



**Joshua Holo, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Jewish History**

**Graduation Address 2026, Los Angeles, Hebrew Union College**

Thank you, President Rehfeld, Provost Cohen, Dean Chernow, staff and faculty colleagues, current students, and of course, a hearty and well-deserved congratulations to our graduands and recipients of the honorary doctorate. Welcome, to all of you who have joined us to celebrate the achievements of the classes of 2001 and 2026, friends and family among whom I proudly count myself this year!

It's an honor a privilege to address you today.

---

A story is told of a seeker who climbed the mountain to inquire of the master at its peak:

“Master, what is the source of wisdom?”

“Good judgment is the source of wisdom” intoned the master.

Unsatisfied, the seeker pressed further: “Master, where does good judgment come from?”

“Good judgment is born of experience,” pontificated the master.

But true to his nature, the seeker sought more: “And how does one gain experience?”

With a level gaze, the master answered: “From poor judgment.”

Cut from our mythical mountaintop to the Hebrew Union College, and our version of the same story:

A student asks: What brings one to wisdom?

To which our tradition responds: Wisdom comes from curiosity, as “Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from everybody.”<sup>1</sup>

Digging deeper, our student poses a follow-up question: “If curiosity spurs learning, what instigates curiosity?”

Our tradition responds: “Ignorance!” The Sages explain: God gave Torah at Sinai—in the middle of the desert—because “one cannot learn the wisdom of Torah, unless one adopts the posture of that which is unaccounted for, like the desert itself.”<sup>2</sup>

These two versions of essentially the same story point to a bedrock principle of human activity: We rise to the occasion when forced to fulfill a need, or a failing, or a lack inside of us. Poor judgment & ignorance yawn open and create a vacuum in our personalities *that demands to be filled* with, in the case of these stories, with experience and wisdom.

Besides, if you’re like me... both poor judgment and ignorance are inevitable, so we might as well put them to good use.

So, I apply this logic to the work that awaits you, our graduands, and I ask: What absence, what lack, what need, what fissure, what void *inside of us*, demands to be replenished by our pursuit to improve the world *around us*? What internal hollow will you fill: with service to the needy, with the education of others, or with the sowing of culture?

By way of one possible answer, or perhaps just an inkling, I offer you today:

---

<sup>1</sup> Pirkei Avot 4:1 “Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? The one who learns from everybody, as it is said: “From all who taught me have I gained understanding.” (Psalms 119:99).

<sup>2</sup> Num. Rabbah 1:7

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי, אֲלֵא כֹל מִי שֶׁאִינוּ עֹשִׂים עִצְמוֹ כְּמִדְבַר, הַפֶּקֶר, אִינוּ יְכוּלִים לְקַנֹּת אֶת הַתְּכֵמָה וְהַתּוֹרָה, לְקַרְבָּן נַאֲמַר: בְּמִדְבַר סִינַי  
עַל מִילַת "הַפֶּקֶר", רָאָה אֲמוֹנָה רַבָּה לְרַאב"ד (יְרוּשָׁלַיִם, תַּשְׁכ"ז) מֵאֲמַר ב', עֵקֶר ד', פֶּרֶק ג', עַמ' 62: כִּבְר נְתִיבֵי דְעֵת  
הַפִּילוֹסוֹפִים הָאֲמֵתִיִּים עַל שִׁסְבַּת הַמְצִיאוֹת כֻּלּוֹ וְהַתְּחִלָּתוֹ הָרַאשׁוֹנָה יֵת' וֵית', הוּא אֶחָד, אֶחָדוֹת גְּמוּרָה מְכַל צַד, כְּמוֹ שְׁכַבְר  
בִּיֶאֱרָנוּ. זֶה אֶחָד שֶׁגִּשְׁשׁוּ כְּעוֹרִים אֶלְפֵי שְׁנַיִם, וְטַעַם מֵהֶם מִי שֶׁטַעַם וּפְקָר מִי שֶׁפְקָר – בְּרוּךְ שֶׁלֹּא שָׁם חִלְקֵנוּ כֵּהֶם...  
Cf. Pirkei Avot 4:10: “Rabbi Meir said: ...Be of humble spirit before all men... If you have labored at the study of Torah, there is much reward to give unto you”

- Two stories from our past
- One Herzlism to help you remember their lesson
- Three wishes for your future
- And one promise, to send you on your way

Two stories:

Well, not exactly stories, but rather *histories* that illustrate how our internal lack, or need, or void motivates us, correspondingly, to darn the rent fabric of our world. **And the internal breach or vacuum that these stories will point to is *regret*. The sorrowful brokenness and dissatisfaction inside of us that spurs us to sympathetic, human solidarity and—ultimately—to repair. Just like poor judgment and ignorance propel us to wisdom.**

Now, there are, of course, many types of regret. Our religious tradition, for one, focuses on *teshuvah*, or personal repentance. Medieval scholars, for example, connect the dots in a straight line from regret, to repentance, to repair.<sup>34</sup>

However, unlike our religious literature about repentance and remorse for personal mistakes or harmful actions, I mean *regret* on the collective scale. I refer to the lament and sense of diminishment that confronts us from the world around us: injustice, violence, and widespread suffering due to politics, history, economics, culture, and even mother nature—forces that challenge us, can harm us or those around us, and surely cause us worry and ruefulness, such that we might say, “the state of the world is *regrettable*.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Sa'adya Gaon on Gen. 4:7.

בדרך תיקון {של אחר החטא} וזה על ידי התשובה, ויש בה ארבעה חלקים: העזיבה, החרטה, הוידוי, והקבלה להבא. Unsurprisingly, other religious traditions similarly appreciate the foundational role of regret in promoting improvement. The Hadith, for example, the collection of the sayings of Prophet Muhammed, transmits the principle that “regret is repentance.” Hasan (Darussalam), Sunan Ibn Majah 4252, Book 37, Hadith 153, Vol. 5, Book 37, Hadith 4252 (?). Contrast Augustine, *City of God*, 19.7.

After all, *this* is the scope of work to which you, our graduands, have chosen to dedicate your careers! Today, you put yourselves directly in the line of Jewish leaders—professional & lay, religious and communal—real individuals spanning literally thousands of years, who made the same choice.

In *this* realm of *communal* challenges, our tradition fortifies us with an abiding sense of *productive regret*, that is, regret that provokes us to improve the world.

But what does this propulsive regret look like?

Our two stories—our two *histories*—will, I hope, illustrate the point. And by way of introduction, here is what is at stake in both of them.

For centuries, Jewish communities in both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Europe could not shake one of the most persistent and troubling social ills in Jewish history: the problem of the *agunah*, or chained woman.

An *agunah* is a woman who is trapped in a marriage which persists *in legal terms* but which has ended for all *practical purposes* due to the husband's absence. Having either abandoned his family or disappeared, the man's absence in these cases lacks formal, legal recognition as either divorce or death. The *agunah*, neither divorcée nor widow as far as the law is concerned, remains legally married to a phantom husband, without the benefit of his partnership or income. Worse, she also remains unable to remarry, have children, or otherwise to move on with her life, by virtue of being chained to this marriage.

Now this problem, called עיגון, no longer applies to most Jews today, for whom secular law has replaced Jewish law in our civic lives. But עיגון stubbornly loomed over premodern Jewish communities for centuries, tragically stunting the lives of individual women and their families, and straining the cohesion of communities around them.

As such, עיגון provoked generations of profound, often-unresolved regret *preserved in the historical record!* Our very history teaches us a lesson about what it takes to harness the power

of that regret and to transform it into motivation to find solutions for seemingly-insurmountable communal problems.

And the lesson, as I see it in the following two stories, is this: Generative *regret* is composed of two essential ingredients: recognition & heartbreak.

Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, the leading light of 13<sup>th</sup>-century Ashkenazic Europe, received a letter in which a young woman sought legal relief from becoming an *agunah*.

Her then-husband, a young Jewish man, had been traveling with others on a ship that sank at sea. Some survivors heard calls for help in real time but *saw* nothing. Only later did they find the boat overturned and the young man missing. After the fact, they searched diligently, but they simply couldn't find him, and the sea itself was full of rocks and shoals, and even ice. Later, a single witness was willing to testify on his life that the young man had definitively died. This witness had searched for young man's body with experienced local fishermen, who even tried to dredge the area with their nets. In the end, they concluded that no one could have survived under those circumstances.

But what of the widow of our young victim?

Her representative who wrote this letter to Rabbi Meir, sought to protect her from *עיגון*, from the status as a chained wife. Our letter-writer knows that a legal declaration of death for the young drowning victim requires *two* reliable witnesses, and that we only have one. So, attempting to find a way around that legal requirement, the petitioner reminds Rabbi Meir of a longstanding rabbinic principle: One should work every possible angle to protect women from *עיגון*. He plainly asks the great Rabbi Meir: "May we declare the young man dead, and permit his wife to remarry?"<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Responsa of Meir of Rothenberg, Prague, n° 771:

שו"ת מהר"ם מרוטנבורג דפוס פראג סימן תתקע"א  
מעשה בבחור אחד שהלך בספינה וג' ערלים היו עמו ונטבע הוא והגוים שעמו ויהודי אחד וגוים הרבה שמעו שצעקו 1  
הושיענו אלקים כי באו מים עד נפש ושוב מצאנו הספינה פיה למטה וכלי הבחור טבעו כמו כן בדקו וחפשו אחריו ולא מצאנוהו

Not unfeeling, Meir ruefully responds:

I wish I could muster a legal artifice to allow her to remarry, but the Rabbis are clear on this issue: When someone dies in open sea without a body or sufficient testimony to his death, we cannot assume that he has died. Thus, his surviving wife is bound in marriage to him as an *agunah*.

In truth, many before us have striven to find a way to declare such a death legally, but to no avail. We must, therefore, accept the decision of the Rabbis.

To be sure, we sense Rabbi Meir's regret. But he only achieves the first step toward the kind of regret that precipitates action. He unquestionably recognizes, intellectually, the gravity of the legal and human problem, and he clearly feels for the *agunah*, the chained woman.

But his recognition only achieves the *first* of the two essential ingredients for productive, generative regret. His heart has not well & truly broken.

Consider, by contrast, our second story, which comes from a letter to the leading Sephardic authority of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Salonica, named Samuel de Medina, which poses much the same problem:

In the face of a ravaging storm at sea, four Jewish men threw themselves off a ship and tied themselves to the mast, which had broken off and fallen into the water, even though the ship stayed afloat and other Jewish travelers had remained aboard. By the time the sea disgorged the four men onto shore, they had perished. After the storm, local men found the four bodies,

---

ובמקום שנטבע סלעים וטרשים ועיקולים והגליד גדול היה שולל ושוטף כל הנמצא ועתה קרובי האשה אומרי' שיש עדות בודאי שמת כי יהודי אחד יעיד על נשמתו שמת כי [הלך] עם דייגים שפרסו מצודתם אחריו ואמרו כי לא היה שום טבוע יכול לצאת והנני מסופק בדין זה שהרי חכמי' הקילו בכל דוכתי' בעדות אשה יותר משאר עדיות מתוך חומר כו' (יבמות פ"ח ע"א) וגם החמירו במים שאין להם סוף (שם קכ"א ע"א) כי יכולני לתלות שגל זה מסרו לגל אחר [דוקא בזה] יש לחוש אבל בנדון זה שיש מכשולי' ותקולין ונסין באמצעות הנהר וסלעים [וטרשים] באמצע וחתיכות גסות של גליד מכסים את הנטבע והם דוחקי' אותו לעומק ומפרקי' גופו לנתחים זה ודאי ולהחמיר איכא ס"ס והי' לנו לומר דלא מוציאו מידי ודאי וכ"ש שהעד רוצה להעיד [שמת] בודאי שהיה ראוי להתירה שלא תשב הבחורה עגונה כל ימיה כי שקדו על תקנת בנות ישראל.2 תשובה כלום חלקנו אלא [בין מים] שיש להן סוף למים שאין להן סוף אבל [שאיין] להן סוף גופי' לא פליג רבנן כלל בין היכא דאיכא סלעים וטרשים להיכא דליכא וכזאת החמירו חכמי' בעדות אשה נפל לגוב אריות נפל לכבשן האש אין מעידי' עליו (יבמות קכ"א ע"א) [אלמא] כה"ג לא אזלי' בתר רובא ואף [אנו] היינו מוצאי' ברצון תקנה לעגונא אבל מה נעשה אין לנו אלא דברי רבותינו [שאמרו]3 נפל במים שאין להן סוף אשתו אסורה כו' וכבר טרחו קמאי' דלקמן למצא צד היתר ולא עלה בידם מאיר ב"ר ברוך ז"ל

without knowing their identity. Later still, sailors from the ship landed on the beach, viewed the dead, and carried the news back to the Jews who had remained on the ship. These sailors identified the victims by name, including a certain Shabbetai, known to the sailors by his Turkish name, Saban.

Despite the precision of the identification, the process took two days, and that interval of time rendered their identification dubious and prevented a legal declaration of death.

Consequently, Shabbetai's wife, whose name we also know, Hannah the daughter of Rabbi Isaac Nafusi, remained an *agunah* in Salonica... Until a year later, when out of the blue, another survivor came and offered a different version of events, according to which the sailors identified Shabbetai's body, spontaneously and immediately.

Emboldened by this new evidence, Hannah's advocates petitioned our Rabbi Samuel to free her from עיגון.

Rabbi Samuel responded:

In truth, even though... a legal determination requires absolute clarity, and even though we now all find ourselves disoriented, downtrodden and brokenhearted on account of a cruel punishment unleashed on our city... I do not have the heart to prosecute this woman's case to the fullest, to turn over every stone as much as I might otherwise do. Ultimately, knowing as we do how much the rabbis were distressed over the problem of chained wives, we're in fact required *not* to root around and search for reasons to keep her chained... and so I see fit to release her from the bonds of marriage.<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Samuel, in brief, comes to the opposite conclusion from that of Rabbi Meir before him. ...not because he cares more than Rabbi Meir about this deeply troubling problem of Jewish

---

<sup>6</sup> Lam 2:3 {ס}גדע בְּחַר־אֵף כָּל קָרַן יִשְׂרָאֵל הַשִּׁיב אַחֲזֹר יְמִינוּ מִפְּנֵי אֹיֵב וַיִּבְעַר בְּיַעֲקֹב כְּאֵשׁ לְהִבָּה אֶקְלָה סָבִיב: Hilkhot Gerushin 13:29

לפיכך הקילו חכמים בדבר זה והאמינו בו עד אחד מפּי שפחה ומן הכתב ובלא דרישה וחקירה כדי שלא תשארנה בנות ישראל עגונות.

law, with all its human and social tragedy. Rather, because Samuel explicitly chooses compassion as an independent rationale for deciding in Hannah's favor.

On the most *basic* level, Samuel applies a lenient legal principle to release the unfortunate widow from the bonds of her defunct marriage. But I want to zoom in on the heartbreak, which *betrays a whole other level of regret*. Seemingly out of the blue, Samuel refers to communal tribulations that have nothing do with the case at hand. He says: "We now all find ourselves disoriented, downtrodden and brokenhearted on account of the cruel punishment unleashed on our city."

Why does Samuel interject these unrelated facts?

He does so, because his heartbreak about the world around him has softened his heart to the specific case of Hannah. Samuel's regret is complete: He intellectually acknowledged an insoluble problem—with insufficient, contradictory and indirect testimony, not entirely unlike the case before Meir—but it was his *broken heart* that led him to pursue a practical solution defined by compassion.

In a word, Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Samuel chart a progression of regret: from mere recognition of a problem to the emotional need that it takes to tackle it. This kind of propulsive regret requires us not only to grasp a problem but also to feel somehow hollowed out by it.

Recognition and heartbreak.

So, what should we call this emotion, this void that inspires the pursuit of justice? "Regret" somehow falls short.

For help, I propose a Herzlism. In 1902, Theodor Herzl novelized his Zionist project in a book called *Altneuland*, or *Old-New Land*, referring to the Land of Israel as both our past and our future. Riffing off this apt and memorable title, *Altneuland*, I offer the idea of an *Altneuwort*, meaning "old-new word," that is, a word that both calls on old and familiar understanding, but also blooms with new meaning.

The *Altneuwort* that I propose, is the word “ruth.” As an old and familiar word, you likely know it from its opposite, the common *adjective* “ruthless,” meaning heartless and cruel. You also know it from its *verb* form, “to rue,” as in “I rue the day,” meaning, of course, to regret.

Now, despite the survival of the words “ruthless” and “rue,” our unfamiliar Middle-English noun, “ruth,” has fallen into disuse. So, I say let’s appropriate this old word, “ruth,” for renewal, because it serves precisely to name the kind of regret that our history captures: brokenhearted dissatisfaction and regret, infused with compassion and responsibility.

So, with this old-new word in mind, I offer to you, our graduands, three wishes for your future:

- In your pursuit of experience, I wish you poor judgment
- In your lifelong search for wisdom, I wish you ignorance.
- And in your careers of service, I wish you...
  - o *Ruth*. Ruth that propels you to better the world.

And in the spirit an even *older* Ruth, I close my remarks with a promise to you, our graduating class of 2026, on behalf of the Hebrew Union College:

Where you go, we will go.

Where you reside, we will reside.

For your success is our success.

And our association with you will ever be a source and pride and joy.

Mazal Tov!



**150**  
1875-2025