

Letting Go of Control...Taking Hold of Life

I stand here before you this evening, on the cusp of a brand new year, and like all of us, I am wholly unsure of what the months that lie ahead will bring. Yet, I am certain of two facts beyond a shadow of a doubt on this night of *Kol Nidre*, and they are these:

Fact#1: Right now...in this very room, there are dozens of people thinking to themselves, “Why is it so cold in here? Seriously...how on earth do they keep it so freezing in this room?”

And, **Fact #2** of which I am wholly assured on this *Yom Kippur*: within just a few seats of those people are others who can’t stop thinking, “It’s Hot! I’m *schvitzing* in my nice High Holy Day clothes. Is the thermostat broken, for heaven’s sake?”

Knowing this to be our existential reality, not only on this night, but on every occasion when we gather together in prayer at Temple Beth Shalom, I have offered up the following suggestion to those leaders who manage our physical plant...individual climate control. That’s right, you heard it here first. I believe that every single seat in our sanctuary ought to come with its own discrete temperature setting apparatus. Of course, I don’t intend to have the control panels wired to our heating and cooling system. I merely suggest providing individual thermostats. I suspect that just the ability to turn knobs, the mere illusion of power, will be enough to make most of us much happier. Oh, how we love that feeling of control.

And, truth be told, we have quite a bit of it in this year of 5772, arguably more than at any other time in human history. Our medical sciences have extended the average American life expectancy over the past century by roughly thirty years¹, a reflection of the new mastery we hold over our own health. Our technological advances grant us the ability to control vast arrays of systems all in the palm of our hands. Our ancestors were concerned for the livelihood of their crops. We have weed and pest control. Our forebears feared wild beasts. We just call Animal Control.

It is, perhaps, because of this extraordinary dominion that we exert over so many elements of our world that we, today, get so very rattled – shaken to our cores – when we are confronted by situations which are beyond our control. And that is the position in which we find ourselves as a society on this solemn day, is it not? The public square is filled with questions that were unfathomable to most just half a century ago. Are the economic woes we now face a normal cyclical ebbing of our markets, or is this different, somehow more permanent? Every day reporters, pundits, and citizens raise questions

¹ <http://www.efmoody.com/estate/lifeexpectancy.html>

about the future of the “American Dream” and whether or not it can be made manifest for the generations yet to be. An Arab Spring inspires pride in our democratic ideals but also chills us with foreboding feelings about what these hard won freedoms will mean for Israel, for American foreign relations, and for the safety of Jews around the world. The earth appears to be getting warmer, posing threats to water supplies, vegetation, and animal life in far flung corners of the globe. Having identified the ecological crisis at hand, is there anything that we can do about it? The answer is not clear.

These global realities leave us feeling frazzled, anxious, tied up in knots by all that exists beyond the realm of our limited agency. Research conducted at Rutgers and Columbia Universities indicates that we are uneasy and fretful for very good reason. They conclude that our desire for control is a hardwired biological imperative.² When we feel like we have power to impact our life circumstances we are at peace, and when our conditions extend beyond the bounds of our efficacy, well, we don’t appreciate that at all.

1,500 years ago, our Jewish tradition intuited that this was not only a biological imperative, but a spiritual matter as well. Our Talmudic Rabbis developed a beautiful metaphor describing the partnership between God and humanity. They imagined that, when creating the universe, God forged keys to various aspects of our world, almost all of which were entrusted to human beings, who would be the stewards of all that now existed. However, “Rabbi Yochanan taught, ‘There are three keys which remained only in the hand of the Holy One of Blessing, and these were never entrusted to humans. They are the key of rain, the key of childbirth, and the key of life beyond death.’”³ How very prescient of this ancient sage...for do not these realms of life remain well beyond our control today as well? And, thus, do they not inspire much trepidation in our hearts?

For in Rabbi Yochanan’s time, rain was a matter of communal life and death. If the rains did not come in their season, then the crops would not survive, and neither would the local population. And much like crisis-creating weather patterns of today, the key to their control is not within our possession.

But the coming of the rains and the subsequent success of the harvest were not only about feeding the population. These also represented people’s financial wellbeing...no crops, no sales, no income. In our own day as well, financial stability feels like a great mystery...a matter worthy of prayer in so many of our homes. For some, the question is, “Will I be able to keep my job?” or “When on earth will I find a new one?” Others are

² Born to Choose: the Origins and Value of the Need for Control, by Lauren A. Leotti, Sheena S. Iyengar and Kevin N. Ochsner. Published in “Trends in Cognitive Sciences,” October 2010, Vol. 14, No. 10, p. 458

³ *Talmud Bavli, Tractate Ta’anit 2a*

wondering, about their diminishing college savings, how many years they'll need to keep working, or how to get out from under crippling debt. For many in our world – indeed, in our own community today - these questions – like the coming of the rain – feel like matters well beyond our control.

So too, the Holy One holds fast to the key which unlocks the wonders of childbirth, the process by which we are granted the blessing of life. Our medical advances have taught us so much, and yet countless unanswerable questions and mysteries remain. Just ask those who have faced complications in their efforts to bring a child into our world. Here too we are forced to live with what is – even as we hope and pray that God unlocks our dreams with that restricted key.

And God's final key withheld...the one which locks life's greatest mysteries away from view. What will become of us beyond our days in this world, and what are we to make of the limited time that we have here? The ultimate wondering...questions we often avoid speaking aloud for fear of the response we might receive from another's lips or from within our own hearts. We avoid, that is, until we are forced to consider them because of circumstances beyond our control.

Christian theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr penned his "Serenity Prayer" for life moments like these. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." His words offer great insight into the human condition and wisdom about how we might respond to our uncertainties. There is a prayer from Jewish tradition which does the same, offering us guidance when we lack the ability to improve upon our circumstances.

"Uneh Taneh Tokef K'dushat Hayom - Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day," we recite during these High Holy Days. "It is awesome and full of dread...Who shall be rich and who shall be poor? Who shall be exalted and who humbled? Who will be calm and who will be tormented? Who will be tranquil and who troubled?" The prayer's words are a stark reminder of all that we don't know...those matters which so often extend beyond our ability to influence.

I recently found myself speaking with a friend who is in the midst of battling life-threatening illness. "How are you feeling now?" I inquire, expecting to hear about her physical state. Instead, she shares, "I will never see the world the same way again. I appreciate every day, everything I do, in entirely new ways. Nothing is exactly like it was before. I experience everything and everyone more deeply, more profoundly. Why did it take this illness for me to live life this way?"

Why, indeed? Our Jewish tradition sought to provide us a mechanism for confronting, and coping with, life's harsh realities without needing to, heaven forbid, receive a life-altering diagnosis. In fact, our tradition's tool for living without full control of our own destinies is this day of Yom Kippur.

Just last week we experienced Rosh Hashanah together, a festival dedicated to the birthday of the world, the celebration of a brand new year and all that lies before us. And if Rosh Hashanah invites us to celebrate the limitless possibilities of newly created life, then Yom Kippur asks us to consider to confront the fact that our lives and capacities are limited.

We fast, depriving our bodies, temporarily, of the nutrition that sustains our lives. And as we all just experienced, this Day of Awe begins by taking all of our Torahs from the ark as we, collectively, peer into the void while the haunting melody of *Kol Nidrei* stirs our souls.

Powerful imagery and ritual, to be sure, and for good reason. Intended neither to be morbid nor morose, this is our tradition's very wise way of providing each of us an opportunity to look mortality in the eye...to confess out loud that we do not know what this year will bring, knowing that we are not fully in control of the most important elements of what is yet to be.

Confronted by this reality, the Torah portion we will read tomorrow morning was selected with great wisdom. We find Moses pleading with the Israelites: "As you stand this day, all of you, before your God...Choose Life!"⁴ What could that possibly mean to us, particularly on a day that is constructed to remind us that such a choice is often beyond our control? How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? Professor Deborah Lipstadt suggests that we do so by returning to this holy day's central prayer. "In the *Unetaneh Tokef*," she writes, "after acknowledging the fearful calamities looming, we still proclaim: '*U'Teshuvah, Utefillah, Utzedakah* – Repentance, Prayer, and Tzedakah avert the evil of [whatever may befall us].' We do not control life and death, but we can control the kind of life we lead. The choice is up to [us on]...this day."

No matter what this year will bring, we can practice *teshuvah* now – returning to and strengthening the important relationships in our lives. Making good with others where we have done previous damage. It is these people, after all, whom we will need to lean on for support during trying days if they should befall us. Those people should rest assured that they can count on us as well.

⁴ Deuteronomy 30:19

No matter what this year will bring, we can rely upon the potential of *t'fillah* – heartfelt prayer - to center us and bring us comfort when we experience turbulent waters. Regardless of one's worship experience and acumen, when the uncontrollable realities of existence assail us, there is a profound and impactful peace to be found in reconnecting with the spiritual and pouring our hearts out to the Source of all Blessings.

No matter what this year will bring, each of us can know the power of *tzedakah* – meaningful giving of what we have to offer. I cannot express how invariably moved I am when members of our community, whom I know to be experiencing serious financial hardship, nevertheless make a donation to lend a helping hand to others in need. This is what it means to live a life of sacred purpose...to confront one's own harsh realities with a heartfelt effort to improve upon someone else's.

In the words of my colleague, Rabbi Julie Pelc, “We may not be able to change the reality we're in, [though we try with all our might]; we may not drastically alter the outcome; but we have the ability to control our own reactions...our own behaviors, in relationship to whatever difficulty...[may befall us]. We can always search for the (sometimes small) ways to achieve a sense of control over our existences, even when it is clear that we do not...have ultimate control. We can always search for the...ways to seek comfort or align ourselves with the Holy, even when overwhelmed by the direction of our lives.”⁵

The *shofar* that sounds on these Days of Awe is intended to be an alarm...a wake up call to realities that most of us would otherwise prefer to sleep through, realities that some are facing so bravely each and every day. Surely, one of the *shofar's* messages to us is this: “Life is finite, and therefore infinitely precious. So...how are we living?”

Let us declare the sacred power of this day. It is, potentially, awesome. If we were to take the messages of this day to heart, how would we choose to treat our loved ones, our neighbors and co-workers? If we were to take the messages of this day to heart, how would we make different choices about how much time we spend at the office and how much we spend with our families? If we were to take the messages of this day to heart, how might these hours inspire us to appreciate every day more deeply and profoundly...to never see the world the same way again? If we were to take the messages of this day to heart, how would we turn our frustrated attention from all that we cannot control to all that is well within our ability to meaningfully impact in this year ahead? If we were to take the messages of this day to heart, how might we spend

⁵ Torah Reflections of *Parashat Tetzaveh* for the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, February 16, 2008

every single day purposefully choosing and crafting the life legacy that will someday survive us?

I stand here before you this evening, on the cusp of a brand new year, and like all of us, I am wholly unsure of what the months that lie ahead will bring. So my prayer for each us is this: May this year ahead be filled with abundant blessings. And when those blessings are out of our view, or out of our reach, may we be resilient, bold, and courageous enough to let go of our need for constant control, and in so doing, take hold of life anew. *Ken Yehi Ratzon* - May it be God's will, and ours as well. Amen.