

Control
Yom Kippur
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

Three men are at a bar, and two of the men are talking about the control they have over their wives. “Yep,” one says with chest puffing out. “I just yell ‘honey’ and she comes in. She may not be happy but she comes.” The second man boasts, “Well, I control all the purse strings.” In the meantime, the third man remains silent. After many minutes, the first two turn to the third and ask, “What about you? What kind of control do you have over your wife?” The third man says, “Well, I’ll tell you, just the other day I had her on her knees.”

The first two men were dumbfounded.

“Wow! What happened next?” they asked.

The third man takes a healthy swig of his beer, sighs and mutters, “Then she started screaming, ‘Get out from under the bed and fight like a man!’”¹

Taking control is one of the themes of Yom Kippur. More specifically, we are to take control over ourselves. The Torah says, “Mark, the tenth day of this seventh month is the Day of Atonement. It shall be a sacred occasion for you: you shall practice self-denial.”² What does self-denial mean? Jewish tradition teaches that on Yom Kippur, we refrain from eating, drinking, anointing ourselves, bathing, marital relations, and wearing leather or luxury items. If we can restrain ourselves for twenty four hours from giving in to physical needs and desires, perhaps we’ll be able to show restraint at other times. We attempt to assert control over ourselves during this Day of Atonement. And as Chaim Stern says, “Judaism calls for self-discipline. When we control our appetites on Yom Kippur, we remember that on other days, too, we can be masters, not slaves, of our desires.”³

Controlling oneself, as we know, is not an easy matter. Let’s talk about food, for example. While we need to eat and meals can be a time of great enjoyment, food can be used to fill voids in ourselves. Some of us eat when we feel out of control with our lives. Maybe a friend or family member disappointed us. Perhaps we faced yet another failure in work or in love or we are under lots of stress. With emotions raging, a person can engage in binge eating, consuming food when he/she isn’t really hungry. A college friend of mine told me recently that she was devouring a half gallon of ice cream a night. Many of us go to the chip bag or cookies, when we are feeling low or out of control.

Others may go the opposite route by starving themselves. I remember when I was a teenager, I felt out of control and so I started to diet. I remember cutting back on my meals, telling my parents at dinner time that I already ate and watching the scale go down. When I was fifteen years old, I went down to 95 pounds. I was so thin that I stopped menstruating. While other teens envied me for my skinniness, I was always too cold and couldn’t enjoy myself at pool

parties. I remember the self-loathing I had. Every day, I would castigate myself. I remember this one afternoon, when I came home from school and went upstairs to do more sit-ups, that I thought to myself if only I could lose a couple more pounds then I would be happy. Another voice in my head that day said, “No you won’t.” It was then I was ready to go into counseling and to realize that my issue wasn’t with food but it was about control. It was then I could start to deal with my low self-esteem, my struggle for autonomy from my parents, and my desire to not engage in risky behavior with friends.

Food and drink are common outlets that reveal our struggle with ourselves but there are other ways we demonstrate our feelings of being out of control. How we keep our homes can symbolize this struggle. Do we hoard things because some day we may need such and such an item? Does going through our things provoke great anxiety? How about the opposite end of the spectrum? Are we obsessive about having a super clean house and get over wrought if a little untidiness breaks through? If there’s a little mess, are we compelled to deal with it even though there are more pressing things to do?

Our appearance is another area where we strive to overtly shape or influence. Many of us fret too much over our changing bodies especially when we are no longer young. The aging process must be reversed and we go to great economic lengths to preserve our physique. We can hyper focus on insignificant physical faults or deficiencies and strive to control our skin, muscle tone, and figure.

Our efforts to control ourselves and our lives can be expressed in many ways but as we all know, there are limits. One of the seminal prayers of the High Holy Days is the Un-taneh Tokef prayer. It begins by stating, “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day: it is awesome and full of dread.” This prayer deals with our lack of control over our mortality. It goes into haunting details of the ways we can perish including earthquake, fire, hunger, and beasts. In the Middle Ages, they didn’t have conceptions of cancer, lung disease, or stroke. We can easily add these diseases to the list. Even with these additions, though, we understand that even if we take excellent care of ourselves, eat the healthiest of foods and exercise, we can still succumb to these ever present diseases. There are some things we cannot control. We can’t control the other vehicle on the road, our genetic predisposition, or how the earthquake will impact our home and family. We don’t get to choose how or when we leave this world.

Feeling a sense of control is not just evident in our adult lives or longevity but I’ve come to realize how innate one’s need for control really is. I’m sure our psychotherapists can help explain this further. A personal anecdote, I remember when my daughter, Gabriel, was over one year of age. She would fight us when we needed to change her diaper. I felt like I was wrestling a beast as she yelled, flailing her legs, as I tried to keep fecal matter contained. After another exhausting time of fighting with her, I stopped. I told her that she had to stay in her

room until she let me change her diaper. It was up to her, I emphasized. Whenever she was ready, then I would change her diaper and she could watch Blue Clues, play in the living room, anything. The struggles ceased within two days. It was amazing. But I remember thinking to myself that even a young child needs to feel a sense of control over her life.

One of the things many of us struggle with is our lack of control over others. We try to channel our children and direct them to take care of themselves. We are frustrated when our parents do not realize their limits and won't take the extra help they need. Our siblings do whatever it is they want without heeding our wisdom. Friends continue to make the same mistakes over and over again, despite our counsel.

I remember as a young rabbinical student wanting to help my maternal grandmother whom I affectionately called, "Graful" because I truncated her title 'grandma' with her first name 'Ethel.' Anyways, her health was declining, I tried talking to her about her anger. She asserted, "I am not angry!" She wanted to die and told me that they shoot horses with the implication that she wanted to be done with her life. I remember at her funeral, I was asked to speak. Now I was very close to her but my mother had a very difficult relationship with her and many members of the family had broken ties with each other. The Wilcove family knew how to keep a grudge and they could maintain it for decades. So with my words, I hoped to bring healing to the family.

I spoke openly about my Graful's struggles in her youth as an unwanted daughter. How she was punished whenever her younger brother did anything wrong because she was supposed to watch him. I mentioned that my Graful always told me she did the best she knew how in raising her daughters. Anyways, when I was done, members of the family were dismayed with me. They felt that I aired the dirty laundry and this should've be done privately. Even though I knew they were never going to talk about it. Fortunately, my mother was okay with my words. I suppose I did it for her because I just couldn't rave about my grandmother knowing the pain that was inside my mother. The lesson I learned from that overeager eulogy was that I couldn't bring healing to the Wilcove family. I could barely even get them to talk about their broken relationships with each other. And it was quite a lesson for me as a young rabbi to be.

I know many of you struggle with helping a member of your family too. Perhaps you have a mentally ill sibling, parent, spouse, or child. It is so hard to convince them of the need of help, therapy, and medication. It can feel like you say the same words and they have little impact. Others have loved ones who struggle with alcohol and drug use. We try to help them, protect them, but we cannot save them from their choices. It is a terrible feeling to be powerless to help the people we love the most. We all know the expression, "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." Ultimately, we know that every person must take responsibility for his/her life but when we see a relative or friend spiral downward, it is a terrible feeling that we do not have the power to stop it.

Many of you know that I've been going through a very difficult time. I've been trying for over a year and a half to get help for Paul and for us as a couple. Even though a therapist urged Paul to go into weekly counseling, he just wouldn't do it. Even though I pushed hard for us, with professional guidance, he could explore how he could be happy and how we as a couple could work through this challenging time, he didn't want it. There came a point that no matter what I did or said, I couldn't change the trajectory of our marriage. I've always felt in many areas of my life that if I really want something and work hard towards it, I can accomplish it. I believe at times that I can move mountains if I just put enough thought and energy into a goal. But this was the first time that I couldn't control the outcome. I couldn't save my marriage and I couldn't help Paul. The only choice I could make was to save myself and ensure that I could take care of my children. I know many of you sadly have had to go through this as well.

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev relates that he started out his rabbinic career wanting to change the world. After several years, he realized that was too hard, so he decided to try to change his community. Several years later, that goal was abandoned as too difficult, and Levi Yitzchak chose just to concentrate on changing his own family. He finally concluded that only one he could really change was himself!

And so, I've been working on myself. A friend and colleague of mine, Rabbi Rick Steinberg, has guided me with the words, "Don't try to get through it, grow through it." What he was suggesting to me is that as terrible as this is, it is an opportunity for learning. I've come to understand that times like this can't be managed alone. I needed support and guidance and have appreciated the collective wisdom that is out there. And so, relying on psychologists, attorneys, colleagues, friends, and family, I've attempted to understand my situation and to maneuver through this very undesirable time in my life. Past congregant, Randy Will, was visiting me from Missouri a couple of months ago when he said, "We can only choose our action and attitude." I think he is right. There are circumstances beyond our control but we can choose how we face them.

The words of this morning's Torah portion I think speak strongly to the choices we can make. **אַתֶּם נִצְבִּים הַיּוֹם בְּלִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם**, "All of you are standing here today before Adonai, your God." In Nitzavim, we are beckoned to choose life and choose blessing. It's an empowering message of focusing on what we can do and the importance of staying rooted to our values and tradition. Deuteronomy 30 states, "See I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity... I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life..."

So what can we do? It's first recognizing the things we can control and those that are beyond us. It's recognizing our limits and striving to adapt our attitude, expectations, and desires to

what is at the present and what can be in the future. It's affirming life even in times of despair and having faith that the time of blessing will come.

The Untaneh Tokef prayer states that it is by Teshuvah, Tefillah, u'tzekadah, repentance, prayer, and charity that the harsh decrees against us are mitigated. I believe the message of this is that how we live our lives can make all the difference in the quality of our days. If we are willing to reflect and acknowledge our mistakes and short comings, then we can grow through every decade of life. If we are willing to root ourselves in prayer, ritual, and tradition, the days we have will be made more meaningful. And if we are willing to give Tzedakah, care about others and strive to make their lives better, then we will feel blessed.

So we may not be able to control our spouses, children, parents, or friends but we can exert control over ourselves. We can choose our perspective and how we deal with situations no matter how challenging. We can lean on family and friends and seek knowledge and help wherever it is. And if we are willing to be brave enough, we can grow. We can grow into adults who are more aware, more attuned to ourselves, and more capable of resiliency. We can acknowledge for God to give us the guidance to change the things that we can and accept the things that we can't.

May we be able to recognize our limits and to know that as long as there is life, there is hope. May this year be one of regaining control over selves so we can shape it into time of possibilities, opportunities, and growth.

Notes:

¹ <http://www.anyjokes.net/funny-jokes/control-freaks>

² Leviticus 23:26

³ GOP pg. 229