

When Derek Jeter was winding down his career last September, Gatorade aired a special 90 second tribute video. The, video, shot in black and white, shows Jeter en route to Yankee Stadium, greeting his fans along the way. Playing in the background is a song Jeter himself chose for the occasion: Frank Sinatra's "My Way."

"My Way" is probably Sinatra's best-known song. More than just a catchy tune, the song is Sinatra's manifesto. It also captured a lot of what people thought, and still think, it means to be successful in America.

The message of "My Way" is made clear in just a few lines.

Regrets, I've had a few
But then again, too few to mention
I did what I had to do
And saw it through without exemption

For what is a man, what has he got
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels
And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows
And did it my way

The song presents a picture of a man, nearing the end of his life, who has been true to himself, who has done what he has to do, accepted the consequences and doesn't look back with any regret. Above all, the man values his integrity, even if it comes at the price of suffering and alienation.

Judaism has its own version of "My Way"--the famous story of Reb Zusya that I so often tell.

The students of Reb Zusya, hearing that their teacher was about to die, came to

pay him one last visit. But entering the room, they were surprised to see him trembling with fear. “Why are you afraid?” they asked. “In your life, have you not been as righteous as Moses himself?” “When I stand before the throne of judgment,” Zusya answered, “ I will not be asked, ‘Reb Zusya, why were you not like Moses?’ I will be asked , ‘Reb Zusya, why were you not like Zusya?’”

As in Sinatra song, Zusya is concerned about being true to himself. This, too, is Zusya's highest aspiration. But while the Sinatra song boldly asserts that we are only accountable to ourselves, Zusya imagines himself answering to his Creator. For Zusya, it is not just about whether he did it “his way,” but also about whether he did it God's way. Did he serve God in the unique way that only he was capable of? Did he make the most of the gifts God gave him?

In “My Way” the singer has a few regrets but, in the end, too few to mention. Zusya seems stricken with regret. And here is another key difference between these two end of life reflections. In the Sinatra song, it is a virtue to live with no regrets. For Zusya, it is an impossibility. The Zusya story suggests that if we have too few regrets to mention, it is because we don't understand just how far short we all inevitably fall of fulfilling the potential inherent in our creation.

If Reb Zusya's view seems a little severe, Sinatra's view seems downright chilling. After all, it was Adolf Eichman who answered his accusers with the simple declaration “I regret nothing.” Like Zusya's students, we don't want to see a righteous person racked with regret at the end of his life. But regret has its place and its purpose in our lives, especially at this time of year. This is the time that we take stock of ourselves, when we review the events of the past year, when we challenge ourselves to acknowledge those times when we have missed the mark, when we have hurt others, shirked our responsibilities, and missed opportunities to make a positive difference. If we take all

this stock-taking seriously, we will no doubt find that we have more than a few regrets. And these regrets will definitely be worth mentioning. Because, as Maimonides teaches us, acknowledging where we fell short is the first step toward doing better, to becoming more fully the person we are capable of being.

Regret, then, can be a good thing. Regret can move us to make changes in our lives. Regret can help motivate us to make these changes last. But regret can only help us if we are able to move beyond it. For example when we were in Israel, I let myself lose touch with the families of several people who were in the hospital. There are all kinds of understandable reasons why this disconnect happened--but it didn't have to. I felt bad. My regret moved me to make a point of making visits to each person on my first full day back. Neither these visits nor the follow up visits I made afterward erased my original negligence. But my regret had pushed me to address the problem and get past it. Now that the regret was no longer useful, I have let go of it and moved on.

Of course, it is not always easy to move on. Some of us may do something so damaging or hurtful to another person that we can never shake the feeling of regret. We become perpetually haunted by the memory of our misdeed. Still others among us may have committed some smaller offense, but cannot bring ourselves to let go of the regret even if the person we hurt has forgiven us. I am only eighteen months older than my brother Larry. We were a grade apart in school. When we entered adolescence, we competed for some of the same friends. I would often diminish my brother in front of our friends to get a cheap laugh and a little advantage. I cringe every time I remember these incidents. To this day I am deeply sorry I was so cruel to my brother. I am sorry even though I know that Larry has gone on to be a successful adult and has never once taken me to task over the way I treated him. He probably never thinks about those awkward couple of years. But I do, and I am sure that my regret is one of many factors that has kept us from being closer.

There is one more type of regret that is not helpful; the regret of the road not taken. It's the kind of regret that's not about a time we fell short, but about the choices we have made. Here's another family story. When she was a young woman, my mom, of blessed memory, dated a few men before settling down with my father. One of them was the son of a prominent Jewish family who had made their fortune running a string of laundromats. According to my mom, this man, whom she referred to as “the Laundry Prince” was quite taken with her. But my mom chose my father instead. Not a few times during my childhood, my parents fought over something and the argument got especially heated. In frustration, my mother would invariably exclaim, “I knew I should have married the Laundry Prince.”

The arguments proved ephemeral. My parents stayed together for almost 56 years. But my mother's repeated evocations of the “Laundry Prince” gave me a window into her soul. In times of frustration, and maybe other times as well, she regretted the choice she made. She fantasized instead about the road not taken. These fantasies were not helpful. They kept regret alive and prevented my mother from fully grappling with the challenges of her relationship with my father. There are times in our lives when we reach the proverbial fork in the road. We have to choose a direction and pursue it with all of our heart and soul. Once we choose, we cannot go back. The other choice is gone—and we can never know if it would have been better or worse. In these kinds of situations, regret pulls us into a black hole of negativity. If we spend too much time there, we may never be able get out.

Although “My Way” was written specifically for Frank Sinatra, it could have been written for an entire generation; the one that probably first heard it, like I did, in the back seats of their parents' cars. We Baby Boomers were the first generation to consciously prioritize self-fulfillment. We were the “Me Generation” whose mantra was, and is, “be yourself.” The Gen Xers, and Gen Yers and Millennials who followed

carried this social trend still further. Now we all have our own Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts where we post selfies chronicling the adventures, the likes and dislikes, and the opinions that are uniquely ours. With Netflix, we program our own personal television network, with Spotify our own custom radio stations. We can be who we are: urban or suburban, geek or nerd, gay or straight, religious or secular and be secure in the knowledge that most people will accept us for who we are. It's never been easier, or cooler, to just be ourselves.

Having a culture that celebrates doing it “My Way” has brought us many good things. All kinds of people who used to be shunned are now increasingly included. In just seven years, we have seen the first black president, the legalization of same sex marriage nationwide and the public transformation of Bruce Jenner into Caitlyn Jenner. We have so much more personal freedom these days. We can pursue our passions without feeling judged. We can wear what we want to wear, live where we want to live, be as social or as solitary as our temperaments demand. We can live in the town we grew up in or go across the country and re-invent ourselves. We have lots of choices in just about every area of our life.

But this newfound freedom to “do it my way” only takes us so far. Living a life where we have no regrets is a great prescription for truly being ourselves. But it's not a very good recipe for being our best selves. To be our best selves, we have to be self-aware, we have to periodically take stock, and we have to be concerned not only about our own integrity, but also about how our actions affect others. We have to be willing not only to “take the blows”--the consequences of our actions-- but also to try to right our wrongs. We have to allow ourselves to have regrets—the right kind of regrets—and let those regrets guide our actions.

Every day, each of us is repeatedly challenged to “be yourself.” At least once a year, our tradition reminds us that life holds out an even more important challenge: to

be our best selves. Our ultimate goal is not just self-fulfillment, it is finding our own unique ways to be good and to do good. Because as much as God wants us to be fully ourselves, God also wants us to live in relationship. And we can't live in relationship unless we take into account the others in our lives. And it is only when we take into account of the others in our lives--our friends, our families, our neighbors, our co-workers, and our fellow citizens, that we can truly be our best selves; that we can truly live not only "our way" but also "God's way."