

In Control

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On a gorgeous spring day in March 2018, I got a phone call that would change my life.

It was Cantor Tifani Coyot from Temple Isaiah in West LA.

“Jaclyn,” she said. “We’re honored to formally offer you the cantorial soloist position at Isaiah. Mazal tov!”

I was delighted. Elated, really. It was my ideal role at that moment in my career. And it was my ideal congregation too, having *correctly* identified years ago that Isaiah would be the perfect fit for my family and me.

In the year or so preceding that moment, Josh and I had been in a state of near-constant motion. We made the difficult choice to leave Seattle, where we’d built a community, enjoyed success in our jobs, and welcomed our first child. We made the equally difficult choice to return to our hometown of Los Angeles, job prospects unknown. While the blessing of having our families close empowered us to take the leap, we knew it would take time to settle into a new chapter.

When Tifani called me that day, it felt as if the roller-coaster ride of that transition year would *finally* begin to slow down. Things would at long last start falling into place.

Several hours later, I woke in the middle of the night to the sound of shouting; the sight of my husband upright in bed, aggressively thrusting one arm in the air. I tried to wake him, assuming he was having a nightmare. When he ignored me, I began to scream.

Thank God we were living in my parent’s home at the time; my father, a physician, came running. He assessed Josh, who was at that point catatonic, breathing awkwardly on his side. We shouted his name and tried desperately to get his attention. No response.

“It’s a grand mal seizure,” my father said, quietly. “You need to call 9-1-1.”

Shaking, I ran to the phone. Minutes later the wail of an ambulance siren grew closer. Several hours at UCLA's emergency room later, we had no reason why this had happened. Josh was completely healthy and acting like himself. His brain looked beautiful. Perhaps it was a fluke brought on by the stress of tax season - *everyone gets one "free seizure" card* - the ER doctor told us. But if this happens again, it's a different story.

Well, it did happen again. And again. Later that year Josh received a diagnosis of Epilepsy, a neurological disorder featuring uncontrolled convulsions ... brought on by flashes of electricity in the brain.

Ultimately, the scariest element of Epilepsy is its randomness. With no discernable triggers, you never know when you might lose consciousness.

And embedded within that is a profound, humbling message: in life, ultimately, there are some things over which we have **no control**.

I've thought about control a whole lot these past few years: through a global pandemic, insurrection in our nation's capital, surge in violent antisemitism, reckonings around race, a relentless chipping away at women's body autonomy, Doomsday warnings on climate change, and any and all sources of existential anxiety you've likely been thinking about, too.

Add into the mix all our personal, often private experiences. All we've endured in our families and friend circles. Milestones missed. Lifecycles lost. Family members who fell ill, or died, in a time when Jewish communal gathering was considered unsafe, even reckless. I think of folks who, like Josh and me, hoped to expand their family ... or simply wanted to see a *doctor*, or had to schedule a *surgery* ... but were told to put it all on hold.

As Janet Jackson once sang, "*I've got my own mind, wanna make my own decisions ... when it has to do with my life ... I wanna be the one in control.*"

Prior to Covid, that song felt like an anthem. Now, it reads like a parody.

Control is a funny thing to talk about on Rosh Hashanah. On one hand, the focus of these High Holy Days is **God**: Avinu Malkeinu, our Parent, our Sovereign, Divine Judge, Decider on who shall live and who shall die.

On the other hand, our liturgy *also* empowers us humans: **we** control our destiny! Our willingness to repent, pray & give *tzedakah* can temper the harshness of the decree! We **do** have a say in what ultimately happens to us!

It's confusing. And it's misleading. Because the truth is, every single day we live with an *illusion* of control. We trick ourselves into believing the choices we make, the actions we take ... from our health to our finances to our relationships ... that they're all completely within our power to influence.

But Covid-19 humbled us. If we didn't know at the start of 2020, we certainly know now ... there is so much beyond our control.

The truth is, most of the time we all live somewhere in the gray space between "human agency" and "God's omnipotence." Between "*I am the one in the driver's seat*" and "*let go ... and let God.*" Pandemic or no pandemic, most of us walk through this world doing the best we can with the tools we've been given, attempting to balance freedom with fate. We create islands of certainty: routines & rhythms that get us through our days. We work, we play, we eat, we rest. The world marches on.

But what about when the unthinkable happens? When tragedy arrives and knocks the wind from us? When our islands of certainty crumble into the sea ... and we are left without so much as a life raft?

Like when a forty-three-year-old man in excellent shape suffers a fatal heart attack in front of his young children?

Like when a preteen girl is thrown headfirst from a bicycle, suffers a traumatic brain injury, and loses her life?

Like Jews held hostage by an armed anti-Semite during Shabbat morning worship at a synagogue outside Dallas?

Like young, healthy, innocent black men dying at the hands of police officers?

Like a teenager opening fire on an elementary school in rural Texas, senselessly murdering nineteen children and two teachers?

Who even has the capacity - the *luxury!* - to think about control when violence and trauma are everywhere?

We know we live in an *imperfect* world. But when the world feels like it's on *fire*, broken beyond repair - what does **control** even mean? (*Pause*)

On Rosh Hashanah, we recite "*Unetaneh Tokef*," a prayer that pulls no punches. *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds us in clear, deliberate prose just how little we humans control. It fills us with a sense of *yirah* - an emotional amalgamation of fear and awe, as it says - and as some of us know by heart:

"On Rosh Ha'Shanah it is written ...

... on Yom Kippur it is sealed ...

... how many will pass away from this world ...

... how many will be born into it?

Who shall live ... and who shall die...

Who will be taken before their time?"

This prayer used to terrify me. As a child I'd sit in the sanctuary of Stephen Wise Temple, a maroon-colored *machzor* in my lap. I'd hear the opening notes of *Unetaneh Tokef* and get goosebumps up and down my arms. My heart would race, my stomach would churn, and I'd wonder who in that room wouldn't be around next Rosh Hashanah. I'd think to myself ... *what if ... I'm the one who dies this year?*

And now? Now it hits differently. I'm older. I'm a *mother*. I've been through some *stuff*. We're living through a *pandemic*. And while there's still that profound sense of fear and awe, there's something else, too. A sense of groundedness ... I simply didn't have a couple years ago.

We cannot control what life throws at us. We cannot control what will happen to our families, our jobs, our health, our futures. We cannot control what gets written in that Big Book of Life. **But we CAN control ... how we respond to it.**

I learned an important lesson around Josh's fourth or fifth seizure. It had been two years with no events - we thought we were in the clear. And then, on a bitterly cold December afternoon, it happened again. A seizure. A loss of consciousness. Violent shaking and screaming.

Only this time, we'd just found out I was pregnant with Sidney ... finally expanding our little family ... after so many years thick with loss.

To say I freaked out is an understatement.

It was more of an existential tantrum.

And then my father, in his Jedi-like wisdom and with the soothing tone of a lifelong physician, sat me down. *Jaelyn*, he said. ***You have to learn to live with what you cannot control. You will put up guardrails - as many as you can - to keep your family safe. You must hold tight to - and celebrate - those things you can control. And somehow, in that balance, you'll find harmony.***

It was then, nearly three years into Josh's Epilepsy diagnosis, that I finally surrendered. There was no way for me to get inside his brain. No way to stop a seizure before it happened. No way to protect him from his own body.

There was, simply, nothing I could do to **control** Josh's Epilepsy.

Instead, all I can do is **control how I cope with it. Control** how I navigate life's ambiguity. **Control** my response when his Epilepsy presents itself. **Control** how I react when things go completely off the rails. **Control** how I communicate with the people I love. **Control** how I approach - and respond to - the world around me, every single day.

At my father's suggestion, we assembled as many guardrails as we could. From the medication Josh diligently takes to the types of cars we drive to the tech notifications we employ to the emergency training we've done for our six-year-old to the way we lay our heads down on our pillows at night, we've refined just about every single process in our day-to-day lives. We've done our best to prepare for the worst.

And I laugh. I laugh a lot. Some days I put on my roller skates and turn up Beyonce, full volume. I celebrate the small victories. I dance around the kitchen with my babies. I put my phone away and read a book before bed. I hold my husband close. I take deep breaths, and rediscover this beautiful planet, and remember that somewhere in this unfathomable mayhem there is holiness, beauty & wonder.

For me, prioritizing *joy* in the midst of all this *chaos* has become a mandatory spiritual practice. Without it, the crushing weight of life's unpredictability would be too much for me to bear.

And I do think some of us have forgotten that over these past two and a half years. We've forgotten the healing powers of joy and laughter. We've been so inundated, so focused on survival that we've neglected other parts of ourselves desperately in need of nourishment: our souls. Our senses of humor. Our pleasures. Our resilience reserves.

In this new Jewish year, I really want us to *prioritize* joy. Let's add it to the top of our to-do lists, okay?

The comedian Gilda Radner, acknowledging the reality of her approaching death from cancer, once wrote:

I wanted a perfect ending.
Now I've learned, the hard way,
that some poems don't rhyme,
and some stories don't have
a clear beginning, middle, and end.
Life is about not knowing,
having to change,

taking the moment,
and making the best of it,
without knowing
what's going to happen next.
Delicious Ambiguity.

Today we celebrate the beginning of a new year. A year of potential and promise, hope and possibility, and, yes, *uncertainty*. There is so much we do not yet know. There is so much *beyond* our control.

And yet - there is so much *within* our control, too. How we *face* the world. How we *respond* when the going gets tough. What we *say* when we feel scared, or lost, or broken. How we *act* when words fail us. What we *communicate* to others when things don't go our way. How we *show up* ... for the people with whom we share this beautiful, complicated planet.

May it be a good year.

May it be a sweet year.

A year of good health and abundant joy.

And may we remember ... all that is within our control ... and the power we have to *respond* to this chaotic world.

Shana Tova.