bravery, and lots of self-compassion. Today we face it all – the heartbreak, the sadness, the embarrassment, the angst. Our regrets! Go there! Picture them, replay them, cry, yes really cry about them. Unburden yourself. Forgive yourself. In your struggle, I believe you will find some new hidden strength – strength that will propel you to atone, to repair and to change. Embrace this God given gift. Heal the past, create a better future - become the person you wish to be.

Final section of Kol Nidre is sung by Cantor and choir

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ⁱ Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, All Our Vows page 40

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Joshua Caruso, Regrets – I’ve had a few... 2022.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brene Brown, Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution (adapted)

^{iv} Daniel Pink, The Power of Regret

^v Rabbi Jonathan Blake. Yizkor 5783