



Yom Kippur 2014

“REGRETS”

by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

A few years ago, science and health writer, Jeneen Interlandi, wrote a compelling cover article for the New York Times Sunday Magazine that was titled, “When My Crazy Father Actually Lost His Mind.” The story candidly discussed her father’s bipolar illness and the difficulties – even impossibilities – of navigating the mental health and the criminal justice systems.

There is a poignant moment in the article – among many – when the author talks about the family’s efforts to have her father involuntarily committed to the hospital. It was exactly what was needed, and the family knew this, but they anguished every moment of the way about what they were doing. Could they really do this to him? Would they regret the decision later? Would they also regret it if they did nothing?

As you are probably aware, the way the system works, you can’t arrest or hospitalize someone as a preventative measure. Just because you are afraid they could turn violent doesn’t allow us to lock them away. We have to wait until the person actually does something dangerous enough that it could be deemed an imminent threat to him or herself or others, but by then it also could be too late.

The author recalls that the commitment hearing for her father was “a tragedy of errors. His doctor did not show up. The substitute doctor maintained that my father was not ready to go home, but when pressed by the judge, she could not explain why. ‘This patient is not really mine,’ she said. ‘So I’m covering now.’”

“I didn’t witness any of this,” writes Ms. Interlandi. “I read it in the court transcript. I could not screw up the nerve to go to the hearing myself. Talking to his social worker on the phone, or to my mother and siblings in private, about the urgent need for longer-term hospitalization was one thing. But speaking against him in court would feel like a betrayal. I couldn’t bear to see his face as I told the judge that we were afraid of him and wanted him put away in a state facility. Nor could I bear to hear the evil alien’s vicious retorts. So I told myself it was better to let the doctors handle the situation.”

Thankfully, the story has a good ending, but at the time, writes Ms. Interlandi, “It was a decision I came to regret. Without his doctor or immediate family present, there was no one to describe the events leading up to his hospitalization or to explain the nature of his diagnosis.”.... “The judge said that a single threatening letter did not meet the standard of imminent danger...He would have to be released.”

Eventually, after a series of arrests and other temporary hospitalizations, long-term psychiatric care was finally approved, and with therapy and medication, the mania finally dissolved and Joseph Interlandi rejoined his family.

I don't recall reading Ms. Interlandi's article when it first came out, but I discovered her this past May when I read another article that she had written entitled "A Revolutionary Approach to Treating PTSD." It centered on the work of a Dutch psychiatrist, Bessel van der Kolk, who I had heard many years ago when he was a consultant to the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services where I had been a social worker. Van der Kolk has devised a therapeutic technique that guides people to recreate a trauma that has haunted them. In the case of the article, the focus was on a man named Eugene, an Iraq war veteran, who was grief stricken by the memory of killing an innocent man and then watching as the man's mother discovered her son's body a short while later.

The way the treatment was designed is that "Eugene would recreate the trauma ... by calling on people in the room to play certain roles. He would confront those people — with his anger, sorrow, remorse and confusion — and they would respond in character, apologizing, forgiving or validating his feelings as needed." The premise was that "by projecting his 'inner world' into three-dimensional space, Eugene would be able to rewrite his troubled history more thoroughly than other forms of role-play therapy might allow. If the experiment succeeded, the bad memories would be supplemented with an alternative narrative — one that provided feelings of acceptance or forgiveness or love."

Some of us in this room may identify too closely than we prefer with the accounts I have shared with you of Ms. Interlandi's father or Eugene, if not in the exact details, then in the depth of trauma and intractability and dilemma they evoke. But even if we do not have personal experience with the severity of these situations, we all have come up on life-altering moments and decisions, responsibilities thrust on us for the sake of others, and especially actions we have taken or not taken that we wish we could undo or do differently or somehow repair.

When I was thinking about these High Holidays the thought had occurred to me to invite a discussion on the topic of regrets for our Rosh Hashanah service. Several months ago I tried out the idea on a few people and asked them if there were any regrets of this nature that came to mind. Immediately each one thought of at least one situation they had regrets about. These ideas were clearly not deep below the surface. I realized, as well, that my own list of personal regrets is easily accessible. But almost to a person, they also expressed their reticence about sharing these stories with the congregation. They are too private or painful. And so it is with me too.

Whether these memories are laden with embarrassment or shame, neglect or guilt, or admission of wrongdoing and culpability, they aren't accounts we are comfortable sharing publicly — maybe not even to our most intimate friends. Of course, that's why we invented therapists and non-judgmental clergy.

It's also why we devised a liturgy that gives us a chance to acknowledge and catalogue our missteps and misdeeds. Notably, rather than say, "I have sinned for X, Y, or Z" we get cover by confessing these mistakes collectively as a community.

Historically, we would ask forgiveness from an ever-watchful deity. But besides rejecting this formulation, I am not sure our focus is really on forgiveness either. That's looking backwards and the past can't be undone or forgiven. But maybe what we're after is acceptance and a belief that we can forgive ourselves the past by how we live in the present with all our flaws and imperfections.

Each day – really each minute and each hour – presents us with countless opportunities to choose our path and to chart our journey forward.

To decide how and when to speak and when to remain silent.

To decide how and when to intervene in the lives of others and when to leave things alone.

To decide to forgive others their own imperfections and not continue to bear grievances and grudges that end up eating at ourselves.

To decide by all these decisions whether and how to inscribe ourselves in the book of life that is written by our deeds and our actions and our utterances.

May the year ahead – may every minute and every moment – be a year of good choices.

And when we fail, because we inevitably will, know that we can strive always to do better the next time.

Shanah Tovah.