

Kol Nidrei 5783

At some point during this past year I was shopping at Wegmans and I ran into a congregant, let's call her Mrs. Schwartz. "Oh rabbi," she said. "It is so nice to see you. How are your children? How old are they now? I am sorry you haven't seen me in Temple, I *really should* go more often. But I will see you on the holidays."

At a different point, over the summer, I was at the beach one Shabbat afternoon over the summer, I ran into another family- we'll call them Schwartz too. "Rabbi, how are you?" I didn't recognize you at first. My how your kids have grown! *I am sorry you didn't see me in Temple this morning. I'm not really a religious person. But I try.* Don't worry, you'll see me on the holidays. Or maybe, I will livestream."

Okay- so these two exact conversations didn't exactly happen - but I have dozens of conversations like this every year with members of our community when I encounter them around town. I do not judge when I have these conversations, I am not judging now, and I do understand where these comments and conversations stem from.

Jewish guilt is a very strong thing. Indeed, I imagine that some of you *are here*, right now, in person or on live stream- in part at least, because of Jewish guilt.

I get it. But it also makes me sad. *Why all of the guilt?* Why do people always feel they are being “judged”? Judaism should be something that brings us meaning, joy, and purpose- not guilt or stress. Judaism should be something that gives us strength and direction, not shame or embarrassment.

I think that part of the challenge lies in the very way that we have been taught to approach the *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe in general, and this moment of Yom Kippur in particular. These days, the days when our synagogue has the highest attendance rate of the year, also happen to be the ones filled with judgment, with self-flagellation, with a focus on the ways we have failed, and the people we have let down, in this past year. No wonder people walk around with so much guilt with this as their main, or one of their main, annual Jewish experiences.

The problem is, when we focus solely on the themes of divine judgment, self-judgment, punishment and forgiveness, we do ourselves a disservice. It is true that Yom Kippur is *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment. It is true that the main metaphors for our ancient

rabbis were that of God as King, as Judge, as the arbiter of who “gets in” to the Book of Life, and who does not. But we would do well to remember that these are just metaphors. They worked for the composers of the liturgy who were trying to convey a sense that there was something greater than them, something to inspire a way of life that was dedicated to service, to a higher purpose. They used these metaphors to inspire the worshipers who recited these to do *teshuvah*, to turn, to change, to examine their lives, and to make corrections and adaptations as necessary.

Metaphors of God as a King and as the ultimate judge worked at the time because in those days kings *were* all powerful, they *were* “the ultimate judge.” But as we inherit this poetry generations later, we must remember that these descriptions are not meant to be taken literally. Especially because these metaphors are only two of the hundreds of other words and ideas used to describe God! In an effort to describe the indescribable, our tradition tells us that God is a breath of life, God is a shepherd, God is shelter, God is a shield. There is even one metaphor for God, in the Talmudic tractate Yoma that is all about Yom Kippur, imagining God as water, as a mikvah (Yoma 8:9). What if we focused on the idea of God as water, as the One who sustains our lives? God as water gives us a chance to cleanse and purify ourselves, and to emerge from these days renewed, with a new lease on life, like a child who emerges from the womb for the first time?

A very different image and idea.

Much less guilt.

On Passover, we describe God as a redeemer. On Sukkot, we describe God as a sheltering presence. On Shavuot, we focus on God as the One who gives us Torah. On Shabbat, we see God as the One who Creates and then Rests. On Purim, we don't even mention God- at least not directly. But today, on Yom Kippur, we get God as Judge. God as Ruler. God as "the decider." Rabbi Chai Levy explains that this metaphor of a Judging God:

...touches our most painful religious questions and fears. If God really is the Judge, then why is there no Justice in our world? If God really is the Judge, then when we suffer, we ask: why is God punishing me? If God really is the Judge, then how can we find comfort in God when tragedy strikes innocent, good people?

Rabbi Levy continues:

I understand why (someone) would say I don't believe in the Jewish God, if her only exposure was to God the Judge. I understand why the Talmud sage, Elisha Ben Abuya left Judaism – The Talmud tells his story:

He saw a boy fulfilling the exact two mitzvot for which the Torah promises the reward of a long life: Shooing away the mother bird before taking her young, and Honoring your parents. Do these two, the Torah says: and you'll be rewarded with long life. The boy's father told him to climb a ladder and shoo away the mother bird, and the boy did so, and he honored his father's instruction, and - he fell off the ladder and died. With that Elisha Ben Abuya declared, *Leit Din v'Leit Dayan*, "there is no justice and there is no Judge," and he left Judaism.

I understand Elisha ben Abuya's struggle. I understand why the metaphor of God as judge is so challenging for so many. I struggle with it myself. And while I don't think that this entire idea is irredeemable, I do think it needs a bit of reframing.

Here is what I mean: this entire period that we are completing, the one that began in Elul and continues through today, is all about *self-reflection*. It is all about doing some serious soul searching, some looking inward, as we work to create a spiritual reset of sorts. Indeed, every time we pray throughout the year we are invited to be self-reflective. And what tends to happen when we people start to reflect in this way? We often start to judge ourselves. The Hebrew word for prayer, *l'hitpalel*, can even mean

“to judge oneself.” But tonight, I want us to remember that it is not **whether we** judge ourselves, but *how we judge* ourselves that matters.

How we judge ourselves?

And how we believe God judges us.

In the same breath as we refer to God as a Judge, our tradition also reminds us that the sounds of the shofar, the sincerity of our prayers, the seriousness with which we take our journey of teshuvah, of “return” during this season- all have the power to “move God” from the *kiseh ha din*, the seat of strict judgment, to *kiseh ha-rachamim*, the seat of mercy and compassion. We are taught throughout the liturgy, over and over, and throughout the Haftarot from Isaiah that we have been reciting every Shabbat for the past seven weeks, that God wants to forgive us. Why? Because God is ultimately believed to be compassionate. *It is compassion, not strict judgment, that is the ultimate theme of these Days of Awe.* God is supposed to be a *compassionate* judge. And we, made in the divine image, are supposed to lead with gentle compassion *for ourselves* and for one another.

But what about all of the *klopping*, the self-flagellation, the beating of our hearts- aren’t we somehow punishing ourselves? We say the confessional, we beat our breast, and we feel bad about ourselves. But that is a mistake, and it is actually counterproductive.

Rabbi Laura Geller once explained that it is useful instead to think of this moment in

our liturgy more as a “knocking on the heart, cracking it open and making it vulnerable.” In other words, during these public moments of confession, we are invited to be compassionate with ourselves, to open our hearts, to be vulnerable. We are invited to turn inward, in teshuvah, *towards* places and shortcomings that we might rather *turn away* from. How does a person feel when they stand before a King, or before a Judge-*vulnerable*. I think that’s what our sages were going for, and we should be going for, when confronting this metaphor.

We are meant to be vulnerable. We are meant to feel exposed. And we are meant to share this experience together during these days in order to remember that while each of us have our own, personal, sacred work to do, none of us are doing it alone.

Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin reminds us that we also strike the heart because, in the bible, the heart was the seat of the intellect. When we beat our hearts, we are meant to remember that we are alive, and that we have an opportunity to consider just what it is that we are doing with our lives.

In fact, says Salkin:

...beating on the chest/heart might be even more powerful, and more suggestive, than we had once thought. Beating on the chest appears to have been an outward manifestation of mourning. The Sages (Genesis Rabbah 96, Shabbat 148b, Megillah 3b, and elsewhere) refer to beating on a chest at a funeral as a sign of mourning. When Rabbi Eliezer died, Rabbi Akiva beat his breast until it bled (Talmud, Sanhedrin 68a)....

When we pound our chests, we are mourning our own inner death. And perhaps we might also say that beating on the chest is not only an act of mourning for ourselves, but a kind of spiritual CPR. Teshuva then- is nothing less than a rebirth of the soul. We are no longer dead; we are alive, again, to the possibility of a new moral life.

We recite the confessional, we beat our hearts, to say that we are fragile, we are vulnerable, we are lost, a part of us has died this year. But then we are invited to remember that this period of time, this very day, this very heartbeat is a gift. A gift that comes with the ability to engage in teshuvah, to return- to our best selves, our truest selves, *our truest intentions*.

Is there some judgment in this equation? Yes. Judgment in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing. But it is not meant to be a harsh judgment- rather a considered and careful assessment of how things have been going for us during this past year. How have our relationships gone? What did we prioritize this last year and what did we fail to prioritize? What mistakes have we made this year with our loved ones? What bad habits have we fallen into? What changes would we like to see in our lives? How might we get started? Those are questions of judgment, they are evaluations. We have to evaluate before we can make a change. But once we evaluate, we are to move forward with care and compassion, not guilt and anger. In the end, our tradition is trying to help us understand the idea that we **can** make a change. Teshuvah, the ability to turn, to “return” is always in our hands. That is why Rabbi Eliezer famously taught that a person can do teshuvah up until the final moments of their lives (Avot 2:1). We get distracted each year. We fall short of our intentions, of our desire to change. We veer from the path that we would ideally like to travel in life. And then we are invited, during these days, in this moment, to return.

Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first chief Rabbi of British Mandate Palestine, understood *teshuvah* as a process that allows us to re-discover and re-embrace the true and whole person *that we have always been*. For Rav Kook, the process of teshuvah is

more about recovering parts of ourselves, intentions, relationships, that somehow got lost along the way of our lives.

When we forget the essence of our own soul... everything becomes confused and in doubt. The primary teshuva, that which immediately lights the darkness, is when a person returns to himself, to the root of his soul – then he will immediately return to God, to the soul of all souls.

We knock on our heart to return to ourselves, to return to God, to remind ourselves that we have the power to become the best versions of ourselves that we can be. Gently, lovingly, and carefully, we are invited to turn inward, to uncover the places that we have fallen down, to remind ourselves of the power that we have to pick ourselves back up- one piece at a time; one knock on the heart at a time.

This process, however, does not require that we beat ourselves up. This is not a process that aims to make us feel guilt. **But it is a process that may require us to feel some regret.**

This summer I read an interesting new book entitled “The Power of Regret,” by Daniel Pink. In it, Pink challenges the entire notion that “no regrets” is somehow a good

philosophy in life. Understanding regret as an opportunity for change, Pink explains that it is our ability to feel regret that makes us human. It is our ability to feel regret that makes us want to do better the next time. Through research and data collection, Pink discovered four major categories of regret that humans experience. Foundational regret (failure to be responsible, conscientious or prudent), Boldness regret (those chances that we didn't take), Moral regrets (those moments when we had a lapse in moral judgment) and Connection regrets (failure to develop, sustain, or maintain relationships with others). Each type of regret comes with its own set of challenges, but all share the experience of being choices that we can remember and consider, as we "look backward to move forward, seize what we can control and put aside what we cannot, crafting our own redemption stories. (As Pink says simply "it can be liberating (210)."

In other words, our regret can be used to make us better, to help us improve, to enable us to move forward with increased intention. Pink explains:

One of my deepest regrets is that I wasn't kinder to people when I was younger. I'm not sure that happened for a reason, but I am sure I can find reason in the recollection. Now I try (not always successfully) to make kindness a higher priority.

I also regret moments of dishonesty, which were not cataclysmic yet somehow remain seared in my memory. Now I try to avoid placing new items on those mental shelves by working harder to do the right thing.

I regret certain educational and professional choices that I made. But now I kick myself less for those blunders and use the lessons I learned to guide the rest of my life and to inform the advice I offer others.

I regret not forging enough close connections with friends, mentors, and colleagues. Now, I try harder to reach out...

After a few years immersed in the science and experience of our most misunderstood emotion, I've discovered about myself what I've discovered about others. *Regret makes me human. Regret makes me better. Regret gives me hope. (210-211)*

Regret makes us human. Regret makes us better.

The confessionals on Yom Kippur are not about *beating ourselves up, they are about building ourselves up*. We are here to make ourselves better. We are asked to gather in this moment, to do the work of the past month and a half, to examine our shortcomings, to ask for forgiveness from others- because God sees the goodness in each of us, and wants us to recognize it in ourselves as well. Indeed God has seen our potential for

goodness since the very beginning. When God created humanity, the Torah tells us that God did not just say it was tov, good, like the other days, but *tov me'od*, very good (Gen 1:31). We were **very good. And we still are, or at least, we still can be.** We, as human beings, have a tremendous capacity for cultivating goodness. God knows that, and we should remember that. When we embrace the process of teshuvah, of returning, we elevate the best of our intentions, in spite of those moments when we missed the mark during this past year.

The Hassidic master Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polnoye, one of the most well-known disciples of the Ba'al Shem Tov believed that

..“the whole world is filled with God’s presence (Isaiah 6:3) and that “there is no place empty of [God]” [Tikkunei Zohar]. All human thoughts have within them the reality of God...When a strange or evil thought arises in a person’s mind while he is engaged in prayer, it is coming to that person to be repaired and elevated...It is necessary to find the root of love in evil so as to sweeten evil and to turn it into love...”

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains:

This confession of sins is not about self-rejection or self-flagellation but the healing that can only come from regret and, then, self- acceptance. This does not mean we are proud of what we did, but it does mean that we have taken what

we did back into ourselves- acknowledged it as an eternal part of our psyches.

Now, however, we have uncovered its original motive, realized how it became disfigured beyond recognition, made an apology, and done our best to repair the damage.

Such a confession of sins accepts our evils as our own deliberate creations- long banished children taken home again at last. And that, of course, is the only way to truly transform them. A whole human being remembers all of his or her past and accepts everything that he or she has done. **And, for this reason, when we recite the *Al Chet* or *Ashamnu*, we don't hit ourselves, we *hold* ourselves and cry.**

A number of years ago, Rabbi Avi Weiss wrote a prayer modeled after the short vidui, the short confessional. Instead of phrasing it in the negative (we abuse, we betray, we are cruel), he reminded us of something that is also true:

אָהַבְנוּ, בָּרַכְנוּ, גָּדַלְנוּ, דִּבְרַנּוּ יָפִי

We have loved, we have blessed, we have grown, we have spoken positively.

הֶעֱלִינוּ, וְחִסְנוּ, זָרָנוּ

We have raised up, we have shown compassion, we have acted enthusiastically,

חַמְלָנוּ, טַפְחָנוּ אֱמֶת

We have been empathetic, we have cultivated truth,

יַעֲצָנוּ טוֹב, כִּבְדָּנוּ, לְמַדָּנוּ, מָחֵלָנוּ

We have given good advice, we have respected, we have learned, we have forgiven,

נִחְמָנוּ, סָלֵלָנוּ, עוֹרְרָנוּ

We have comforted, we have been creative, we have stirred,

פָּעֵלָנוּ, צַדִּיקָנוּ, קוִיָּנוּ לְאֶרֶץ

We have been spiritual activists, we have been just, we have longed for Israel,

רַחֲמָנוּ, שָׁקָדָנוּ

We have been merciful, we have given full effort,

תִּמְכָּנוּ, תִּרְמָנוּ, תִּקְנָנוּ

We have supported, we have contributed, we have repaired.

In other words- it hasn't all been bad. And while I am not ready to replace the traditional list of shortcomings with this list of positives, because we shouldn't throw out judgment entirely, perhaps we would do well to remember that our mistakes **are not the only thing** that defines us. We have made mistakes. But we can correct them. We have gone off course, but we can get back on track. We have also, hopefully more

than occasionally, done some good things this past year.

So as we gather on this most sacred evening of the Jewish calendar, let us remember that this moment, this day, is an invitation. It is an opportunity. It is a reminder to open our hearts and let them show us the way forward. Thousands of years ago, during the time of the Mishnah, Yom Kippur was considered by some to be an ultimate day of joy (Taanit 4:8). Perhaps that is because it is on this day that we remember our inner strength. It is on this day we take ownership, not only of who we have been, *but of who we are capable of becoming*. And so, over these next 25 hours, may we be gentle with ourselves, may we be honest with ourselves, and may we be compassionate with ourselves, as we endeavor to “return” to people that God knows we are capable of becoming.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.