

Letting Go of Control

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A few months ago, late in the evening I found my 4-year-old daughter hanging out in the living room well past her bedtime. I approached her and asked her with a gentle yet firm voice to go back to sleep. Without missing a beat, she told me, “You’re not the boss of me” and then she added, “You’re not in control.” At that point, I was expecting her to tell me that only Imma, only Mom is in control, and that only she is the boss. But my daughter surprised me with her next pronouncement, “Hashem is in control” — only “God is in control.” In truth, I just couldn’t argue with that. “You’re right,” I said to her, “Hashem is in control” and I walked away.

It seems like every day, each of us encounters manifold moments in which we seek to assert our control unwittingly. This impulse seems especially necessary at a time that is so replete with uncertainty and unrest. To make things worse, the nature of social media coupled with daily technological advances, may give many of us a false impression of our sense of control.

R. Abraham Twersky offers this important insight, “As a child, I had a toy truck which I pushed along the floor. Recently I saw a three-year-old child gleefully pushing buttons on a panel, whereby he controlled a little car all the way across the room. With so much control at our fingertips, it is understandable why we may have extended our concept of control.”

<http://ou.org.s3.amazonaws.com/publications/ja/5759winter/twerski.htm>

Indeed, like three-year-old children, many of us may have developed a dependency on gleefully pushing all sort of buttons – tangible and intangible – in order to strengthen and bolden our sense of control. All this, without ever fully realizing that oftentimes we are not in control and that we are draining ourselves of vital resources while becoming increasingly frustrated by our lack of control and impact.

To be clear, Jewish tradition urges us to never shirk away from our moral duties. Each of us must fully take account of our actions and consider the weight of duty that falls squarely on our shoulders. Certainly, in several important domains, we are obligated to claim our share of responsibility and assert control over our lives, our society, and the world. As R. Tarfon famously taught in Pirkey Avot (2:16), “*Lo aleicha hamelacha li’gmor, ve’lo atah ben chorin li’batel mimenah*” – “It is not for you to complete the task, but neither are you free to stand aside from it.” This is especially true in regards to our moral responsibility towards the wellbeing of our fellows and the welfare of this world.

At the same time, we must carefully sift through and distinguish between the various types of control we try to assert each day. Indeed, our tradition offers us essential daily and weekly reminders that we are not fully in control, both practically and theologically. These reminders urge us to come to terms with the limitations of our humanity, inviting us to make space for the limitless reign of God in our lives and in this world.

A few examples.

Our weekly observance of Shabbat offers a mitigating counterbalance to our sense of control over time.

At a shabbat meal earlier this summer, someone shared the story of a close friend who is an observant man from Denver. A few years ago, this person showed up to Kabbalat Shabbat with a huge smile on his face and loudly proclaimed, “My car has been stolen! My car has been stolen!” Members of the community could not understand the discrepancy between his facial expression and the news he had shared. And so he was forced to explain, “It’s Shabbos. The next 25 hours belong to God and I am so happy that I’ve got this gift of time and that for the next day or so, I am not in control.”

Perhaps on a more serious note, like many parents of young children, we sometimes struggle with setting appropriate limits. Perhaps surprisingly, when it comes to Shabbat, those struggles for the most part, simply disappear. It’s as though our children know that it is one thing to encounter a boundary set by us and quite another thing to encounter a boundary set from above (*Avinu...Malkeinu!*). Indeed, from a very young age, Shabbat observant children internalize a valuable lesson that we adults seem to struggle with all our lives. Time belongs to God and God is in control.

The famous contemporary Israeli journalist and Torah teacher, Sivan Rahav Meir, vividly describes her first experience as a secular Israeli teenager at an observant Shabbat meal. She recalls how they sat and sat and sat, the meal went on and on and on, discussions around the table continued throughout the afternoon, and she, merely a teenager at the time, suddenly understood that for the time being, nobody is concerned about time. There is nowhere to go, nothing else to do, there is only Shabbat.

For a moment, let us conjure up different experiences from this past year in which we may have unwittingly tried to exercise mastery or control over time. Let us try to remember the amount of times we lost our cool because we were going to be late or because we thought it was critically important for us or someone else to be somewhere on time. Concurrently, think of an instant in which you left a

meaningful experience too soon because you determined that you had run out of time. Or try to recall periods of days turned into weeks turned into months turned into years, in which we foolishly spent just one more hour at work, at the expense of our social or spiritual or family life, because we convinced ourselves that doing so would result in an ultimate breakthrough, or that this would help advance our careers. Imagine the sort of choices we would be able to make and the quality of relationships and life experiences that would result, if we only learned to let go, or at least, loosen our grip on time.

We don't only seek to control time.

Many of our agricultural holidays and agrarian *mitzvot* offer a mitigating counterbalance to our sense of control over material wealth and possessions.

Almost a year ago, during Chol Hamoed Sukkot, our family home was robbed while Frayda and I enjoyed some quality time sitting in our Sukkah. Thankfully and most importantly, no one was hurt. Perhaps surprisingly, Frayda and I reacted to the situation with equanimity, calm, serenity, and theological intrigue. After all, isn't Sukkot, the very holiday that teaches us that our homes are impermanent and that all forms of material wealth are transient, a perfect time to be robbed?!?

In an agricultural society, the seven-year sabbatical cycle that demands that the land be left fallow for a year serves as a powerful reminder that the earth is the Lord's. Let us just dwell on that: The earth is the Lord's.

In a similar vein, commandments to tithe one's produce as well as to not reap the corners of one's field, among several similar *mitzvot*, help cultivate through regular practice the idea and disposition that we are not full owners of the work of our hands, nor are we fully in control of our material wealth and possessions.

A number of years ago, I instructed a close friend of mine, who wanted to better observe the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah*, to have his bank automatically set aside, in a separate *tzeddakah* account, 10% of his monthly earnings. Recently, this friend remarked that being fully aware of this accumulated amount had at times caused him some internal tension, and invited tempting thoughts in the form of second guessing. Every time he checked his account, and it seems that he did so with some frequency, he was forced to come to grips with his desire to hold on tighter to his wealth. For him, practicing tithing in this way has allowed the *mitzvah* of *tzedakah* to become a practical training grounds for letting go and assuming less control.

In a talk about regret, Kathryn Schultz, a staff writer for the New-Yorker, points out that, “We have a vast body of literature on consumer and financial decisions and the regrets associated with them -- buyer's remorse, basically. But then finally, it occurred to some researchers to step back and say, well okay, but overall, what do we regret most in life?

“Here’s [...] the top six regrets -- the things we regret most in life: Number one by far, education. 33 percent of all of our regrets pertain to decisions we made about education. We wish we'd gotten more of it. We wish we'd taken better advantage of the education that we did have. We wish we'd chosen to study a different topic. Others very high on our list of regrets include career, romance, parenting, various decisions and choices about our sense of self and how we spend our leisure time -- or actually more specifically, how we fail to spend our leisure time.

“[...] So [...] it turns out, when you look overall at what people regret in life, you know what, our financial decisions don't even rank. They account for less than three percent of our total regrets. So if you're sitting there stressing about large cap versus small cap, or company A versus company B, or should you buy [this car] or [that car], you know what, let it go. Odds are, you're not going to care in five years.”

https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schultz_don_t_regret_regret?language=en

Now for a moment, let us conjure up different experiences from this past year in which we may have unwittingly tried to exercise mastery or control over things we think we own and possess. For a moment, remember the amount of times that we lost nights of sleep over the things we own or wish we could own. Let us conjure up the various relationships, among them family and business relations that soured because we firmly believe we got less than we deserve. And now, imagine the sort of choices we would be able to make and the quality of relationships and life experiences that would result, and as importantly the sort of impact we could make on the world, if we only learned to let go, or at least, loosen our grip on the things we think we possess.

We don't only seek control over our material possessions.

Our daily prayer practice and regular recitation of blessings, of *brachot*, offer a mitigating counterbalance to the sort of control we too easily try to assert on others through our misuse of words.

At the very conclusion of the Amidah prayer, a service addressed intimately to God which we recite three times each day, we recite a verse from Psalm 19 which states, “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart find favor before You, Lord, my Rock and Redeemer.” Immediately after

reciting this verse, we add an additional meditation composed by the son of Ravina, which opens with a powerful request, “My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech” (BT Brachot 17a).

One of my teachers once pointed out the strange and unexpected placement of these petitions at the very conclusion of the Amidah, as opposed to placing them as the introduction to the Amidah. After all, don't we want to make sure that we refrain from unfavorable or even deceitful words while addressing God?!

My teacher explained that our prayer to God serves as training grounds for us to learn how to address each other. The serene communal space along with the set text of prayer itself leave little room for deceit. It is only our encounter with people, in stressful settings and challenging dynamics, that tempts us to exercise control over others through our cunning manipulation and misuse of words. We say this mediation at the very conclusion of prayer because we aspire to extend our mode of communication with God to our mode of communication with others.

R. Yaakov Edelstein, zt”l, the former chief rabbi of Hod Hasharon in Israel, shared this insight, “There is a terrible disease that afflicts our tongues. A person is used to speaking and doesn't sense that words come out of his mouth. Speech is [on autopilot]. The book *“Hovat Hlevavot”* [or “Duty of the Hearts”] teaches that a person must train himself so that the most difficult bodily movement would become the movement of the tongue. After all, before a person walks, he thinks about where he is going [...]. One's hands and feet don't move automatically without prior thought. [...] But speech comes out freely. A person must train himself to the point that moving one's tongue is heavier than lifting one's hand or foot. You must train for this before speaking, before uttering any word.” (Sulam Yaakov pp. 107-108).

The Vilna Gaon powerfully captures this challenge and taught that, “Our sages said that observance of commandments and teachings are not enough to counterbalance what comes out of a person's mouth. [In Talmud Chulin (89a) the sages ask:] “What should be a person's pursuit in this world?” [and they answer:] He should be silent.” (Alan Morinis, *Every Day, Holy Day*, p. 175)

Now for a moment, let us conjure up different experiences from this past year in which we may have unwittingly tried to exercise mastery or control over others through our cunning manipulation of words. Think of the times that you posted a comment on social media or pressed “send” or “reply all” in order to publicly assert yourself. Imagine, what would happen if we didn't always insist on giving advice or on getting the last word in, or even sometimes, if we allowed ourselves to not get any word in at all. And

now, imagine the sort of choices we would be able to make and the quality of relationships and life experiences that would result, if we only learnt to let go of our constant need to speak.

In truth, life constantly tests our ability to let go. We don't only attempt to hold on to time, to take possession of material wealth, or seize control of others with our words. We hold on to emotions, and resentments, and dreams, and failures. We hold on to what should have been, but never was. And we even hold on to what could be, but may never be. In time, more often than not, our hold becomes firm and our grip unrelenting.

Yehuda Amichai, the famous Israeli poet, beautifully describes this process in one of his poems:

“Remind the fallen fruit
of its leaves and branches,
remind the sharp thorns
how soft and green they were in springtime,
and do not forget,
even a fist
was once an open palm and fingers.”

(Yehuda Amichai, "Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm and Fingers", English translation by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav)

I recently came across a story about Elie Wiesel that truly challenged my conception of one's ability to let go.

“Many years ago, several years after the war, I was living as a journalist in Israel. One day in Tel Aviv I was on a bus, and I saw a man. The first thing I recognized was his neck, because I was standing behind him. I knew that neck. It belonged to a Jewish guard from Auschwitz, a kind of collaborator.

“I approached the man and said, ‘Were you in Germany during the war?’ The man said yes. I asked, ‘Were you in Auschwitz?’ The man said yes. Then I asked, ‘Were you at such and such a camp?’ The man said yes. Then I asked, ‘Were you at such and such a block?’ And I described more and more specifically until the guard recognized me. And we both realized this man had been the guard at my barracks inside the camp.”

[...]. “I knew in that moment that all I had to do was shout – Tel Aviv at that time was a place where this man would not be safe had the crowd known who and what he was, what he had done. I knew I could have had him arrested or worse, and all I had to do was to raise my voice. I held this man’s life in my hands. [...] I did nothing. I cannot call this an act of forgiveness. But it was an act of letting go. [...]” (Ariel Burger, *Witness*, p. 183).

This year, let’s remind the fallen fruit of its leaves and branches. Let’s remind the sharp thorns how soft and green they were in springtime. Let us not forget, that even a fist was once an open palm and fingers.

This year may Shabbat remind us to let go of time. May our *tzedakah* remind us to let go of our greed. And may our prayers and our Torah study remind us to let go of our manipulations of others.

Ultimately, may our fulfillment of the *mitzvot* train us to loosen our grip, to open up and make more space for the reign of God.

Ha’melech, ha’melech, ha’melech – the King, the King, the King.