

Notebooks

Kol Nidre Sermon

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A story is told of a new young rabbi who arrived in an eastern European town. During his first day he was given a tour of his new village by one of the baal ha'batim, the town leaders. Eventually they came to the Jewish cemetery where, as was the custom, all of his rabbinic predecessors were buried in a common section. As they passed by the gravestones something began to become frighteningly clear – the ages on the stones. The life of one rabbi was 34 years, another 28, and yet another was a mere 23 years. In fact there was not one person who survived past 40.

As this shocking realization descended upon him the new rabbi started sweating. He began to believe that the community was so difficult it was killing off its rabbis. His guide sensing the young rabbi's growing panic. And fearing he was about to start running for the road out of town said, "Let me explain and then you can decide if you still want to leave. These dates are not the number of years of these people's lives, they are the number of years that they truly lived their lives."

You see we have a custom in our community that each person keeps a notebook and at the end of the day they write down how much of their time was spent serving God – not just through prayer or study, but the number of hours spent living a life of gratitude and not regret– the number of hours living closest to their highest self – living according to the important and not trivial things. And then at the end of a person's life we add all of the hours in the notebook and that is the

number we put on their headstone. He lived to be 94 not the 38 years engraved there.” And pointing to another stone, he said, “And this rabbi was on this earth for 83 years not 34.”

When I heard this story I wondered how many years I would put on my headstone. How much of my life have I squandered instead of pursuing holiness. Not some grand righteousness mind you, but simple everyday holiness like being present to my children. Saying what is true and not what is convenient. Asking for forgiveness when I know I am wrong.

“When we wake each morning,” the tradition teaches, “We are given the world anew. And each night as we go to sleep we must return it. And when we do our Creator asks us, ‘what did you do with my creation today? Did you add to my world or diminish it?’” We need to reexamine the algorithm we are using to measure a life well lived.

And what is odd is that we know this. We have heard the clichés that nobody ever wishes they spent more time at work when they are on their death bed. This is nothing new. It is in our hands to repair or destroy our relationships – to open or close our hearts. To live in fear or to live in faith. But our culture’s gravitational pull is too strong. Our identities are far too bound up in inconsequential things. It is an addiction that ties self-worth to net-worth. An addiction that says, never admit when you are wrong. An addiction to rights over responsibilities. To concern for what others think and not concern for the pain of the other. And each time this happens we carve more years off our lives.

And further, we lead those around us to create regrets in their lives for poor choices in our own. On more than one occasion students and young adults have come to speak with me because this or that professor questioned their dedication to their studies because they wanted to fly home to be with a sick parent. Or the med student in the ER who is berated for tending to a shattered spouse watching her husband die before her eyes. Or the young Jewish activist who is condemned because their moral compass leads them to a different political philosophy from our own – either to the right or the left.

And hearing these stories and so many more, we shake our heads in indignation. But the truth is I suspect we are not all that different. In our own way, subtly or not so subtly we probably do similar things that if we saw them objectively would make us cringe. “On Yom Kippur two films are playing before us. One shows the choice we made and the other showing the choice we might have made.” These regrets rarely leave us. They define us. And they haunt us through our lives. Creeping out of the dark corners of our souls.

I was talking to my 81-year old father the other day. He had just returned from the cemetery and the graves of his parents and grandparents. He was reflecting that he wished he had treated his grandmother better. “When I was a teenager,” he said, “I didn’t give her as much respect as I should have, she spoke Yiddish and I was trying to be an American. I was embarrassed by her accent. Now I look at it much differently.” He continued, “I noticed on her headstone that she was born in 1863. Now I wished I had asked her about her life in Russia...her childhood. How she met my grandfather. There is no one to ask anymore.” My father has mentioned this to me occasionally over the years, but what I never noticed and what I found stunning was that he was a teenager 65-years ago. He is still carrying that regret

after 65 years. Although our relationships continue beyond death - our ability to repair those relationships does not.

Funeral director Thomas Lynch writes, “In even the best caskets, it never all fits – all that we’d like to bury in them: the hurt and forgiveness, the anger and pain, the praise and thanksgiving, the emptiness and exaltations, the untidy feelings when someone dies.” We can only escape the weight of our regrets if we actively try to make right what we once did wrong. That is the task for the living – our task.

Rabbi Israel Salanter learned this lesson from a shoemaker who he saw working deep into the night by the light of a candle. When Rabbi Salanter asked the man why he didn’t stop working and go to sleep, the shoe-maker responded, “As long as the candle is burning, it is possible to mend.” “As long as a person is alive, there is still hope for transformation -- reconciliation.”

I once asked a mentor with cystic fibrosis for some advice about life. “Most people assume they are going to live to be 90,” he said, “So they put off the hard conversations --asking for forgiveness or saying I love you, but I never know if I am going to live another year, so I can’t wait. And neither should you,” When he died several years ago of complications from a heart-lung transplant -- his bag of regrets was light. He had made sure not to waste the life he was given – although his years were short, his life was very long.

“We live in a flash of light; evening comes and it is night forever.” As we read “Our origin is dust and dust our end. Each of us is a shattered urn, grass that must whither . . . a particle of dust floating in the wind, a dream soon forgotten.”

I had seriously considered placing a casket here to drive home the point. Today we encounter our death and presumably live another day. How many years do we have left? It is odd to consider, but the true date of our last breath is out there, God willing, far into the future, but it is there before us somewhere in the mist of time. There will come a moment when we will no longer be here. Over the next 24 hours we are given to imagining what that time might feel like. Not only our own death, but also the deaths of those close to us. The process of “mourning is a romance in reverse,” writes Lynch. “And if you love, you grieve and there are no exceptions – only those who do it well and those who don’t.”

Some of our regrets are beyond our grasp to heal and for those we can only seek comfort from God, time and a form of tikun – a sweeping up of the pieces, examining the wreckage and dedicating ourselves to get it right next time. The Kotzker Rebbe understood the challenge well, “The main element is not the transgression, for we are only human... The main element is that we may do tshuvah and return at any moment, but we do not... this is a greater sin than the transgression itself.” The relationship unrepaired. The risk not taken.

These regrets will fester and infect our lives if we don’t heal them. Learn from them and move on. Blame does not matter. How it started does not matter. Being right does not matter. These things will not increase your happiness. Their only reward is bitterness and cynicism. We carry so much unnecessary sadness in our hearts. Look around this room – around our building. Our regrets are surrounding us – stalking us, holding us captive.

The first step is awareness, but then we need to take the next step and reach out. This is what it means to revive the dead. Think of a relationship that you thought

was over, but was saved. And think of what it felt like before the healing when you ran into them unexpectedly and what it is like today. As it says in the Talmud, “Great is tshuvah, is returning, for it reaches the throne of Glory. It brings redemption near. And it lengthens a person’s life.” The rabbis understood that it can change our world. It is the only thing that ever has.

Tonight we are being offered a mystery. Tonight our ancestors are begging us to get it right, so we don’t find ourselves holding the same hand of regrets when the gates close tomorrow night? They understood that every regret is a kind of theft. And they similarly understood the way forward. The way toward a redeemed world.

I often hear people complain that our prayer books just seem to be saying the same thing over and over again. Thank you God, I am sorry God and I love you God. Pages and pages of the same repetitive thing. Say it when you wake up. Say it when you go to sleep. Teach it to your children. What is the point? My son Nativ asked me the other day why we have to say thank you when we wake up every morning.

I will let you in on a secret. There is a reason why are told to keep repeating these words. We constantly need reminding. Look at those three phrases a bit more closely. Thank you. I love you. I am sorry. How different would our lives look, our relationships look, if we actually dedicated ourselves to those three most basic ideas. How many of our deepest regrets would have been avoided? How many of our relationships would be transformed. Life changes in an instant. We always believe we have another year, another day until we don’t.

There is a Midrash which says, don't put off saying I am sorry in the belief that you will have a chance to do it later. "A person cannot say to the melech ha'mavet, the angel of death, 'I need a few more minutes to reconcile my life.' The famous quote by Hillel says, "If not now, when." A commentary on that verse explains that the text says "If not now," and not "If not Today." By saying now, Hillel reminds us that all we have the present moment, 'If not now, when?' "Time is all you have," wrote Professor Randy Pausch of the Last Lecture before he died of cancer. "And you may find one day that you have less than you think." Don't wait. If this was your final day what regrets would you have? If you live another 65 years which of these regrets will you still be carrying with you? How would you rewrite final verse of your life?

"With each child the world begins anew," says the Midrash. When the gates close tomorrow evening you will be given your life back. We will be as children being given our world again for the first time. And once again we will be asked what are you doing with my creation? And you will be given a choice about the way forward— no one else can travel that road for you. The path to tshuvah, to returning, the book of life and death are engraved on each of our hearts – written with our own hand. "If not now? When?"

I have made a notebook for each of you – to record the hours of your life lived well. On the cover it says Kol y'mai h'echa. All the days of your life. In it I challenge you to keep track of the moments of your life – the love, the regret, the joys and the gratitude. The people that you need to thank, oo ask for forgiveness and to tell you love them.

When dusk falls tomorrow and the gates close I pray that your life will be lengthened, your days will be short on regrets, long on gratitude, forgiveness and filled with much love.