

Yom Kippur 5767
Letting Go
Rabbi David Lerner

Boker Tov – good morning.

I want to share an important teaching from a leading Orthodox rabbi and scholar, J.J. Schachter, who served for a number of years here in Boston as director of the Soloveitchik Institute. Rabbi Schacter is an intense and thoughtful speaker, whose singsong voice sounds as if it were coming right out of a Talmudic yeshivah.

The advice he offered me some 12 years ago?

“The key to delivering a sermon is that you have ninety seconds to drop your pants!”

This was a line that shocked me at the time and remains with me to this day. Here was this rabbi wearing a dark blue suit, telling me that he drops his pants every time he delivers a *d’var Torah* and that I should do the same.

He explained: “In shul, everyone will listen to you for about a minute and a half. But, if you haven’t said something interesting in that time, everyone will cease to pay attention, and any words of Torah or insights that you may have after that first minute and a half will be lost.”

Sage advice.

He also once said: “Don’t go to the well too many times,” meaning that one should try to vary one’s themes and ideas and not simply retell the same stories.

Unfortunately, I am going to break that rule of Rabbi Shachter’s and deliver a sermon that touches on a topic that I discussed a couple of years ago on Yom Kippur. That was a sermon about our son’s unexpected home birth – for those of you who forgot it or missed it, I would be happy to email you a copy.

So, this morning I also want to talk about birth or, more specifically, about pregnancy. The good news I have to share is that Sharon and I are expecting. This is a great blessing and cause for excitement and the traditional greeting, which, by the way, is not *mazal tov* (congratulations – good luck) but a slightly more cautious greeting: “*b’sha’ah tovah*,” which means: “in a good and successful time.” When one hears that someone is expecting, we do not invite the *ein harah* – the evil eye – by congratulating them on something that has not yet occurred, but we wish them well more tentatively, aware that many things can go awry in a pregnancy.

With Sharon's permission, I would like to share some of our recent experience. This pregnancy has been different from those of Talya and Ari. It is one where our hopes and dreams have been tempered by higher risks. The last couple of months have been particularly anxiety-producing for us.

It all began on Thursday, July 27. I was spending the day at Camp Ramah in Palmer, Mass in a *Yom Iyyun*, a day of study for rabbis. After visiting our Emunah campers there (and I am proud to say, we have a nice group!), I studied Jewish texts and enjoyed the company of my rabbinic colleagues from around New England. Then I got back on the Pike to drive back to Boston.

Sharon called me on my cell phone. I could tell immediately from her voice that something was drastically wrong. She was bleeding and was sure she was losing the baby. Since we had experienced early miscarriages before, this was not completely unfamiliar. But I was surprised, since we were past the first trimester and thought we had made it through the danger zone.

Sharon was with Talya and Ari at a friend's house in Newton. She was going to leave the kids there and drive to her doctor, and she asked that I go as quickly as I could to pick up the kids. She was alone in her car, and I felt badly that I was not at her side.

I was beyond devastated. There was nothing else I could do. After we said goodbye, I began to cry. I couldn't pull over because I had to get the kids. I was just alone with my sadness. I called out to God ...

Finally, I arrived at our friend's house. There was better news: Sharon called to say that apparently the fetus was OK. It was unclear what was happening.

After a stressful Shabbat, Monday brought an ultrasound. The technician looked at the baby, trying to suppress the concern I could see clearly on her face. Noticing her change in manner and a large black area on the screen, Sharon asked, "What's that?" The technician said, "I'm going to have the doctor come in and speak to you." Words that seemed particularly dreadful.

We were told that Sharon has a large sub-chorionic hematoma, a large blood clot in the wall of her uterus; it could cause the placenta to separate or cause other problems. We asked many questions, but the doctors did not know the answers to most of them. We don't know what causes it, we do not know what helps it, and we don't have the ability to get rid of it. We cannot control it.

It was recommended that Sharon be placed on "limited activity," meaning not to lift heavy things, go for long walks, do any strenuous exercise, lift our children or push a stroller. These are challenges with two young children!

But the most difficult part was not being able to do anything for it; there was no pill, no treatment, no therapy we could do. Medical technology could tell us that something was wrong, but not how to relieve the problem.

Sharon's obstetrician, Dr. Beth Hardiman, a member of our shul, told us that we have a higher-than-normal-risk pregnancy. Until the baby is viable, there is nothing we can do, we have to let go, it's not in our hands. The only thing we can do is pray and be as hopeful as we can.

For the past two months, we have tried to cope with that advice; Sharon has taken it easy; we have prayed, and we have tried to let go of our anxiety, shifting our attitude away from one of fear and pessimism.

Sharon has not been coming to shul that much and has not been here on Shabbat in two months. Thankfully, we have received tremendous support from this community, from friends and family, and through baby-sitting and other arrangements, we have figured out how to make it all come together.... sort-of.

Today we are doing better and are optimistic and hopeful that, with God's help, Sharon's pregnancy will continue safely, and I thank you all for your thoughts and prayers, your help, and your words of hope. Sharon and I thank you.

Dr. Hardiman's prescription, "letting go" applies not only to pregnancy, but also to much of life and Yom Kippur. Living is about coming to terms with the chaos and brokenness in the world around us. Life is about learning how to let go. This is not a letting go that means throwing up our hands in despair. Nor does it mean that we forget that we are God's partners in the world and that there are many things we can do.

But, in many cases, we have to ease up. Letting go is about unclenching our fists, opening ourselves up to the world and to whatever hand is dealt to us. Life is about letting go of the idea that we control everything; instead, we learn to take a deep breath and do the best we can. On Yom Kippur, this lesson is magnified and highlighted.

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we add a most challenging prayer into our service: the *Unetaneh Tokef*. As it states: "*B'rosh Hashanah yekateivun, u'v'yom tzom kippur yehateimun* – on Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass away and how many shall be born. Who shall live and who shall die. Who shall see ripe age and who shall not. Who shall perish by fire and who by water. Who by sword and who by beast. Who by hunger and who by thirst. Who by earthquake and who by plague. Who by strangling and who by stoning. Who shall rest and who shall wander. Who shall be at peace and who shall be troubled. Who shall be poor and who shall be rich. Who shall be humbled and who exalted."

According to this *piyyut*, this religious poem, God decides if we will live or die and how it will happen. God decides if we will live with vigor or if we will become ill. Some of our greatest fears are bluntly articulated in the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer.

This year, in light of our experience, my understanding of *Unetaneh Tokef* has deepened. I see in this prayer an extended spiritual exercise in understanding our limits as human beings. It is an intense experience in humility. It is all about letting go.

Who will live and who will die?

Perhaps God knows. But we certainly do not. We do not control our own fate or our own destiny.

Even in this modern world as scientific knowledge expands, where we have more and more insights, we are unable always to control the destiny of a fetus or of someone living with cancer. While we have more and more ability to understand, there is still so much we cannot control.

Over the years, I have visited many people suffering the ravages of disease – at home, in hospice, in the hospital. I have tried to provide whatever spiritual healing I can, to be as helpful and as encouraging as possible – to be with people in their time of need and to support them and their families. The truth is, however, that they have given me far more than I could ever give them.

People who are seriously ill and dying have shared with me profound insight into life. They have been told by their doctors that they have two years to live, six months to live, a few weeks to live, and while sometimes those prognoses have been off in either the positive or negative direction, many times they have been tragically accurate. I have watched as people have made the best of the time that they have been given. In many of these conversations, I have been taught how to live, how to make each day a blessing, and to appreciate the gifts that are our lives.

In one recent conversation, a woman shared with me the fundamental insight that, while she hopes for the best, she is aware that her life is drawing to a close. Even with that understanding, she has a new appreciation of her life. She spoke about letting go of her fear and her sense of control. She cannot control her illness, and while she does her best to fight it off with modern treatments, both she and her doctors are limited in what they can do. So, she takes each day by glorious day and lives it as best she can, with as much hope as she can, with the awareness that she is not in charge.

Life is about letting go. This is true at the beginning of life and this is true at the end of life, but it is also surely true throughout our lives.

We have an unusual artistic drawing in our home entitled: “Illusion of Control” by B. Andrias. It is a picture of a woman holding on to an upside-down umbrella that seems to be pushed by wind. There is a quote that reads, “If you hold the handle, she said, it’s easier to maintain the illusion of control. But it’s more fun if you just let the wind carry you.”

This picture reminds me that I will not be in command of whatever the day will bring, but I also challenge its assumption that it’s more fun to let go of the handle, the illusion of control. We fill our lives with rituals and superstitions that can serve to calm and comfort us, even if they do not control anything.

I spoke earlier of the phrase one recites upon learning of a pregnancy – *b’sha’ah tovah*, but there are many other similar phrases in our tradition. Generations of Jewish (mostly) women (but men as well) have said after hearing something good, “Shhhh, don’t say that – you could give me a *kenaharah*,” the evil eye. To Americanize the phrase a bit, Grandma, my father’s mother, would exclaim: “Don’t say that. You’ll give me a canary.”

Previous generations of Jewish women would then spit. That was the Eastern European custom, which has become slightly more modernized by saying “poo-poo-poo,” which my Grandma also said and for some reason still resonates with me to this day.

But in these superstitions, there is the clear awareness that these phrases – while they provide comfort, do not actually direct the future. Life is about letting go.

Parenting is filled with the realization that we relinquish power over our children – whether they are children, teens or adults. Take the example of a child going out for his driver’s license. The parent, filled with anxiety at this most difficult and stressful time, knows that drivers in their first few years of driving are at the greatest risk of accidents, but at the same time, a parent must let go and let the child go off on his own.

Many have asked to mark this exciting but stressful moment with a ritual, and there are prayers for this occasion. This moment and prayer are also about letting go. We pray that the child will be safe, but at the same time the parent must acknowledge that he must give the child his space to go off on his own.

That is to me what *Unetaneh Tokef* is all about. It is the awareness that we do not control our own destiny. God may or may not, but we certainly don’t. All we do control is our response to life. We control our attitude, our reaction to what happens.

That's why the ending of the *Unetaneh Tokef* is so powerful. "*U'teshuvah, u'tefillah, u'tzedekah ma'averin et roa hagezeirah* – and repentance, prayer, and acts of justice and charity can help avert the severity of the decree." We don't change the decree. We can change only the way we receive the decree. We have the power to transform the harshness of our destiny or our fate. Without that power, we would live in far too harsh a world that would be simply unbearable. It is within our power to transform what life gives us through our reaction and our attitude that allows us to bring in love, grace, humility, and charity to ourselves and to the world. That to me is the depth of *Unetaneh Tokef*.

Last night we recited the piyyut: *Ki Hiney Ka-homer*. We are like clay in the hand of the potter. Like the *Unetaneh Tokef*, this poem declares that God is in control of our destiny. It goes through a series of metaphors: as stone in the hand of the mason, as iron in the hand of the craftsman, as glass in the hand of the blower, as cloth in the hand of the draper, as silver in the hand of the smelter. While we can debate to what extent God is molding us, I do appreciate its sense that life is not in our hands, but in God's.

The same metaphor is found at the end of *Adon Olam* – that most beautiful prayer whose last two lines Sharon and I recite with our children when we put them to bed. "*B'yado afkid ruhi, b'eit eeshan v'a'eerah v'im ruhi ge'vee'a'ti Adonai li v'lo irah* – Into God's hand I deposit my soul. Soon I will go to sleep and then awaken, and if my soul gives out, God will be mine, and I will have no fear."

My Savta, my mother's mother, taught us to recite these lines again and again, almost like a mantra, whenever we were in a frightening situation. The hope is that repeated recitation will enable us to place ourselves in God's hands, to let go.

We cannot direct our souls or prevent our life force from giving out, but we deposit it in God – the Supreme Sum of all Souls, the Repository and Origin of Our Souls. Our very capacity for spirituality and depth of feeling comes from the divine and returns to the divine.

According to the rabbis, each night before we go to sleep, our soul goes up one-sixtieth of the way back to God. Then upon death, it returns fully to God, from whence it came. The imagery of God's hands is such a powerful one. We deposit our souls in God's hands. The idea of being held as a father holds his newborn in his hands, cradling that precious and fragile life, that image sustains us and helps us to transform our own reactions to the harshness and cruelty of life. We realize that we cannot hold everything in our hands and we need the Almighty's hands to hold us.

Rabbi Meir offers a Midrash (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:14), that I want to relate to this idea: “When a person enters the world, his hands are clenched as if to say, ‘The whole world is mine. I shall inherit it.’ When he takes leave of it, his hands are spread open as if to say, ‘I have inherited nothing from the world.’”

While Rabbi Meir’s focus is on the material world, I would like to offer an interpretation of his teaching: when newborns comes into this world, their hands are clenched shut, whether from the tight space of the womb or the trauma of the birth canal, or the manifestation of a reflex, babies comes out with their hands tightly closed, ready to take on the world.

As we develop and grow into adulthood, we learn more and more that we do not control everything. We learn our own place in the world and our own limitations and our hands begin to open, finally accepting that not everything in our hands.

When one leaves this world, it is with hands open, letting go. That letting go is not sudden. It is process occurring throughout life, a slow opening of our hands.

Perhaps that is the great insight of Yom Kippur. We do the best we can, and we are aware that our own ability to manipulate life is quite limited. We maintain the illusion of control in our lives in so many ways but, at the end of the day, we learn to experience that life is about letting go. We can control only our attitude.

As Sharon and I have learned again in our particular circumstances, some things are not in our power.

The 20th century Israeli poet, Zelda framed this well in a poem that also serves as commentary on *Adon Olam*.

My soul peered through the openings
In the desolation and emptiness
Of my sickness.
From its captivity it called out
To the One who was, is, and shall be,
In the dark it whispered
Into Your hand I entrust my spirit, my pain,
My honor, my life, my death.

Gmar hatimah tovah – May we all let go of the bad and take hold of a year of blessing – may we all be sealed for a good year.

Amen.

