

## SERMON BEFORE YIZKOR 5777

During the summer, my husband, Jim, and I saw a play entitled, "If/Then." He hated it, by the way. But I found it intriguing. The show, which played on Broadway for a little over a year, follows the life of a 38-year-old woman named Elizabeth. Newly divorced, she moves to New York City for a fresh start. Elizabeth meets her friends Kate, a kindergarten teacher, and Lucas, a community organizer, in Madison Square Park. Kate suggests that Elizabeth start using the name "Liz" and seek out new experiences. Lucas suggests that she go back to her college nickname, "Beth," and start making professional connections in the city. "Liz" stays in the park with Kate while "Beth" leaves with Lucas, and the remainder of the show depicts two different paths that Elizabeth's life could take. [See Wikipedia, s.v., "If/Then," synopsis]

Are you confused? So was Jim. So was a good portion of the audience. Because the action kept going back and forth between one road taken – the path of "Liz" – and the other – the path of "Beth." And it was sometimes hard to keep up with whether we were watching Liz or Beth. But the premise of the show was clear. We make certain choices in our lives; some very deliberately and others by happenstance, and those choices and events have consequences.

The show spins out two very different possibilities for one woman's life, and invites us to wonder: What if? What if Elizabeth had left with Lucas? What if she had stayed in the park with Kate? What if she could have known the future, could have seen how her life would play out? What if?

Of course, the audience is in on this on this little thought experiment. And we are left to wonder the same about our own lives. *What if?*

What if, in a parallel universe, there's a "me" who made different choices? And in that other universe, I had married that guy. Or not. Had moved to California. Or made Aliyah. Maybe I had majored in dance. Or become a rocket scientist. Maybe I'd bought stock in Apple at the very beginning. Or maybe I'd gambled everything away on a hunch. Maybe there, in that other world, I had made fewer mistakes. Or maybe I'd just made different ones.

There's a reason why human beings are drawn to this kind of speculation, whether in art or in life. Psychologists call the contemplation of "what if" *counterfactual thinking*. And too much of it can lead to anxiety and depression, as people mire themselves in wondering what might have been. But thinking about "what if" can also play "a key role in problem-solving, achieving goals and improving our behavior." [See "Regret is the Price of Free Will" by Julie Beck, *The Atlantic*, June 8, 2016]

The rabbis, in the midrash, explore this notion of many worlds. Playing on the verse from Isaiah: "For, behold! I am creating a new heaven and a new earth" (Isa. 65:17), they write that God created and destroyed many worlds before this one:

When the thought arose in God to bring the world into being...God began to trace the foundations of a world and, in this way, brought a heaven and earth into being. But when God looked at them, they were not pleasing, so God changed them back into emptiness and void. God split and rent and tore them apart... and ruined whole worlds in one moment. One after another, God created a thousand worlds, which preceded this one. And all of them were swept away in the blink of an eye. God went on creating worlds and destroying worlds until God created this one and declared, "This one pleases me, those did not." That is how God created the heaven and the earth as we know it. [See Genesis Rabbah 3:7; 9:2]

The rabbis imagine God with the power not only to fashion a universe, but with the power to start over from scratch. They picture God creating and destroying one world after another until arriving at the one that is most pleasing. God gets to have the ultimate do-over.

Haven't you ever wanted a do-over? Haven't you ever wished that the "undo" arrow on your computer could be used in others areas of your life?

Ugh, I shouldn't have said that to her. Undo.

Why did I say yes to that project? Undo.

I should have paid more attention. Undo.

I shouldn't have yelled at him. Undo.

Sadly, there's no "undo" button for life. And this life, this world, is all we've got. As human beings, we don't have the do-over power of God. But maybe we have something else. A late medieval version of the midrash about God creating and destroying world after world says that God drew the blueprint of the world, but it would not stand firm until God created repentance. *Teshuvah* - repentance - was the essential element that made our world possible. [See *Sefer HaZichronot* 1:1]

This midrash picks echoes the ancient rabbinic idea that *teshuvah* was one of the things God made before Creation itself. That's the Sages' way of saying that, without the notion of return, repentance, and renewal, we could not endure. Without *teshuvah*, there's no hope for us.

We need the possibility of *teshuvah* precisely because we are human. Because we will inevitable fail. We will make bad choices, commit errors, give in to self-centeredness, hurt one another. And *without* the possibility of *teshuvah*, we will be stuck in the past, unable to grow and change. *Teshuvah* doesn't make the past *disappear*. It's not exactly a re-do button; maybe it's more like a re-set button.

And the first step in *teshuvah* is feeling a sense of regret. A few years ago, journalist Kathryn Schultz gave a TED talk entitled, "Don't Regret Regret." Toward the beginning of the talk, she puts a quote up on the screen: "Things without all remedy should be without regard: what's done is done."

"What's done is done."

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And then she reveals that the person who had said it was Lady Macbeth. “basically telling her husband to stop being such a wuss for feeling bad about murdering people. And as it happens,” Schultz says,

Shakespeare was onto something here, as he generally was. Because the inability to experience regret is actually one of the diagnostic characteristics of sociopaths. ...But if you want to be fully functional and fully human and fully humane, I think you need to learn to live, not *without* regret, but *with* it.

Schultz defines regret as “the emotion we experience when we think that our present situation could be better or happier if we had done something different in the past.” She says that regret requires two things:

First of all, agency – [that] we had [the ability] to make a decision in the first place. And second of all, it requires imagination. We need to be able to imagine going back and making a different choice, and then we need to be able to kind of spool this imaginary record forward and imagine how things would be playing out in our present.

In Hebrew, regret or remorse is called “*harata*.” It comes from the root *het-resh-tet*, which means “scratched” or “chiseled,” something not easily erased or brushed over. *Harata* is an intense emotion; it is not a fleeting sense of guilt, but a sense that one has made a mess of things, that some kind of repair and redress is required. “*Harata*” is painful and no one likes to experience it.

In an article on regret this summer in *The Atlantic*, Julie Beck makes the important point that “we can only regret things we think we have control over. If we had no choice, no agency, if we were but tossed about on the tides of fate, there’d be nothing to regret. And so, regret ends up being the emotional price we pay for free will.” [“Regret Is the Price of Free Will” by Julie Beck, *The Atlantic*, June 8, 2016]

Regret, *harata*, reminds us that we have free will, that we have the power to make good or bad choices. But ironically, much of what we “regret” are the things that were never really in our control.

After a loss or tragedy, people often say to me: “Oh, rabbi, if only I noticed this or that symptom” or “If only I hadn’t gone to work that day” or “If only I hadn’t lent her the car.” For years, I’d try to comfort the folks who expressed such a sense of regret with bland reassurances: “No one could have known; You did the best you could; You couldn’t have stopped what happened.”

Then my own beloved father became gravely ill. I was living in Massachusetts at the time and I traveled to Connecticut for days and weeks at a time. Night after night, I slept in the hospital at my father’s bedside. On the final morning of his life, my brother and sister and I were all there. We hugged him and told him how much we loved him.

Afterwards, I was plunged into grief, but something else nagged at me. I felt like a failure. Because I had let my father die. Oh, I knew this wasn’t rational. But the thought kept going through my mind: If only. If only we had

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realized earlier how damaged his heart was; if only the doctor hadn't switched his medications; if only he hadn't caught pneumonia. If only.

I realized then how the litany of "if only's," those tortuous feelings of regret, are really an attempt to convince us that we *could* have changed whatever happened. Even – especially - those things which were never really within our control to begin with.

It's a normal human response. But, to quote Shakespeare again, "That way madness lies." The "If only" regret is not what the rabbis mean by *harata*. For them, *harata* is always seen as the first step in changing direction, in setting one's life and deeds on a better path. A person who experiences *harata* looks back in order to move forward.

One of my favorite teachers, writer and educator Parker J. Palmer, is not content to leave it there, to let the past stay in the past. He maintains that "the past isn't fixed and frozen in place. Instead, its meaning changes as life unfolds."

...I've made many mistakes and often failed to live up to my aspirations," he writes, "but I don't need to look back with regret. Instead, I can see all of my mess-ups as humus or compost for the growing I needed to do. I love the fact that the word "humus" is related to "humility." The good I do today may well have its roots in something not-so-good I did in the past. Knowing that takes me beyond both the sinkhole of regret and the hot-air balloon of pride.

[See [www.onbeing.org/blog/meaning-changes-as-life-unfolds](http://www.onbeing.org/blog/meaning-changes-as-life-unfolds), by Parker J. Palmer, March 18, 2015]

Palmer shares a poem called "Thanks, Robert Frost," by David Ray. It begins:

Do you have hope for the future?  
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.  
Yes, and even for the past, [Frost] replied,  
that it will turn out to have been all right  
for what it was, something we can accept,  
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,  
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,  
or what looking back half the time it seems  
we could so easily have been, or ought...  
The future, yes, and even for the past,  
that it will become something we can bear.

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Perhaps this is part of the reason it's customary to recite *Yizkor* in the midst of this long day of prayer and introspection. We cannot move forward, cannot do the work of *teshuvah*, if we don't look at all that came before, if we don't remember the deep connections, the relationships, the choices we made.

Looking back and reflecting, we ask: Did we mess up? For sure. Did we appreciate what we had? Sometimes. Did we ever manage to be our best selves. That sometimes, too.

And we ask: What might we have done differently? Can we feel some humility about our actions? Can we do better going forward? And looking back, can we show some *rachmoniss* - forgiving our beloveds, forgiving ourselves?

*Teshuvah* begins with regret. But it cannot end there. This morning, let's choose to push the re-set button. Let us free ourselves from the heavy burden of "if only" and change what we can, beginning today. Let us strive to grow wiser even as we grow older.

My friends, we are here on this earth for such a short while. We're not actors in a Broadway play, living two parallel lives. We're not God, able to create and destroy entire universes a thousand times over; we are stuck with this one. This one world. This one life.

May we be blessed to fill it with kindness, caring and love. *Amen.*