

Sermon for Kol Nidre (9.27.09 = 5770)

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A friend of mine just loves the t.v. program “House, MD.” He told me about one episode a couple of seasons back that featured a punk rock ‘n roller who was in the hospital and was in a bad way. Amber, a regular character on the show that season, looked at him, and saw what terrible shape he was in, and asked him, “You don't regret anything?” The punk rocker, JIMMY QUIDD, sighs and says: “Well, there was a lot of drugs. A lot of drinking. A lot of fights. [swallows] I regret everything else.”

On the second day of Rosh Hashana, I spoke about teshuvah; I mentioned that Maimonides ruled that one of the essential ingredients in a true and successful process of teshuvah was that a person should express “regret”; **גִּיחַמְתִּי וּבִשְׁתִּי בַמַּעֲשֵׂי**, “I regret and am ashamed of my actions.” Each and every one of us is expected, especially at this time of year, to reflect on our lives over the past year, and in a spirit of heightened self-awareness and complete honesty, try to make amends; restore our most noble sense of purpose; renew any ruptured ties with our family and friends; and return to God — to our sense of God’s presence and our understanding of God’s way. The haftorah we read this past Shabbat, on Shabbat Shuvah, opens with the simple words, **שׁוּבוּנָה יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ**, “Return O Israel unto YWHW your God.” These words form the basis of our sense of a Divine commandment that instructs us to assess our lives

periodically and try in a formal way to “do better.”

This evening I would like to focus on that part of teshuvah that is embodied in the word “regret.” The word in Hebrew to express this notion is *חרטה*; the word itself does not appear in the Bible, but it does in rabbinic literature in the way we would expect. For example, we have the following statement, אמר רבי חנינא בר פפא: כל העושה דבר ומתחרט בו מוחלין לו מיד, “R. Hanina bar Pappa: anyone who does a (sinful) deed and regrets it is immediately forgiven.” Another instance is found in a *סליחה* (for Tisha B’Av) in the Siddur of Rav Saadia Gaon, שבים ועל פשעיהם נתחרטו, “they repent and regret their sins.” And, most prominently for us, we have the Kol Nidre ceremony that we have just completed, in which we have declared (in Aramaic!), כלהון אחרטנא בהון, “all of these things — all the vows, oaths and obligations we will make to God — we have regretted them” (that is, nullified them) in anticipation of actually having done any of them.” Each of these sources states what we might term “the conventional wisdom” of the rabbis on the subject of teshuvah, and were undoubtedly influential in Maimonides’ formulation.

But sometimes what plagues us as we do our annual self-reflection is not sins that we have committed and about which we are now filled with regret. Sometimes what causes us great discomfort are the things we might have done, but which we let pass us by and did not do. Is

there a difference between regretting one's actions, and regretting lost opportunities? I think there is, and it is a crucial distinction. As Maimonides formulates it, *חרטה* is the component in the teshuvah process that actually leads to action: if a person does not feel regret for past deeds, then he or she will not likely go on to the next steps wherein one actually makes the change and then sees to it that it is incorporated into the person's new emergent personality.

But "regret" along the lines of what I wish to direct your attention to is something else altogether: it is not the regret over past deeds, it is the regret over lost opportunities... how many of us do this frequently? Some of us eat away at ourselves over not taking that "other" job when it was offered; not finishing that degree; not dating that "other" woman or man for some reason or another... (I, personally never having a "business *kop*," regret not buying Apple when I wanted to do so, in the late 90's)... But joking aside, having regrets such as these and letting them, in effect, rule our lives makes memory a curse rather than a blessing, and creates an impediment for ever making any positive change in our lives. For regret like this stops us in our track, and makes change impossible to even consider. While regret for past deeds is an essential component for Maimonides, the kind of regret I am describing is the enemy, holding us in our present states.

To be honest, it doesn't seem to me that classic Jewish sources treat this type of *חרטה* that I

am describing here, or at least not by using this word. However, there is one text that may speak directly to our understanding. It is a mishna from the famous “Pirke Avot” (2:4): הלל אומר, “Hillel used to say... Don’t say when I have free time, I will study, lest you never have free time.” While the specific teaching of this mishna is about making regular time for Torah study, it seems to me instructing us in an anticipatory way about how to avoid feelings of חרטה or regret for things we wanted to do but never managed to do. And the way to do this, according to the mishna, is not to push off opportunity to some unspecified time in the future — because all too frequently this is just a false strategy, one in which we delude ourselves that we have a plan to take advantage of opportunities but which in reality is just a way of putting off action, of keeping us rooted in our complacency. As the Book of Proverbs puts it, אַל־תִּתְהַלֵּל בְּיוֹם מָחָר כִּי לֹא־תֵדָע מַה־יָּלֵד יוֹם, “Do not boast of tomorrow, For you do not know what the day will bring” (27:1). In other words, the best way of avoiding חרטה is to train ourselves to take advantage of life’s opportunities when these arise — so that we are not filled with regret afterwards for things that we did not manage to accomplish, or even attempt.

That’s all well and good as a personal policy for our lives “from here on in,” I can hear you saying, but how do I deal with regrets for things that are already in the past? How do I avoid looking back over lost opportunities which are never to return, and not feeling lousy over them? A colleague of mine, Rabbi Larry Seibert, recently referred me to a book by David

Allen; it is entitled, *Getting Things Done*. Allen is a kind of systems analyst who helps individuals and corporations manage their business better. I couldn't for the life of me figure out why Larry had referred me to this book, when a phrase used by the author kind of "leapt out at me." In trying to explain "workflow management" and how to "collect, process, organize and review" data in order to help you decide what to do and when to do it in "real time," Allen spoke about the need to "Close the Open Loop." In the context of business, Allen uses the phrase "open loop" to describe unfinished or incomplete business; "closing the loop" means bringing it to a resolution. In a sense, then, engaging in the process of teshuvah is akin to "closing the open loops" in our lives.

The question I would put to you in such circumstances is: to what degree, in the context of your own individual, existentially-conceived lives, can you "close your open loops" by going back in time and trying to recreate the lost opportunity? Perhaps in your unique circumstance, you could accomplish this to your own satisfaction (certainly there are enough Hollywood movies on the subject that seem to offer a way to do this). But in the "real," non-Hollywood world, this seems an impossible, fruitless endeavor. The medieval midrashist, Tobiah ben Eliezer alludes to this in his work *Leqah Tov*: when reading the narrative of Esau's sale of the birthright to Jacob, Tobiah notes the strange locution of Jacob's command/suggestion that Esau make the sale: **מִכְרָה כְּיוֹם**; what does this expression "כְּיוֹם" mean — we

would have expected היום, “today”?! The Leqah Tov writes, מהו כיום, מה, ויאמר יעקב מכרה כיום: מהו כיום, מה, “What does “כיום” mean? Just as a day passes away and does not return, so too your sale endures without חרטה — without regret and without retrieval.”

Indeed, our days pass away and cannot be retrieved; regret over what is past, this kind of חרטה, is all too often an insidious endeavor, destructive to the soul by keeping us, in effect, complacent and rooted in our current state of being. Earlier, I said that the word חרטה does not occur in the Bible, and it really does not. However, the root ח-ר-ט does appear (twice), and it refers to a stylus, or an engraving tool used for carving words, for example, on a tablet. The prophet Isaiah is bidden, at one point, to take a large sheet and an engraving tool and prepare to write a new message: וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֵלַי קַח-לְךָ גְלִיּוֹן גָּדוֹל וּכְתֹב עָלָיו בְּחַרְט אָנוּשׁ, “The LORD said to me: take a large sheet and write upon it with a human engraving tool” (8:1). This is the kind of חרטה that we need to resolve to perform tonight — we need to write a new גליון, a new chapter in our lives — and we need to do it without the kind of חרטה that will hold us back, but with the kind that moves us forward. Yogi Berra, the quotable Yankees catcher, supposedly once said - “If we don't change direction, we're liable to end up where we're going.” Speaking to myself as well as to you all, I urge us at this hour of Kol Nidre to change our direction, to not indulge ourselves in the חרטה of crying over our past, lost opportunities, but rather fill ourselves with resolve that during the coming year and, indeed, whatever time

we have on God's good earth, we will take advantage of every wonderful opportunity that life sends our way.