

Productive Regret
D'var Torah for Rosh Hashanah Day 2 5780 (2019)
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Zusia was a pious and revered chassidic master of the 19th century. One day Zusia met with his followers, who saw that his eyes were filled with tears and his face pained with fear. His pupils looked at him and asked in a panic:

"What's wrong? What is the problem?"

Zusia explained that he had just had a vision about what the angels would one day ask him about his life.

"Zusia, you are pious. You are scholarly and humble. You have helped so many of us. What question about your life could be so terrifying that you would be frightened to answer it?"

"I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Moses, leading your people out of slavery?'"

"So, what will they ask you?"

"And I have learned that the angels will not ask me, 'Why weren't you a Joshua, leading your people into the promised land?'"

"But what will they ask you?"

"They will say to me, 'Zusia, there was only one thing that no power of heaven or earth could have prevented you from becoming.' They will say, 'Zusia, why weren't you Zusia?'"

As we begin the עשרת ימי תשובה, the ten days of repentance between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Zusia reminds us that we shouldn't be thinking in terms of who we might *want* to be, but rather who we are *capable* of being. I might want to be the fastest, or the smartest, or even the kindest person in the world, but no amount of repentance, no set of life changes will get me there. On the other hand, if I want to be the best me I could be, there is nothing to stop me but myself.

Zusia expresses his regret that he did not do everything he was capable of doing. A study by Cornell psychologists Tom Gilovich and Shai Davidai suggests that Zusia's regrets were type of regret that is most likely to be productive.¹ In their study, Drs. Gilovich and Davidai were interested in what kinds of regrets a person has that are the longest lasting and the strongest. Based on prior research, they distinguished between two types of regrets, what they called "ought regrets," which concern the attributes people think they should have, and "ideal regrets," which concern the qualities people think they would like

¹ Davidai, Shai & Gilovich, Thomas. (2017). The Ideal Road Not Taken: The Self-Discrepancies Involved in People's Most Enduring Regrets. *Emotion*, 18, 10.1037/emo0000326. <https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2017-21180-001>. For some articles discussing this study, see <https://news.cornell.edu/stories/2018/05/woulda-coulda-shoulda-haunting-regret-failing-our-ideal-selves>, <https://qz.com/work/1298110/a-new-study-on-the-psychology-of-persistent-regrets-can-teach-you-how-to-live-now/>, <https://www.womanandhome.com/life/news-entertainment/biggest-regret-life-study-321518/>, and <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180529153106.htm>.

to have.² In other words, the ought worries are about who we *should be*, while the ideal worries are about who we *wish we could be*. Zusia was worried about who he ought to be, not about what the ideal person might be.

Doctors Gilovich and Davidai talk about how our regrets about who we “ought” to be tend to be very powerful in the moment but tend to dissipate over time, while regrets about not meeting an ideal tend to linger and get worse.³ They found that 72% of the people in their study said “that they have more regrets about not being the person they could have been” than about the not being the person they should have been. When probed about their biggest regret, 76% spoke of regrets that “distanced them from their ideal selves,” while only 24% spoke of regrets that “distanced them from their ought selves.”⁴ But I am less interested in the conclusion that “ought” regrets tend to resolve than in some of the reasons the authors give for *why* these regrets tend to resolve. The authors explain:

Because of the sense of urgency that accompanies ought-related regrets, people are more likely to take active measures to dampen or counteract them (e.g., by “undoing” their past behavior, changing their future behavior, offering apologies to those who have been wronged, or treating the event as a learning opportunity). In contrast, because failures to live up to one’s ideal self do not seem as pressing and do not elicit this same feeling of urgency, people tend to put off dealing with these sorts of regrets.⁵

So, when it comes to not living up to what we ought to do, we respond to the problem and it diminishes. When it comes to falling short of the ideal, we tend to ignore the problem and it festers.

The authors discuss other reasons why we have more regrets about failing to meet an ideal. They say that often our ideals are not really possible, because sometimes we set impossible goals, because ideal-self goals are more abstract than our sense of what we ought to be, and because our ideal selves are less dependent on context and therefore regrets about them may be triggered more often.⁶ I think all of this boils down to the fact these ideals are rooted in the ether rather than in the concrete consideration of what we are genuinely capable of doing.

Here are some of my takeaways.

First, set concrete and achievable goals. Lofty and grand ambitions are a recipe for disappointment. Concrete goals are achievable and even if we fall short provide a framework to recognize, understand, and respond constructively to that failure. Rather than aspiring to “be a better parent,” think about what the specific things are that you will do to make yourself a better mother or father. Rather than “be a better Jew,” think about

² Id.

³ Id.

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id. Citations omitted.

⁶ Id.

which mitzvah you can fulfill more fully in the future. There is nothing wrong with having a sense of the ideal, but try to translate that ideal into examples of actual things you can achieve.

In last Shabbat's Torah reading, Moses told us:

כִּי הַמְצִנָּה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לֹא־נִפְלֶאת הוּא מִמָּוֶה וְלֹא רְחֹקָה הוּא ... כִּי־קְרוֹב
אֵלַי הַדְּבָר מְאֹד ... :

For the instruction that I give you today are not so baffling to you, nor so distant ... rather the matter is very close to you . . .⁷

I think Moses is telling us something that is true by definition. God doesn't ask us to take on some ephemeral set of expectations – the Torah is not so baffling – it asks us for concrete steps - and if the goal seems impossible to achieve, that is, by definition, not what God asks of us either. כִּי־קְרוֹב אֵלַי הַדְּבָר מְאֹד – fulfilling God's expectations is very close to us, very achievable.

Second, review your progress often. Considering both our failures and successes is, of course, the entire purpose of repentance, a process that we highlight during these ten days of repentance but needs to be a part of our daily routine as well. One of the main reasons that Drs. Gilovich and Davidai gave for why people had fewer regrets about the failures of the “ought” was that we are more likely to review those failures, respond to them, and even learn from them. So, if you fall short even of your reasonable goals – as we all do from time to time – think about what you can do to repair the damage of your misdeeds and also what you can learn from them in the future. If we respond appropriately, failure is but an opportunity to improve, while failure to respond is a recipe for continued disappointment and disaster, as God told Cain when Cain's first attempt at sacrifice failed, “לָמָּה חָרָה לָךְ וְלָמָּה נִפְלוּ פָנֶיךָ: הֲלוֹא אִם־תִּשְׂטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תִשְׂטִיב לִפְתּוֹחַ חֲטָאת רָבֶיךָ. Why are you upset, and why is your face fallen; Is it not that if you improve you will be uplifted, but if you do not improve, sin crouches at the door?”⁸ Each time you review your deeds, take a moment to think about what things you have achieved. Pat yourself on the back and start asking what your next step is. The Torah teaches that when a person completed the cycle of tithes, the person would issue a “confession” including all the mitzvot the person had fulfilled,⁹ demonstrating that it is also important to recognize the things we have gotten right,¹⁰ since that encourages us to continue and build from there.

Zusia teaches us that there is no power on heaven or earth that can hold us back from success. No one can stop us from getting the best out of ourselves. Unfortunately, we are bound to disappoint ourselves when we fall short of our own aspirations. But if we are fair to ourselves, setting discrete goals, asking of ourselves no more than we are capable of achieving, learning and growing both from our successes and our failures, then קְרוֹב אֵלַי הַדְּבָר מְאֹד success will be nearby. We are never too far away from achieving what, in fairness, is all that can be asked of us ... to be our own, best, selves.

⁷ Deut. 30:11, 14.

⁸ Gen. 4:8-9.

⁹ Deuteronomy 26:11-15.

¹⁰ I think I heard this point from my colleague Rabbi Robert Pilavin.

CLOSING PRAYER FOR END OF SERVICE

“וְטַהַר לִבֵּנוּ לְעִבְדֶּךָ בְּאֵמֶת”¹¹ and purify our hearts to serve you in truth.”¹¹ Dear God, purify our hearts so that we may be honest with ourselves and with You. Bless us, that we may recognize our potential and identify those ways in which we have failed to live up to that potential. Gladden us with knowledge of what we have done right and inspire us with the hope that we can do even better in the future.

¹¹ This phrase appears toward the end of the “sanctification of the day” blessing in the Shabbat and holiday Amidahs.