

Press Here to Control the Universe?
Yom Kippur 5782-2021
Rabbi Yael Ridberg

Back in January I had a COVID scare that had me in tears, curled up in the fetal position on the floor of my parents' house out of fear I might have infected them. I had travelled to bring our oldest daughter to college, and we were to stay with my parents nearby. They were rightfully still concerned about transmission, as this was pre-vaccine. So, I double masked everywhere, I tested twice, I wore a mask and a plastic shield on the plane, and I rented my own car so as not to be in an enclosed space with my parents before having a chance to shower and change my clothes.

Four hours after we arrived, had dinner, and had a quick awkward hug while holding our breath, I received a text from a friend telling me she had COVID. Gali and I had had a goodbye dinner with her four days prior. Indoors. Masks mostly off. My friend told me that she had gone for a test *the day before* when she lost her smell. The day *before*, when I was *still* in San Diego. The day *before*, when such information might have meant I made a different choice as to when I saw my parents.

Out of an abundance of caution, Gali and I left my parents and went to the hotel where she was going to live for the semester. And we spent the better part of the next 24 hours in various fits of rage and anxiety while we waited for our own test results.

My friend's diagnosis was not her fault, and she was not in control of how she was infected given her own careful living. Thank goodness her symptoms were relatively mild, and she recovered well. But that night, she took away my control – my ability to make a different choice which, after 11 months of calculating risks to the nth degree, made me realize once again, the many ways we humans are small and fragile, and despite our best efforts, we still do not control the universe. We've been living through a pandemic that has brought the world to its knees, and I had a new opportunity to accept the vulnerability and fragility of existence.

The Talmud teaches: "Three keys are held by the Blessed Holy One that have *not been delivered* to a messenger: the keys of rain, of childbearing, and

resurrection.”¹ I love this teaching because despite all of the things we might imagine are in our control, the rabbis remind us that human power is indeed limited. We can’t make it rain, we can’t bear a child on our own, and we can’t resurrect the dead.

The amazing thing is, no matter how long we live, no matter how much experience we gain, how much money we make or how much happiness we enjoy, we never get better at *avoiding* a year like the one we just lived. The best we can do is hope to get better at *managing* our response to these derailments and difficulties, even if we cannot avoid them entirely.

On some level, we must accept the experiences that are out of our control, we must try to respond to them, but we cannot *predict* and *prepare* to respond to them. It is in the moments of the unexpected, uncharted territory in life when we must confront our fears and limitations. Here is where we struggle the most, but here is where we can potentially find meaning as well.

Year after year the prayer on Rosh Hashanah & Yom Kippur that has the most personal resonance for me is the *unetaneh tokef* – the prayer that speaks plainly about the uncertainty and fragility of life.

The theology is from another time and place when believing that regardless of what transpired, all was in the hands of God. As modern Jews we may no longer find such theology meaningful, but we would do well to consider these words seriously, and recognize the common truth about human existence, that life is fleeting, and we never know what the future holds.

The prayer is not supposed to be an easy prayer, it has a different function and can truly be a “purifying practice.” For me, it burns away all of my negative baggage and emotions. Every year my experience with this prayer is different – sometimes hard, sometimes neutral, but it never ceases to challenge me to consider the options we face when coping with the unpredictable nature of life.

The rabbis who wrote this text lived in a world where disasters, plagues and wars were understood as punishments from God. That feeling – that life’s tragedies are largely externally imposed – is one we know all too well. There is so much

¹ BT Taanit 2a

that we simply cannot control about our lives. In this year and a half of collective injury from COVID, we've lost a certain *sense of certainty*, that may have felt like *control*, even if it really wasn't.

I *thought* I understood I had done everything in my power to protect my parents from possible exposure to COVID, but in that single moment, I realized I had constructed a reality, that wasn't exactly *false*, but it was exactly as the psalmist describes – “like a breath; like a passing shadow.”

In an essay by Nadia Bolz Weber called *If You Can't Take in Anymore, There's a Reason*. The author likens her experience of the last year to an old electrical circuit breaker that wasn't built to withstand multiple electrical appliances plugged in at the same time (she would have to unplug her stereo in order to blow dry her hair).

Bolz-Weber writes: “I think of that fuse box often these days, because friends, I just do not think our psyches were developed to hold, feel and respond to everything coming at them right now; every tragedy, injustice, sorrow and natural disaster happening to every human across the entire planet, in real time every minute of every day...am I doing enough, sacrificing enough, giving enough, saying enough about all the horrible things right now to think of myself as a good person and subsequently silence the accusing voice in my head? No. The answer is always no. No I am not. Nor could I. Because no matter what I do the goal of “enough” is just as far as when I started.”²

It's another way to describe feeling out of control, when the sheer number of things that demand a response from us is too many to count, and it all feels jumbled together without a clear sense of what is good and what is not.

How might we manage this? What matters to us? Can we affirm the stability of our existence? Can we renew our trust in the lives we have crafted for ourselves and can we recognize the gift of life itself?

² <https://thecorners.substack.com/p/if-you-cant-take-in-anymore-theres?fbclid=IwAR3uLN-8UpSaRlks9a2c0qwV1tgMNAoQdN7lVWHj2JiqDOnzGLmbkBEki6k>

A kabbalistic understanding of the sin of Adam and Eve when they eat from the Tree of Knowledge may be instructive here. According to the midrash, the sin of eating from the fruit of the tree, brought about something called *beirurim* sifting, separating, and clarifying through the mixed up good and evil in the world to extract and liberate the sparks of holiness trapped in the mixture.³

There was no longer the stability and control that was in the Garden of Eden, and to return to such stasis, the mystics believed that observing mitzvot would be the way to bring more kindness, more holiness, more goodness into the world, thereby “crowding out” the negative elements, depriving oxygen to the evil inclination that caused the sin in the first place.

It matters not what the good is, but rather that you seek to increase the holiness, it decreases the space held up by the evil. It’s not a quick fix, not may it even be done in our lifetime – but it is *a way to regain control*.⁴

It’s on each of us to do this. No one is exempt. It’s the holding the door open for someone, responding to emails in a timely way. It’s appreciating someone for something they said or did; it’s saying I love you in words and in deeds. The list is literally endless. But when we consider that all we have is the example of our own lives, and perhaps the record button is always on, tracking our deeds, our choices might bring more holiness and crowd out the evil.

A few years ago, I gave a sermon about Job and Ruth – two biblical characters who faced terrible suffering and responded completely differently to their loss of control. I come back to these timeless examples often, because every time we must pivot in the context of adversity, I am reminded that our tradition accepts and responds to our sense of vulnerability, and provides, should we choose to accept it, a context in which stability can be regained, where hope can be embraced, and joy can be experienced once again.⁵

The primary teaching about the Book of Job is that life simply isn’t secure, and that when you face tragedy, it is a good idea to have some room in your life in which it can be absorbed.

³ Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh 26

⁴ Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Erev Rosh Hashanah Drash 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=telbhvOTUq0>

⁵ Adapted from a sermon by Rabbi Richard Hirsh, 2006

Job is visited by several friends, each of whom offers an interpretation for Job's suffering. But Job is inconsolable and when God finally speaks to him, God only impresses upon Job that *there is no real explanation*. Hardly satisfying.

Later when Job's fortunes are restored, it's hard to accept such an ending, *especially* in a year such as this when a global pandemic continues to destabilize our lives as we knew them before March 2020.

That's where the Book of Ruth diverges. Naomi's experience of famine, the loss of her husband, and the subsequent death of her two sons explain the bitterness she says has engulfed her life in the span of 10 years.

Her redemption begins with the return to community, her daughter in law Ruth's commitment to her, her people, and to God. Stability comes back to Naomi through Ruth's strength and companionship, and through her finding a husband for Ruth, through whom will be the ancestor to King David.

From both Job and Naomi, we learn that there *is* comfort to be found in our darkest moments. Most of the time stability is regained not by replacement but by a restored understanding that although life is messy, unpredictable, and can break our hearts, life *is* an amazing gift.

On September 11, I spoke to our dear friend Jon who descended 41 flights out of his office at the WTC after it had been attacked, 20 years ago. He shared with me that the single most important thing he lives with since that day is *perspective*. He refuses to engage with negative, entitled ideas and people who complain about the smallest things. In the face of the trauma he experienced *beyond his control*, he has decided that he *can control* the life he lives, with whom he engages, and what is really important.

Ultimately, that is the message of *Unetaneh Tokef* as well. Living lives directed to goodness (*teshuva*); reflecting who we are and where we are going (*tefila*); and acknowledging that our deep connection with others means that our own self-fulfillment cannot exist apart from those with whom we share past, present, and future (*tzedakah*), are those things that will impact dramatically those parts of our lives we can control.

When I graduated High School, Dr. Shulamith Elster z”l (who died this year) gave each of the graduates a gift of a hammer tied with a purple ribbon which I still have. “Go out and fix this broken world! Fight the ugliness and the injustice, but don’t forget to notice the color purple, and create and find beauty whenever and wherever you can.” It’s not a perfect recipe to control the universe, but it is a way to remember what we are called to do in this world, despite our uncertainty, our fears, and our lack of control.

We ask for a pure heart, and a steadfast spirit. We pray not to be cast off from the divine presence, nor for the experience of the holy to be taken from us.⁶

On this Yom Kippur, let us acknowledge the truth of truths, that we will continue to swing between stability and fragility, between life and death, between resignation and redemption, between vulnerability and confidence. May we affirm the stability of our existence, may we renew our trust in the lives we have crafted for ourselves, and truly recognize the gift of life itself.

Gmar Hatima Tovah – May our letting go lead to letting in.

⁶ Psalm 51:12-13