Pharaoh, T'shuvah, and the Power of Regret
Parashat Bo 5783
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As a kid, I used to zone out during the High Holy Days. But, for some reason, one thing I remember clearly is the saying in the prayer book that "the gates of repentance are always open."

I guess it stuck with me because it teaches this very powerful idea that you can always change course and that, if you do, God is waiting there to welcome you back in.

As a rabbi, I teach that it's never too late to do *t'shuvah*. In fact, the Talmud famously says you should do *t'shuvah* "one day before your death."

All of which makes the story of Pharaoh in this week's parashah so troubling and hard to understand.

Parashat Bo begins after the plague of hail had rained down on Egypt. It was the seventh plague in what we know will eventually be a sequence of 10.

God tells Moses to go back to Pharaoh once again with his warning to let the people go—but this time there's a twist: "I have hardened [Pharaoh's] heart and the hearts of his courtiers," God says, "so that I may display my signs in their midst." (Ex. 10:1)

The implication is unmistakable. Moses may again urge Pharaoh to free the slaves, but the outcome is preordained: Pharaoh will say "no," because God has intervened to take away his free will.

Meaning that even if Pharaoh wanted to at this point, *t'shuvah* is now beyond his reach. For him anyway, the gates of repentance are, in fact, closed.

I know from our conversations in Torah study that many of us feel it's wrong for God to deny Pharaoh the chance to repent. It feels like the moment demands that Moses channel his inner Abraham and challenge God: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justly?" (Gen. 18:25)

But he doesn't. And, in any case, the Midrash answers this critique:

"Rabbi Shimon b. Lakish said: 'When God warns someone once, twice, three times and he doesn't repent, God will close his heart to repentance. …'" (Ex. Rabbah 13:3)

In other words, God is pretty darn forgiving and patient, but everything has its limits.

And, in fact, Pharaoh was given many opportunities to change course, but he didn't.

At one point, though, it looked like he might.

After the plague of hail, Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron to the palace and said, "I stand guilty this time. God is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Please ask God to end the hail. I will let you go; you need stay no longer." (Ex. 9:27-28)

This seemed to be a sign of big movement for Pharaoh; after all, as Rabbi Moshe Feinstein points out, through all the six plagues before this one, Pharaoh had not once acknowledged that he was in the wrong. (Darash Moshe, Bo)

Of course, after each plague, he promised he would let the people go. But, as Feinstein puts it: Pharaoh had not changed his heart, and he had no intention to free the slaves; he was just saying whatever he needed to say to get the plagues to stop.

But, this time, after the hail, it was different. Maybe Pharaoh really had changed. Maybe this *was* real *t'shuvah*.

After all, he had confessed his sin; he'd acknowledged that it was wrong; and he'd indicated that he would change his behavior—all of which Maimonides identifies as key ingredients of genuine *t'shuvah*.

But it turns out that one of Maimonides essential ingredients was missing, and that ingredient is *regret*.

To do *t'shuvah* sincerely, Maimonides explains, a person must not only confess their sin aloud, but they also have to express regret and embarrassment for what they did. (T'shuvah 1:1)

Why regret and embarrassment? Because otherwise, the acknowledgement is merely intellectual at best or utilitarian at worst.

It's not enough simply to *know* that you've done something wrong. More importantly, you have to *feel* it.

You have to *feel* pain for having caused harm; and, on some level, you have empathize—you have to feel and *internalize* the pain that you caused someone else by your misdeed.

The Sages call it "*t'shuvah shel yissurin*"—*t'shuvah* brought about by suffering.

To regret and feel embarrassment is—as we all know, because we've experienced it—a kind of suffering. It hurts. And we do our best to avoid it.

But it's the only way forward. We can't achieve complete *t'shuvah* without it.

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There's an excellent book about this by the contemporary author Daniel H. Pink. It's called *The Power of Regret.*

Pink's argument is that the conventional advice that we should live with "no regrets" is all wrong.

We've been conditioned to think that having no regrets means we're living in the moment and living our best life, when, in fact, psychological and biological evidence indicates that living with no regrets is actually quite unhealthy and runs counter to human nature.

Pink points to a scientific study that found that "the inability to feel regret…wasn't an advantage. It was [in this study] a sign of brain damage."[1]

"In short," he says, "people without regrets aren't paragons of psychological health. They are often people who are seriously ill."[2]

Our brains and our psyches are programmed to feel regret so, instead of fighting it or disavowing it, Pink encourages us to embrace it.

In explaining the power of regret, Pink distinguishes it from disappointment.

Disappointment, he explains, is a feeling we get when something doesn't go our way for reasons beyond our control. By contrast, regret is what we feel when we realize that the reason things went badly is our *own fault*, not someone else's.[3]

It's that sense of ownership that hurts so badly and makes regret a kind of suffering.

As Pink explains, "Its very purpose is to make us feel worse—because by making us feel worse today, regret helps us do better tomorrow."[4]

How so? Scientific research shows that "regret, handled correctly, offers three broad benefits."[5]

First, because the pain of regret is so sharp, it can lead to improved decision-making by causing us to "slow down [and] collect more information [and] consider a wider range of options [and] take more time to reach a conclusion."[6]

Second, regret "[spurs] reflection, [which leads us to] revise [our] strategy, [which leads to] improved performance."[7]

And third, studies show that when people experience regret and contemplate the "if-onlys" of their lives, "they experience higher levels of religious feeling and a deeper sense of purpose than when they simply recount the facts" of life as it is.

And this, in turn, can "prompt us to revise our life goals and aim to life afresh,"[8] which will improve our spiritual and emotional well-being.

The goal is not to torture ourselves or wallow in self-pity. Rather, it's to allow our natural feelings of regret to cause us to ask: What does this demand of me now? And then to change for the better.

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Pink writes, of course, from a secular, scientific point of view, but his conclusions square nicely with the teachings of Judaism about *t'shuvah*.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, one of the greatest Jewish scholars of our generations, writes that "Repentance does not bring a sense of serenity or a completion but stimulates a reaching out in further effort. Indeed, the power and the potential of repentance lie in increased incentive and enhanced capacity to follow the path even farther. ...In this manner, the conditions are created in which repentance is no longer an isolated act but has become a permanent possibility, a constant process of going *toward.* ..." (*The Thirteen Petalled Rose*)

T'shuvah is about changing yourself completely, to the point that you can say: "I am a different person and not the same one who sinned." (Maimonides, T'shuvah 2:4)

And Judaism teaches us that a person cannot achieve such essential change in themself without truly experiencing the power of regret.

In the words of the prophet Jeremiah: "Now that I have turned back, I am filled with remorse/Now that I am made aware...I am ashamed and humiliated." (Jer. 31:19)

Pharaoh paid only lip service to *t'shuvah*: He said the right things, but he felt nothing.

Worshipped as a god in Egypt, he was too arrogant and prideful and macho to allow his natural human emotions to transform him for the better.

But if we can allow ourselves to feel regret and truly embrace it and endure the pain that comes with it, rather than convincing ourselves that it's a sign of weakness, then our tradition promises that the gates of *t'shuvah* will indeed always be open to us.

1 Pink, *The Power of Regret*, 20
2 Ibid., 20-21
3 Ibid., 22
4 Ibid., 39
5 Ibid., 42
6 Ibid., 43
7 Ibid., 48
8 Ibid., 49