

Quite often when I am reading a news article or an opinion piece online, my eye is drawn to a link posted along the side or the bottom of the screen to another article. Web surfing is addictive and following links prolongs my indulgence in what has become a favorite vice. Invariably the links which most often arouse my curiosity are to articles which present information in the form of a list - the five most expensive football stadiums; the ten best cities to find a job; the nine things a man should never say to a woman. Information presented in that format attracts my attention and my interest more than articles that are straight text. Listomania is the title of a book published within the last year, and I guess that I am something of a listomaniac. One of the links I recently clicked on was to an article from the AARP Home Page titled Five Regrets of the Dying. I went to the link, not only because it contained a list, but also because it seemed to offer the promise of some suitable material for a High Holiday sermon. The themes of regret and mortality are, after all, most relevant to this season of the year.

The High Holiday season and Yom Kippur in particular encourage us to acknowledge and confront our mortality. Human weakness and limitation and the finite nature of human existence are contrasted with the majesty, the eternity and the infinite Being and power of God. The hymn, *unetaneh tokef* in our holiday prayer book proclaims that our destiny each year is determined by Divine decree, *mi yichyeh umi yamut*, “who shall live and who shall die”, but (addressing God) affirms that You are the King, the eternal One. *Attah hu melech el chai v’kayam*. The prayer introducing the confession of sins states that “Our days are as a passing shadow, while You (God) are eternal, Your years without end.”

Acknowledging our mortality and resolving to live wisely in the light of that awareness are among the themes and imperatives of this day. The Psalmist’s words, *limnot yameinu ken hoda*, “so teach us to number our days that we may acquire a heart of wisdom” draw out the obvious lesson from the brevity and finiteness of our existence. Dr. Heschel in his classic work, *The Sabbath*, speaks of the categories of time and space. Our weekday labors are intended to control, to transform, and to exert human dominion over the realm of space; those labors are curtailed on Shabbat, which is dedicated to creating a sanctuary in time. In contrast to our dominion over space, time remains

resistant to our efforts at control. TV, movies, and science fiction may fantasize about time travel, but in reality we can't revisit the past or bring it back once it is gone. Nor can we slow down the passage of time, in order to cram more experiences into a day or a week or a month. Having missed opportunities that are irrevocably lost, it stands to reason that people whose future horizon is limited would express regret about what they failed or omitted to do within the time frame allotted to them.

The author of the article on the AARP Home Page had had experience working in palliative care, attempting to alleviate the pain of those who were terminally ill and assuring that their last days were as comfortable as possible. Her work afforded her the opportunity to engage in serious conversation with the patients and to learn what it was that they, at the end of life's journey, regretted. Number one on the list was the regret that they had not had the courage to be true to themselves, to pursue their own dreams. These patients regretted that they had tailored their lives to conform to the expectations of others and had not followed their own interests and inclinations. Along these lines, I have had the opportunity to see two generations of young people from our community grow to adulthood, some of whom have pursued career paths that were out of the ordinary, seeking, for example, to break into the world of the performing arts, where competition is fierce and success elusive. I've always felt that young people need to pursue their dreams when they're young and unencumbered by the responsibilities of family and home ownership, and, that if they don't do so, they will forever regret it and wonder what might have been. I believe that parents who are supportive of their children's interests and dreams are to be commended. Fortunately, the expectation that "you will be a doctor or a lawyer and make me proud" may no longer be as prevalent as it was in a previous generation, and children may feel freer, as they grow up, to be themselves. I am also reminded of the story of the Chasidic master Zusya, who once said that he feared that after his death, when he stood at the gates of Paradise seeking admission, he would be asked not, "Why were you not Moses?" (after all, said Zusya, I could reply that I was not blessed with Moses's natural abilities as a leader) but rather, "Why were you not Zusya?" Why did you not fulfill the potential with which you were endowed and use your unique gifts to carve out your own path as a spiritual leader and your own way of serving God?

Second on the list of regrets expressed by the dying was that they had worked too hard and had sacrificed valuable time that could have been spent with family, particularly with children during their formative years. Life, of course, is a series of trade-offs, and sometimes the hard work and long hours are necessary to advance a career that brings fulfillment or to attain a level of compensation that provides the wherewithal to pursue one's interests and be oneself. What I believe the people to whom the author spoke were saying was that, had they had it to do over again, they would have adjusted the balance in favor of family rather than work, that where it was a matter of choice rather than duress or compulsion they would have chosen differently than they had.

Many expressed the regret that during their life they had not been able to express their true feelings and had kept them "bottled up." The author notes that sometimes expressing one's feelings does create tensions within our relationships with family and friends, but that containing one's emotions inside oneself is unhealthy and impairs our spiritual and mental health. A wholesome relationship depends on the ability to communicate feelings honestly. Expressing our feelings not only includes letting others know that we see things from a different point of view or that we are hurt or angry or disappointed or sad but also communicating to the special people in our lives how much they mean to us and how much we love them. This is sometimes difficult for people to do except in the rare moment of heightened emotion, and they may later regret, when their dear one is departed, that they had not spoken the simple words, "I love you."

Not staying in touch with friends over the years was also a source of regret. I understand why this happens. We live in a mobile society, and people move from one community to another, leaving old friends behind. We make new friends in the communities to which we move, although, as we grow older, it's often harder to strike up really close friendships. People's circumstances change, and their interests diverge. But the feeling of loss and regret must be widespread, given the popularity of websites like Classmates and the use of Facebook to search for friends and acquaintances from years gone by. I've had a number of electronic exchanges with acquaintances from my high school and college years, but it never led to any ongoing communication. It's just too difficult to revive a friendship after such a long interval and over long distances. I did, however, have an interesting experience recently. When I was in Baltimore in August to

visit my sister, I met her rabbi and found out that one of his mentors in the rabbinate was my Seminary roommate, who had also been a very close friend of mine in high school. I hadn't talked to Bob in 17 years, not because of any falling out, just due to inertia. On my return to Springfield I called him up, and we made arrangements to see each other when I attend the Jewish Federations General Assembly in Baltimore in November.

Finally, some of the terminally ill patients expressed regret that "they hadn't allowed themselves to be happier," to which the author appends the observation that happiness is not strictly the result of outside circumstances but frequently involves a choice on our part. We can focus on the negatives – obsess over what is lacking in our life, feel envy toward others for what they have, nurse grudges and resentments, and agonize over circumstances that are beyond our control. Or we can cultivate feelings of gratitude for what we do have and cherish those blessings that we enjoy. Mind cannot totally prevail over matter, but it plays a larger role than we commonly acknowledge in how happy we feel.

Most of these regrets expressed by the dying resonated with me, particularly when they spoke of time not spent with family. I regret that for the first twenty years of my residence in Illinois I was only minimally involved with my extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins and never was part of family *simchahs*. Fortunately, I did make efforts to rectify that in subsequent years. I do have my own list of items as well to add to the list. I regret, most of all, time I've wasted that could have been spent more productively. I say this not out of some puritanical belief that one shouldn't have fun, but out of regret for the hours spent "killing time" or "unwinding" that were neither particularly pleasurable nor mind-enhancing nor devoted to deepening human relationships. I enjoy conducting Shabbat and holiday services, and I find fulfillment in being a pastor who visits the sick and comforts the bereaved, but I regret not having devoted more of my rabbinate to teaching, which, when I have a receptive audience, is my highest pleasure. Current literature on what makes for a successful Jewish congregation assigns high priority to creating "a community of learners." I regret that there are entire fields of human knowledge, particularly in the sciences, that are like a foreign language to me, and that my intellectual interests have been rather narrowly focused. I regret too that I have not traveled more, particularly to some of the areas of the continental United States and

of Canada that are noted for their scenic beauty and that I've never visited. Finally, I regret not having achieved more of a balance in my life between the physical, the spiritual, and the intellectual. I certainly have not been graced with innate athletic ability, but I am sorry that I didn't devote more time to sports and recreation and to developing greater proficiency in these pursuits. Other than returning to the gym (one of my Rosh Hashanah resolutions), it's probably too late to do much about this particular regret. Fortunately, there's still an opportunity to make good on most of the other items I've mentioned and to minimize my regrets regarding them.

The major preoccupation of Yom Kippur is with sin and atonement, as well it should be, because we do act in ways that are shabby and unworthy of us and that estrange us from each other, and we aspire to begin a new year cleansed of wrongdoing and its consequences and "at one" with God and fellow persons. My focus today has strayed somewhat from that theme. The regrets that the people in the AARP article expressed and that I included in my personal list don't typically involve behaviors or omissions that we would readily classify as sins. We generally think of sins as actions or failures to act that are hurtful to others, while many of the regrets that were mentioned seemed to concern the self and its needs.

I would counter that my theme is actually most appropriate to the season. Our tradition speaks of two categories of sin – between man/woman and God and between man/woman and his/her fellow. It is possible, however, to conceive as well of a third category (and I believe our tradition would concur), sins that we commit against ourselves. Self-destructive behaviors, injurious to body and to spirit would certainly fall within this category. We sin against ourselves too when we fail to fulfill our potential and to achieve those aspirations that could legitimately be realized within the framework of serving God and respecting the rights of others. The Torah command us, *v;ahav-ta l're'acha kamocha*, "love your neighbor as yourself", not more than yourself (note you) but as much as you love yourself. In regard to which, it has been remarked that one who does not love himself will be unable to fulfill the *mitzvah* of loving others. Likewise, one who goes through life feeling unhappy, unfulfilled or untrue to himself will be far less capable of acting with grace, generosity and compassion toward others than one who bears fewer regrets.

Regrets may involve behavior that is not, strictly speaking, sinful, and yet, it strikes me, that they are in one key respect very much like the feelings of guilt we have when we have committed a transgression. When we sin, we can beat up on ourselves and hold on to our feelings of unworthiness, or we can acknowledge our wrongdoing, apologize to the offended person or persons, and, to the extent possible, endeavor to make amends. This is, to be sure, an oversimplification, and there are sins so horrendous that atonement and forgiveness are not easily achieved. On the other hand, some manage to harbor feelings of guilt totally out of proportion to the wrongs they've committed. My point is that guilt can be productive when it leads to sincere repentance and an attempt at reconciliation, or it can be a waste of mental energy that immobilizes us and prevents us from enjoying and making the most out of our life. Regrets are similar; they can be fruitless and unproductive, a source of continuing unhappiness, or they can serve the useful purpose of spurring us to change our behaviors, so that the years remaining to us can bring us the maximum possible fulfillment.

This is a season of resolutions, although I hesitate to use the word because it has been cheapened by the casual way people make and break New Year's resolutions at the beginning of the secular year. We Jews greet the onset of a new year with the earnest resolve to turn away from deeds and actions that were hurtful to others and that betrayed the ideals and values we profess to hold. May we resolve too to cherish our families and our friendships, to be true to ourselves and to our feelings, to cultivate the habits of mind that make for happiness, and to live in such a way that at the end of our journey, our regrets will be few.