

Taking Control Of Our Lives

Minister and Author Steve Goodier tells a story of *a man who was driving a long and lonely road, the last 65 miles of it unpaved, in order to watch Hopi Native American ceremonial dances in the state of Arizona. After the dances, he returned to his car only to find that it had a flat tire. He put on the spare and drove to the only service station on the Hopi reservation.*

"Do you fix flats?" he inquired of the attendant.

"Yes," came the answer.

"How much do you charge?" he asked.

With a twinkle in his eye, the man replied, "What difference does it make?"

This is what has been called a "Hobson's choice." A Hobson's choice is a situation that forces a person to accept whatever is offered or go without.

According to Barbara Berliner (The Book of Answers), the phrase was inspired by sixteenth-century entrepreneur Thomas Hobson, who hired out horses in strict rotation at Cambridge University. There was no choosing by the customer – it was strictly "Hobson's choice."

*But most of the time **we really do have a choice**, and the choice we make **does make a difference**. We may not always believe it. We may feel as if we have no choice, like we have to take what is being given to us, but almost always there is a choice in the matter. And when we realize that most of what we do we do by choice, then we are taking control of our own*

lives.

*Someone challenged me to try an experiment that completely changed my perspective. "For the next seven days," he said, "eliminate the words 'I have to' from your vocabulary and substitute the words 'I choose to.' Don't say, 'I have to work late tonight.' Instead, say, 'I choose to work late.' When you choose to do it, you take control of your life. Instead of saying, 'I have to stay home,' try 'I choose to stay home.' The way you spend your time is your choice. **You set the priorities. You are responsible. You have control.**"*

In just seven days I was no longer saying "I have to" and I felt better about my decisions. I learned that there is very little in this life I actually HAVE to do. You and I decide to do certain things because we believe that it will be for the best. When we eliminate "I have to" from our vocabularies, we take control. <http://stevegoodier.blogspot.com/search/label/control>

Goodier's lesson reminds me of a time that a couple that I once met with to help them prepare for their upcoming wedding. It was clear that this couple was feeling anxious, a bit out of control, and concerned about the upcoming wedding, and we collectively decided that it was best if they went for some professional counseling ahead of time. When I saw them next in my office they looked much more relaxed and seemed to be in a very healthy place thanks to some very good advice they had received from the therapist. The therapist had told them to consider the idea that there are two columns in

life- the column filled with things that we can control, and the column filled with things that we can't. Much of our stress and anxiety in life comes from trying to control things that are in the wrong column. We spend so much energy trying to control things that are in the column of "things that we can't actually control," that we just end up creating endless amounts of useless stress and anxiety for ourselves.

As we gather on Yom Kippur, looking back at the year that has passed, I am confident that this has been a stressful year for many of us. From issues with parents, children, spouses, grandparents, grandchildren, health, marriage, work, retirement, or dealing with a loss in the family, I know that all of us have had challenging moments during this past year. On a national level, regardless of political affiliation, I think it is fair to say that we are living in unprecedented times and that the political realities that we are facing are also a source of a tremendous amount of stress in the daily lives of many. The fact that we have access to the news and analysis of local, national, and international events every second of every day likely doesn't help, but rather fuels the sense that sometimes life just seems out of control.

Along comes Yom Kippur with a message that comes to caution and challenge us about our notions surrounding how much control we have over our own lives.

On the one hand, we know that Yom Kippur is about recognizing the fragility of life. It is about facing our mortality, understanding that we never know how much time we have on this earth, and acknowledging that so much of what we have is a gift from God. It is about acknowledging that much in life is beyond our control as we throw ourselves at God's mercy, saying: *God, I did the best that I could this year, I have tried to repair those relationships which I could, but I need you to meet me halfway. Your forgiveness, God, is at least somewhat, out of my control. I am depending on your gratitude, your mercy, and your compassion, Adonai. Aseh Imanu Tzedakah va'Hesed-v'hoshiyenu, act with justice and mercy towards us; save us- we say during the Avinu Malkeynu. We can only do so much God. We only have so much control over our destiny. Please help us because of Your goodness, not because we deserve it.*

And yet.

Just as we are standing before God, recognizing our limitations, and acknowledging our mortality, the fragility of our lives, and that which is ***beyond our control***- we are simultaneously being told **that we have more control than we think.**

The Mishnah in Yoma teaches:

עֲבֻרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם לְמָקוֹם, יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר. עֲבֻרוֹת שְׁבִין אָדָם
לְחֶבְרֹה, אֵין יוֹם הַכַּפּוּרִים מְכַפֵּר, עַד שֶׁיִּדְּצָה אֶת חֶבְרֹה.

Yom Kippur will atone for sins that are between a person and God, but will not atone for sins between one person and another, until (the person who committed the sin) appeases his/her fellow. **Mishnah Yomah 8:9**

The message of our tradition is clear: Yes, we need God's forgiveness to get through another year. And yes, that is something that is beyond our control. But if we have harmed someone else, wronged someone else, insulted someone else- *it is in **our power*** to do our best to remedy the situation. We are taught that we can't just show up on Yom Kippur, and ask God for forgiveness, if we did not at least *try* to take control of those relationships that were in need of repair. Whether or not the aggrieved party forgives us, or whether or not someone who wronged us asks us for forgiveness, might

be beyond our control. But how we respond in either case, is definitely within our control.

This same message- that there is much out of our control, but also much in our control, was also found on Rosh Hashanah. As you recall, we recited the powerful words of the Unetnaeh Tokef:

וְהָיָה רִשְׁתָּךְ, וְעַכְשָׁי, וְאַחֲרָיִךְ כְּכֹפְךָ וְכִמְעֵי יָמֶיךָ

“ God determines the life and decrees the destiny of every creature.”

וְכַתְּבָהּ לְכָל נֶפֶשׁ וְלִכְלֵם וְלִכְלֵמָה וְלִכְלֵמָה

“How many shall leave this World, and how many shall be born into it?”

וְהָיָה חַיֵּיךָ וְיָמֶיךָ וְאַחֲרָיִךְ, וְכֹפְךָ וְכִמְעֵי יָמֶיךָ

“Who shall live and Who shall die, Who by fire and who by water?”

וְהָיָה עֲשִׂיֶּיךָ וְכֹפְךָ וְכִמְעֵי יָמֶיךָ וְכִמְעֵי יָמֶיךָ

“Who shall be poor and who shall be rich, who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted?”

But then we made the bold claim that:

וְהָיָה גִּלְגָּלְךָ, וְהָיָה גִּלְגָּלְךָ וְהָיָה גִּלְגָּלְךָ וְהָיָה גִּלְגָּלְךָ

living lives of teshuvah, tefilah, and tzedakah, repentance, prayer, and acts of justice- those are things that we **can do** to limit the severity of the degree, to make a difference in our lives and in our world. Those are ways

that we **can take control**, even amidst a life that is so fragile and overwhelming at times.

Indeed the past ten days that we spent in active "teshuvah mode," where we hopefully tried to make amends, take stock of our lives, our relationships, and our priorities, as we committed to doing better if granted the blessings and privileges of another year were another example of taking control. And showing up today, right here, and right now, acknowledging our failings in front of one another- is yet another way in which we are taking control- at least in word (and hopefully in deed as well).

Over and over in the liturgy we recite words reminding us that we do have control over our actions. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, we have been guilty, we have betrayed, we have robbed, we have spoken slander. Al Chet she hatanu lefanekha, for the sins that we have committed before you, Adonai, forgive us.* By taking ownership over our misdeeds, we are admitting that we do have a large degree of control over our lives. Indeed our tradition is so bold as to claim that, while we do not have ultimate control over our fates, we *can* influence God's decision over whether or not to forgive us in the first place. If we admit wrongdoing; if we take ownership over our actions, if we take control over our lives and our decisions, then and only then, will we merit the blessings of God's mercy and forgiveness. One midrash even

goes so far as to claim that we have enough control to move God from the strict "seat of justice", to the "seat of mercy and compassion."

In some senses, Yom Kippur, and the entire season leading up to this very moment is a Jewish ritual calls to mind the famous Serenity prayer composed by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who prayed:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

Which all brings me back to the stresses of the year, of our nation, and of our world.

We may not have complete control over everything in life, but we have more control than we think.

That is the message of today.

On a personal level:

Are you having challenges with your children or grandchildren? Are you having trouble at work? Are you struggling in your marriage? Are you struggling with your health? Are you struggling with your daily schedule that just seems completely overloaded and overwhelming? Are you struggling with your financial situation? Are you struggling with the fact that you have no time for those things that are so important to you in life?

Now ask yourself: How much of this is in your control? Really? Take one area that I mentioned above and spend a few moments analyzing it. Let's say that we are simply feeling overscheduled in life. Well, how much of that is our fault? How many things do we "have" to do, and how many things are we "choosing" to do. I rarely have time to read during the week. And yet, this summer, I somehow read seven books in four weeks. Why? Yes, in part because I was on vacation, but in part because I watched little to no TV, and spent little to no time on the internet for the month that I was at camp. During the year, like many of you, I watch TV every night- staying up later than I should. And then I complain that I am tired, or complain that I have no time to read. Well, whose fault is that? As I have said before, there are

only 168 hours in a week. How we spend them, is to a large degree, up to us.

The next time that you find yourselves feeling anxious or stressed because things in life seem totally out of control, I want you to remember a short teaching that I used to have as a tag on the bottom of my email a few years ago. Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov taught:

*There are two things it is forbidden to worry about. That which is possible to fix and that which is impossible to fix. What is possible to fix, fix it and why worry? That which is impossible to fix, how will worrying help? **Rabbi Yechiel Michel of Zlotchov, 18th century***

We worry. It is in our tradition. You may know the joke about how Jews used to send a telegram? *Start Worrying. Details to follow.*

But instead of worrying, and *dreying our kops* (literally, spinning our heads in circles), when it comes to our personal lives, we should remind ourselves to stop spinning and start focusing our eyes and our energy on those things that we can influence in life.

The same is also true on a national level:

We cannot control what members of congress or our president do or say on any given day - but we can vote. We can make sure that we are registered. We can help register others. We can write to our representatives, get involved, learn about issues that we care about (beyond articles that already confirm what we believe to be true), engage in thoughtful and respectful dialogue with those with whom we disagree; we can choose to march, protest, or voice our support, and take advantage of the blessings of living in this democracy by exercising our rights as free citizens. Respectfully and thoughtfully getting involved in our democracy is a privilege, it is a mitzvah, and it is a way that we can exercise control. If the political climate is stressing you out- take a deep breath and get involved. And remember, above all, to be respectful and kind to one another.

Finally, the same is true on a global level:

I recently read an article that said that

Since 1989, the global mean temperature has increased by one degree Fahrenheit. By 2030, the number of people worldwide affected by floods is expected to triple. By 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause the deaths of roughly 250,000 people each year. By 2050, the Arctic Ocean is expected to be largely ice free in the summer. By the same year, a million species will face extinction. By 2080, the frequency of heat waves in New York metropolitan area is

projected to triple. By the turn of the next century, global sea levels will have risen by one to four feet, potentially turning hundreds of people into refugees. (NY Times Magazine, August 4, 2018)

Much damage has already been done. That, unfortunately, at least according to scientific research, was also largely in our control as human beings. But how many of us are really paying attention? How many of us are making personal decisions with our purchases, our energy choices, our votes, or even our level of awareness about this issue? How many of us know the difference between fossil fuels and biofuels, between non-renewable energy and renewable energy, for example. Educating ourselves, and I include myself here, would be a good place to start. Many of us understand the environmental impact of the cars that we drive, but how many of us understand the environmental impact of the food that we consume?

Is there much when it comes to our environment that is beyond our control? Unfortunately, yes. On the other hand, we can all do our part- from the lightbulbs that we use, to the cars that we drive, to the recyclable bags that we buy, or the meat that we eat. We can make small choices every day to make a difference. We can choose to exercise at least a modicum of control when it comes to the influence that our daily decisions have on our environment. *Because the truth is that we have more control than we think-*

even something so seemingly insurmountable as our beleaguered environment.

We have spent well over a month engaged in serious spiritual work. Thirty days of preparation before Rosh Hashanah. Ten days of intense soul development working towards Yom Kippur. We tear ourselves down. We acknowledge our shortcomings. We take concrete steps to do better this year. And then, we throw up our hands to God in an acknowledgement that ultimate forgiveness rests in God's hands alone. We acknowledge that while it is our signature in this year's Book OF Life, God is the One who needs to ultimately sign off. It is a frightening theology. But *even with this theology, even in this moment* when we throw ourselves upon the court of divine mercy, we are reminded of our ability to control the precious gift of our lives which in our hands. Just think about the first thing that a Jew is to traditionally do tomorrow night (after we eat!). She is to take a hammer, and put the first nail in the sukkah. He is to pick up the hammer and takes a swing as he seeks to build a life that is as precious as it is fragile (just like the Sukkah).

In other words, immediately following this most sacred day, we are urged to remember that **we** have the power to build. **We** have the power to create something new. **We** have more control than we realize or care to admit.

So take your first swing tomorrow night, as you marvel at the precious gift of life which God has once again given you. See what you can create.

Remember, the hammer has two sides to it. You can always take a nail out and replace it, if you regret the choice that you make, or change your mind.

Do not get overwhelmed by the enormity of the building project that is life.

Just take it one nail at a time. Remember, the tool of taking control, of making changes, is often right in your hand. Use it.

Ktivah v'Hatimah Tovah, May we all be inscribed and sealed for a healthy, meaningful, and purposeful year.