

KOL NIDRE DVAR: NO REGRETS

“Who is wise,” asks Pirkei Avot, the primary text on Jewish ethics and wisdom which some of us here studied this year in adult ed. The answer: “Those who *learn* from *all* people.” I can’t claim to have achieved wisdom, but I try to learn from many people. I learn the most from people with whom I spend time in their final days. In fact, the prerogative of spending time with people in their final days is one of the biggest joys and sometimes sadnesses of being a rabbi.

This past year, one of those mixed joys & sadnesses was spending time with Stanley Rosenberg, spiritual leader of this community for some 20 years. Stanley knew the end was nearing when his wife, June, passed a few months earlier and his health began to decline. In the last weeks, and especially in his final days, he repeated many times that he had no regrets at all. He felt that his life was well lived. A few hours before he passed, he said goodbye to me with a smile that I’ll never forget. I learned a lot from that smile. Please G!d, let me one day say the same thing with that same smile.

I suspect that many of us — whose deaths could come this next year, in 10 years, or at some other not too distant time – can’t now honestly say this. But every one of us has the potential to go out like Stanley IF we do the work to make that a reality. This is the very purpose of YK. It is the essence of the u’natene tokef prayer – this is our annual checkup and rehearsal for death -- where we ask ourselves what we need to do this year so that if this is our year to go, we can honestly say with a smile that we have no regrets.

Why does this matter so much to a Jew? I am teaching a women’s interfaith Torah study on Mondays, and this past week, a woman in the group was shocked that I didn’t share her view of heaven, the place where she said she longed to go because it was free of pain and struggle. For a Jew, I explained, heaven potential is here on earth, but it is our job to make it so by living our lives in a holy way, by making every choice, indeed, every breath, a holy one. If we do, in the end, we will have no regrets and notions of heaven become unimportant. Living our lives well; that’s the whole idea. We do all this YK work to ensure that we live our lives to the fullest.

One thing I've for sure learned: regrets or lack thereof at the end of life has little to do with financial or professional success. In fact, in my experience, it is often the most "successful" people who have the most regrets.

So, what sort of regrets do people often have at the end of their lives, and how can we learn from them? I have yet to hear a regret about not having seen the Eiffel Tower or the Pyramids. I have yet to hear a regret that I didn't get a better deal when I bought that car. I've never even heard a regret that I didn't read that book, ski that mountain, or learn to swim. Here's what the association of chaplains say are the 3 most common regrets: Number 3, I wish I'd been a better friend to my friends. Number 2: I wish I had the courage to express my feelings. And number 1: I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. Notice that the top 3 regrets all bear on relationships, and especially unhealed relationships.

Beth and I recently saw a wonderful movie called "Something the Lord Made". The true story begins in the Depression Era when a brilliant surgeon named Dr. Blalock hires a black man named Vivien Thomas as a janitor in his Vanderbilt University lab. But Thomas' incredible manual dexterity and intellect was such that he soon becomes an indispensable research partner to Dr. Blalock in his revolutionary heart surgery.

Thanks in large part to Thomas' work, Dr. Blalock becomes the Chief of Surgery at Johns Hopkins, where the only black employees are janitors and where Thomas has to enter by the back door. Together, they discover a surgical cure for Blue Baby Syndrome, save thousands of children's lives and they begin the field of heart surgery.

But, even though Blalock needs Thomas to coach him through the first Blue Baby surgery, outside the lab, they are separated by the racism of the time. Thomas attends Blalock's parties as a bartender, moonlighting for extra income, and when Blalock and all of his doctor assistants are publicly honored for the Blue Baby work, Thomas is never mentioned, let alone acknowledged for his major contribution.

When the two men become elderly and frail, Thomas visits Dr. Blalock, wheeling him about in his wheel chair. For me, the teaching moment in the film is when Blalock reviews his life – a life of extraordinary renown and success – and he confesses to Thomas that he has regrets, and although it is too painful for him to say what those regrets are, Thomas and the viewer know he’s talking about failing to fairly and fully credit Thomas for his part in Blalock’s success.

The title of the movie -- “Something the Lord Made” -- comes from a line in the film where they were about to perform the very risky first blue baby operation and a priest protests, saying that the baby’s defective heart was something the Lord made, and humans had no right to mess with it. But at a deeper level, the title referred to Thomas, a human being that the Lord made, who was seen as defective not only by a racist world, *but by the very person who became successful on his back and never acknowledged it.*

It’s important to know that Dr. Blalock was not a bad man. He treated Thomas much like everyone else in his time did. But here’s the second key teaching: the following of societal norms and expectations did not dissipate the regrets. As a boy, I would often defend my errant conduct by explaining that that’s what everyone else did, but my dad would also say “you’re not everyone else.” Societal norms are convenient, but no excuse.

As was the case with Dr. Blalock, our deepest regrets often involve the people who have helped to shape us, people with whom our lives are intertwined. Just listen to our own words on those *AI Cheyt* cards. And those regrets come from not having been a better friend, not having the courage to express feelings, and not having the courage to live a life true to ourselves as opposed to what others expect of us. All of these may be summed up by our failure to fully acknowledge the roles of others in our lives, properly express our gratitude, and to seek forgiveness when we don’t get it right.

As it happens, the issue of acknowledging and crediting others has entered our political debate. In a recent “Dear Abby” type column, someone who identified himself as “Confused in Columbus” posed the following question to the Jewish NY Times conservative columnist David Brooks:

Over the past few years, I've built a successful business. I've worked hard, and I'm proud of what I've done. But now President Obama tells me that social and political forces helped build that. Mitt Romney went to Israel and said cultural forces explain the differences in the wealth of nations. I'm confused. How much of my success is me, and how much of my success comes from forces outside of me?

Brooks' answer was insightful and was no doubt influenced by his Jewish background. He said: "As you go through life, you will pass through different phases in thinking about how much credit you deserve. You will start your life with the illusion that you are completely in control of what you do. You will finish life with the recognition that, all in all, you got better than you deserved."

Brooks is right. In our 20s, we think of ourselves as Superman/woman, the architect of the wonder that is me. This sense of possibility unleashes energies that propels you forward. This may not make you sympathetic to other people's failures, but it gives you liftoff velocity in the race of life. This is the last time in your life that you will find yourself truly fascinating, so you might as well take advantage of it.

In our 30s and 40s, we have a lower estimation of our own power and a greater estimation of the power of outside forces. We still have faith in our own skills, but it's more the skills of navigation, not creation.

Then in our 50s and 60s, we hopefully begin to understand that relationships are more powerful than individuals. We find ourselves in the coaching phase of life. We think back to our own mentors, newly aware of how much they shaped our paths. We get sentimental about the relationships we benefited from and the ones we are building. Steve Jobs said his greatest accomplishment was building a company, not a product.

Then in our 70s and 80s, we hopefully are like ancient historians. Our minds bob over the decades and then back over the centuries, and we realize how deeply we were formed by the ancient traditions of our people. We learn to appreciate how much power the dead have over the living, since this will one day be our only power.

As maturity develops and our perspectives widen, we learn the smallness of the power of any individual and the greatness of the power of those forces flowing through each individual. Those forces are especially the people in our lives who helped us get where we are, the wisdom of the ancestors and traditions which shaped us, and the role of the larger universe, which you may choose to see as luck, or which you may believe – as I do – has an order and is not random, but that’s a discussion for another day.

Today is YK. The time to rehearse for our deaths. Deaths that could come this year, and if not this year, some time relatively soon in the context of cosmic time. If this is your year, what will your regrets be? To whom could you have been a better friend, how might you better express your feelings, and to whom do you need to show your true appreciation for how they helped you get where you are? From whom do you need to seek forgiveness and set the record straight?

Today is the day to remember the proverb from Pirkei Avot. Not only the first part: “Who is Wise; Those Who learn from all people,” but also the second part that follows: “Who is Rich? Those who rejoice in their abundance. Perhaps the greatest abundance that we have and for which we owe so much gratitude are for those in our lives who have helped us get where we are.

There’s a teaching in another chapter of Pirkei Avot: “Act as if the whole world depends on you, but know, in reality, that there are much greater forces at work.” As David Brooks put it in the conclusion of his column: “Dear Mr. Confused in Columbus, as an ambitious executive, it’s important that you believe that you deserve credit for everything you achieve. As a human being, it’s important for you to know that’s nonsense.” If we really grok this AND do it, our lives will be lived to the fullest and, like Stanley Rosenberg, we will leave with no regrets.

ANTHEM: STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS