

# Holding On & Letting Go – On Regret

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Earlier this summer, while I was driving on highway 24, a song came on the radio that all of a sudden took me back to my late adolescent years. The song triggered very vivid memories of a dear friend of mine. Sadly, this close friend has been going through an extremely difficult period in recent years. His life, as it were, flashed before my eyes. For a moment I could see how a series of dynamics and experiences led to particular reactions, decisions, and actions, and I could also see, to a degree, how he had arrived to this point in his life.

Feelings of sadness and regret overwhelmed me and reflections about what could have happened or should have happened nagged at me. In what seemed like an instant, my eyes filled up with tears and my vision became blurry. I completely did not notice, until the very last possible moment, that the lane I was on was suddenly all clogged up and the car right in front of me was standing at a halt. Thankfully and miraculously the lane to my left was completely clear. I swerved into that open lane in full speed, missing the car right in front of me by just a few short inches.

My heart was pounding for the next fifteen minutes or so. It never beat in that way in my entire life. I had to pull into the nearest exit stop just to catch my breath. I remained shook up for a few more days. I continued thinking about the experience for the rest of the summer. I could not shake off my thoughts about my friend as well as this driving incident. I was particularly struck by the idea that memories of the past so overwhelmed me that I lost sight of things that were happening right in front of me.

How, if at all, do we maintain a balance, a working relationship, if you will, between the past and the future, between where we once were and where we are now heading?

Perhaps more deeply, what should be our disposition towards our regrets for the past and how should that disposition inform, or not inform, our attitude for the future?

The Talmud in Tractate Yoma offers a fascinating exchange between the rabbis and R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov that helps inform this very question.

“The Sages taught: With regard to transgressions that one confessed on this Yom Kippur, he should not confess them on another Yom Kippur, since he has already been forgiven. If he repeated those same transgressions during the year, then, and only then he must confess them again on this Yom Kippur.

And if he did not repeat them but did confess them again, about him the verse states: ‘As a dog that returns to its vomit, so is a fool who repeats his folly’ (Proverbs 26:11)” (BT Yoma 86b).

In this teaching, the Sages make it clear that repeating confessions on Yom Kippur for sins for which one had fully repented for is an act of folly. Simply put, going back to the past is crazy. It is likened to a dog smelling its own vomit.

Nevertheless, R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov forcefully disagrees.

“Rabbi Eliezer ben Ya'akov says: If one confesses in subsequent years, all the more so is he praiseworthy, as it is stated: ‘For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me’ (Psalms 51:5)” (*ibid.*).

R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov argues that remembering one's transgressions, all your life, even if one did not return to those very sins, is meritorious. Perhaps humbled by the weight of guilt or regret, our memory will help guide our way towards the future.

What then is one to do? Are we supposed to let go of our past, burdened as it is often by transgressions and sins, feelings of regret and guilt, or do we firmly hold on to those past experiences, setting our sense of regret as a guidepost before our eyes?

In his major treatise on repentance, Rabeinu Yonah Gerondi, a Catalan rabbi and moralist living in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, sides with the rabbis.

Rabeinu Yonah notes that many rabbinic teachings warn against repeatedly confessing for sins of the past again and again, from year to year, on Yom Kippur. He offers two main reasons.

First, Rabeinu Yonah argues, that doing so demonstrates a lack of faith in God, as the person doesn't trust in the forgivingness of God "who forgives inequity and overlooks transgression." Truly letting go of these past sins is demonstrative of our faith in God's forgiveness and our trust in the possibility of complete and radical repentance.

Second, according to Rabeinu Yonah, "if the confessor only mentions these earlier sins" then this person might "imagine that he must only worry about these past sins" and that might erroneously lead him to think that "he has not sinned since..." (Sha'arei Teshuva (Gates of Repentance) of Rabeinu Yonah, Gate four). In other words, if we hold on to the past too tightly then we might lose our hold on the very things that truly deserve our attention in the present.

Writing a century earlier, Maimonides offers the opposite approach in his major treatise on Jewish law. In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides sides with R. Eliezer ben Ya'akov and quotes his opinion almost verbatim: "Sins that one confesses this Yom Kippur should be *confessed* again next Yom Kippur even though the person has not committed the sin again. As it says, *For I know my transgressions; and my sin is ever before me*" (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Laws of Teshuva 2:8).

There is certainly wisdom in each of these approaches.

Rabeinu Yonah's approach is not only a call to let go but also a reminder of the things that we don't control.

Over the summer, I reviewed different lists of things that people argue that simply cannot be changed. Here's one titled, *Things That Will Never Change in Life (No Matter How Hard You Try)*, that I particularly appreciated:

1. You're not going to live forever.
2. You can't please everyone.
3. You'll never catch up to the Joneses.
4. Holding that grudge is never going to have the effect you're hoping for.
5. Similarly, you can't control what someone else thinks.
6. Yesterday is over. You can't get it back.
7. The world... nope, you can't change it. (Okay, I don't agree with that one!)
8. Where you came from.
9. Nothing is ever really private anymore.
10. You can't get back what you've lost.

<https://www.inc.com/larry-kim/11-things-you-cant-change-so-quit-wasting-your-time-trying.html>

“A young man once came to the [Lubavitcher] Rebbe ashamed that he had distanced himself from Jewish observance. Now he was back and sought a path of penitence for straying. The Rebbe said, “Don't focus on your past right now; rather, concern yourself with serving G-d through joy, and you'll take care of the past at a different time.” (R. Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, p. 192)

Dr. Susan Krauss Whitbourne, Professor Emerita of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, one of the pioneers of the field of adult development and aging, further notes that “There are many advantages to remembering the past in a positive way.” In her research on personality and aging, she's “found that the older adults with higher

levels of self-esteem and wellbeing are the ones who tend to focus on the positive events from their lives. Long-term happiness often depends on your forming a favorable narrative of your life. Those who ruminate over their failures, disappointments, and mistakes are not only less happy in the moment but also risk experiencing chronic depression.”

Chasing the past, getting bogged down in one’s sense of guilt, holding firm to one’s regrets might end up holding you back from moving forward.

And yet, the Rambam’s approach is not simply a call to hold on firmly to the past but it too offers a path forward into the future by reminding us of the things over which we do have control.

R. Mendel Kalmenson notes that “Our shortcomings are what ultimately push us to progress, if processed properly.” (R. Mendel Kalmenson, *Positivity Bias*, p. 259)

In a powerful lecture about regret, Kathryn Schulz, staff writer for the New Yorker and the author of *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* quotes a well-known line from Shakespeare’s Macbeth, “Things without all remedy should be without regard; what's done is done.”

Schultz then dissects the line as follows, “[This] seems like [...] an admirable philosophy at first - something we might all agree to sign onto ... until I tell you who said it. [...] So this is Lady Macbeth basically telling her husband to stop being such a wuss for feeling bad about murdering people. And as it happens, 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.”

[https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_don\\_t\\_regret\\_regret?referrer=playlist-ted\\_talks\\_to\\_watch\\_when\\_you\\_wa](https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_don_t_regret_regret?referrer=playlist-ted_talks_to_watch_when_you_wa))

Needless to say, each of our lives offers different varieties and shades of regret. Some decisions are irrevocable, some actions lead to terrible results. We've each, to various degrees, impacted the lives of others and even our own. Some regrets, in the words of Schultz are "piercing and enduring." In this way, the weight of our past might lead to existential angst and paralysis.

In her lecture Schultz offers three helpful strategies for living with regret.

"[...] The first of these is to take some comfort in [the] universality [of regret]."

When it comes to regret, you are not alone. You are not the first one who messed up in this or some other way and you won't be the last. As your rabbi over the past thirteen years, and as someone who shared in many of your celebrations and in your challenges, I know that each of us has been afflicted in some way or another. If we are not alone in this, then to a degree, we are all in this together.

"The second way that we can help make our peace with regret is to laugh at ourselves."

Schultz notes that this "might seem like a kind of cruel or glib suggestion when it comes to these more profound regrets." And yet she argues that "All of us who've experienced regret that contains real pain and real grief understand that humor and even black humor plays a crucial role in helping us survive. It connects the poles of our lives back together, the positive and the negative, and it sends a little current of life back into us."

I can't even begin to count the times in which in the midst of a profound crisis while sitting together with one of our community members, somehow, we found a way towards laughter. Oftentimes, that very laughter made space for perspective, wisdom, and a measure of comfort.

Schultz writes that "The third way that I think we can help make our peace with regret is through the passage of time, which, as we know, heals all wounds."

In truth, from my experience as your rabbi, I would say that time doesn't always heal all wounds. Some wounds leave lifelong scars. Some wounds remain slightly open, ever ready to bleed again when the scab is picked at. Still, I do know that time does offer a measure of healing for most wounds. There is both a softening and a strengthening of the heart that does take place over time.

So, which one is it? Do we let go or do we hold on?

Perhaps our question is not one of either/or but a question of moderation.

Yehuda Amichai's poem, *Open Closed Open*, a poem I often think about during this time of year, is illuminating and instructive.

The sound of a drawer closing – the voice of God,  
the sound of a drawer opening – the voice of love,  
but it could also be the other way around.

Footsteps approaching – the voice of love,  
footsteps retreating – the voice of God  
who left the country without notice, temporarily forever.

A book that stays open on the table beside a pair of glasses –  
God. A closed book and a lamp that stays lit –  
love. A key turning in the door without a sound –  
God. A key hesitating – love and hope.

But it could also be the other way around.

A sacrifice of a fragrant scent to God,  
a sacrifice of the other senses to love:  
a sacrifice of touch and caress, of sight and of sound,

a sacrifice of taste.

But it could also be the other way around.

In truth, letting go and holding on are two sides of the same coin. Each offers us important insights. Each is potentially the voice of God or the voice of love.

On Yom Kippur the gates both open and close. It is the time to both hold on and to also let go.

Our challenge this day is to choose carefully, thoughtfully and honestly.

Truly, these are the ultimate questions of *Teshuvah*, of repentance:

What do you regret and how have you moved on?

What should you hold on to and what should you let go of by now?

Is now the time to hold on or is now the time to let go?

Tomorrow night when the gates close, what will you keep in and what will you keep out?

And let us remember, tomorrow night when the gates close, it could be the voice of God, and it could be the voice of love, but it could also be the other way around.