

Yizkor 5783 - October 5, 2022

Rabbi Jonathan Blake

Of Regret and Being Alive

The first emotion mentioned in the Torah—this will probably surprise you—comes six chapters in, well after the stories of the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and all their kin. You might think we'd read about God's joy in the wonders of creation, or the fear Adam and Eve felt upon their expulsion from Eden, Cain's jealousy and rage which resulted in the murder of Abel, or Adam and Eve's grief at the death of their son; but, no. The first emotion in the Torah belongs to God:

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי־עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ

“And God regretted having created humankind on the earth,” a sentiment followed immediately by these words:

וַיִּתְעַצֵּב אֱלֹהִים לְבָבוֹ: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֲמַחֶה אֶת־הָאָדָם אֲשֶׁר־בְּרָאתִי מֵעַל פְּנֵי הָאֲדָמָה מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה עַד־רֶמֶשׂ וְעַד־עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּי נַחַמְתִּי כִּי עָשִׂיתֶם:

“And with a sorrowful heart, God said, “I will blot out humanity, which I created, from the face of the earth, along with all the beasts, and the creeping things, and the birds of the sky, for I regret making them at all.”¹

¹ Genesis 6:6-7.

Maybe it says something about God, regret coming first of all feelings. I think it says more about *us*: that the authors of the Torah so identified with the feeling of regret that they saw fit to ascribe this emotion first and foremost to God.

For while it is true that the God of the Hebrew Bible is anthropomorphic—that is, described with human form and human features (eyes that see, a mouth that speaks, ears that hear, an outstretched arm and a mighty hand, and even, in one of my favorite Biblical expressions, a “nose that glows,” which is how the Torah describes God getting really angry)—it is even more true that the God of the Hebrew Bible is *anthropopathic*, meaning, described as having human *feelings*: a God capable of feeling and acting on love and hate, sorrow and joy, jealousy and rage, disgust and yes, regret.

There’s actually something comforting to me about this image of a God who expresses regret, and so early in the Torah, too. For if God can second-guess having created the entire world; if God can say, “no, I really wish I hadn’t done that,” doesn’t that give us a little permission to live with regretting some of our own (considerably less consequential!) decisions?

Especially on Yom Kippur, this God of regret speaks to me. It won’t be God’s last time, either, by the way. God delivers the Israelites from Egyptian slavery only to find them, time and again, to be unruly, uncooperative, unfaithful; and, more than once, God expresses regret in having freed the people in the first place.

Again, it may say something about the Divine nature, that God can feel regret, wish things had gone differently, but it probably says more about *us*, that we would enshrine such natural and pervasive human feelings to the Divine.

Another tale from the Torah. It's a long and complicated story found in the Book of Numbers, complete with a talking donkey and possibly even a cyclops, but here's the gist. It features an unusually flawed protagonist, a Gentile sorcerer named Balaam. His employer, a fellow named Balak, King of the Moabites, sworn enemy of the Israelite nation, has summoned Balaam to do his dirty work for him: to curse the Israelites so that they will fall in battle.

Balaam shows up for his unholy mission, but not before God gets to him and hijacks his ability to curse the Israelites, forcing him to bless them instead. "I can utter only the word that God puts into my mouth," he confesses. "When [God] blesses, I cannot reverse it." So Balaam stands on the hilltop, gazing down at the Israelite encampment, and instead of damning the people, he graces them with words now enshrined in the prayer book, recited at every morning service. "*Ma tovu ohalecha Ya'akov, mishkenotecha Yisrael*," "How beautiful are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling-places, O Israel!"²

² Numbers 24:5.

While all this is happening, Balaam offers a candid aside. Gazing at the Israelite encampment, he says, “If only I could die a righteous man. If only my fate were like theirs!”³

How *human* of this fallen spellcaster, how poignant, for him to express regret like this. How real, and how raw, for him to think, “I don’t want my epitaph to say, ‘Sorcerer and Charlatan.’ Let me die the death of the upright. Let me redeem myself in righteousness before it’s too late.”

Balaam is saying a prayer that from time to time probably crosses our own minds:

*Please, don’t let me die with regret. Don’t let my frailties and failings define me. Please let me go to my eternal rest feeling good about how I lived my life. Let me share in the fate of the people I admire most, the ones whose names I bless.*⁴

And yet, we *all* carry regrets, even to the grave, because that too, is what it means to be human. If God carries regret, why not we?

This penultimate hour of the Day of Atonement, this *Yizkor* hour, is heavy with feeling. Not only because we come to this place and this moment with all our stored-up memories and love—all the sorrow that never really goes away, but just finds a sturdier container within us to hold it—but also because we come here with our regrets.

³ Numbers 23:10.

⁴ Special thanks to my teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater, for his insight into the theme of regret in this story.

How could we not? It is true that grief is another form of love; and it is true that the love we shared with our dear ones—a wife, a mother, a father, a husband, a grandparent, a friend, a teacher, a sibling, a child—was never destined to last. But it is also true that our love, like all things human, was not devoid of flaws, was not perfect. It was, and is, a love tinged with regret.

A rabbi I met only once, Sam Karff, was one of the elder statesmen of the Reform Movement and a friend of WRT's own Rabbi Jack Stern, *z'l*. Sam died two years ago. Contemplating his own mother's death, he wrote: "It was not a perfect goodbye which only highlighted that—for all our precious bonding—ours was not a perfect relationship. There are none."

Hence this *Yizkor* time together, and on Yom Kippur no less, day of forgiveness. Because today we seek not only forgiveness for the living among us, but forgiveness for our dead as well.

They hurt us sometimes by what they did or said, or what they failed to do or say. They hurt us by leaving us here alone, alone to negotiate our grief and wounds and memories; they left us alone with our regrets. Unfinished business, unspoken words, hopes unmet and dreams unfulfilled.

Come to think of it, we need forgiveness for ourselves, for all that we regret, too. And so we have this *Yizkor* time, for remembrance, for letting go of regret, this time, an hour before the gates are closed, for picking ourselves back up in order to move forward with renewed hope, into the new year.

When Stephen Sondheim died the day after Thanksgiving last year, you could count me among the legions of fans and admirers who greeted the occasion with mourning, albeit with only one regret, that I never met him. (He was on the short list of “people I’d love to have dinner with before I die.”)

But, speaking of regret—outside of the Torah itself, I don’t think any writer in any genre ever gave better voice to this feeling. “Send in the Clowns” is a masterclass in regret. There are many others. Regret provides the emotional through-line of entire Sondheim musicals: *Follies* and *Merrily We Roll Along* come to mind.

And then there’s *Company*, which many of you saw on Broadway this past year in a bold gender-inverted staging that Kelly and I saw in London back in 2019. *Company* does something unexpected, at least in Sondheim: it suggests a way to move forward in life and not languish in regret.

Company ends with a song called “Being Alive.” It’s sung by the protagonist, Bobby, a 35-year old bachelor (or bachelorette, in the newest production) who “realizes that being a lone wolf isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” In the song, Bobby “declares that he wants to take the chance, be afraid, get his heart broken—or whatever happens when you decide to love and be loved,” as a reviewer from the *Washington Times* once described it.⁵

⁵ Blanchard, Jane M., “Bustling, Robust ‘Company’: Sondheim Musical Seldom Misses a Beat,” *The Washington Times*, May 21, 2002.

Sondheim actually tried two other songs to close out the show before settling on “Being Alive,” which moves *away* from cynicism, *toward* hope, *away* from regret, *toward* renewal.

In the opening stanza, love is just

*Someone to hold you too close
Someone to hurt you too deep
Someone to sit in your chair
And ruin your sleep*

By the end, Bobby is pleading:

*Somebody crowd me with love
Somebody force me to care
Somebody let me come through
I'll always be there
As frightened as you
To help us survive
Being alive*

Death is the price we pay for being alive, and mourning is the price we pay for loving another person deeply, flaws and all.

Being alive means acknowledging our failings and theirs, the things that hurt us and frighten us.

Being alive means accepting that to be human is to live with regret.

Being alive means choosing to live, and to love, despite it all, to move forward, come what may.

May God's compassionate embrace enfold our loved ones who have died.

May God's eternal presence comfort us in our hour of need.

And may God's abiding love move us to give thanks for being alive.