

# Complete Control Matters

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“Complete Control Matters.” Read the poster at the Chicago airport. It was an ad for what is now one of our local banks. And I was struck that this bank was making an unintended theological statement – After this past year’s financial meltdown I thought it would be more accurate if this poster declared – You Have Absolutely No Control, but we’ll give you toaster if you bank with us. The copywriters know their audience because I suspect this belief in complete control is one many of us hold. And it is certainly one we desire.

We want to be in complete control. We want to know the outcome before the end of the game. To know the answers before the exam has even been written. Show no weakness or insecurity. Never fail. Never lose. And stand as the rugged individualist in complete control of our emotions, our world and our destiny. No Fear – isn’t that what the t-shirt says. We want to be gods while at the same time being atheists or at least agnostic – to hedge our bet.

I noticed this poster because I had been reflecting on how little control we actually have in our lives. I’ve seen a lot of loss this past year. Friends savings being wiped out. Jobs lost. Bankruptcy. Long time relationships destroyed by infidelity. And I’ve been with people as they have taken their last breath – lives cut short by tragic accident or the end of a long battle. I have mourned with couples who have lost pregnancies – a dream turned nightmare. And I am beginning to think maybe the right response for some of this is to cultivate a ferocious surrender.

Surrender to life's fragility. Surrender to our mistakes, and surrender to the people around us. Complete surrender to the many things well beyond our control. There may be freedom in owning this truth.

Owning the fact that life rarely makes sense. Owning the fact that we can be very good at making a mess of things and very bad at admitting it. And owning the fact that we cannot control the people around us. Accept the reality that we really do care even if we may pretend we don't. And there is no value in denying our pain. It may hollow us out but it expands our souls and makes us more human.

We will be rejected, disappointed, we will fail, we will fall short and we will be hurt. People we love will die too soon. Sadness is part of the dues we pay. And while it is painful and we have to mourn those losses and learn from them ultimately we have to let go of them – integrate them. If we don't learn to let go of them, they become like stones and sediment filling the crevices of our souls.

There is an insect that lives in our local rivers called a Caddis Fly. Some of you might know about my recent obsession with fly fishing. On my first trip in Idaho my guide began a meditation about his struggles with God and religion. I said I agreed with him. And then told him I was a rabbi. Apparently he had never been fly fishing with a rabbi. And I said there probably weren't many us, and speculated I would likely be his last.

But it opened up a conversation about the theology of fishing, the wilderness and the Caddis Fly. During its larval stage the Caddis Fly collects grains of sand and creates a stone cocoon around itself that it hides in. What starts as a shelter becomes a fortress and ultimately many live and die encased inside their pebble graves. We do the same thing you know. Year by year, stone by stone, fear by

fear, we gradually build our own tombs in the name of self preservation or the desire to have “complete control.”

The commentator the Sefat Emet writes that upon each of our hearts God engraves the word “Life.” Over the course of our years the engraving gets covered with grit and dirt until the word is lost. Yom Kippur comes to help us dismantle the stones, wipe away the grit, accept the limits of our control, our vulnerability and let go a little or a lot so we stop building walls around our souls – and start taking them down.

Anyone who has ever been in love has learned that the only way to fall in love is to surrender and relinquish control to another. To step, maybe tentatively at first. Maybe courageously, from behind our walls and into love’s insecurity. One of the lessons I learned in falling in love was that the cave I carefully built and used to retreat to when feeling vulnerable or fearful suddenly had my wife in it. And that when my sons Nativ and Idan were born the entire cave was torn away and I had to get used to my heart and soul walking around outside my body -- today in the form of a three-year old and a five-year old. And the three year old seems to have no fear, and does things that give him big scars and scares the hell out of me—

Watching Idan racing down the sidewalk behind his brother and stumbling grips my heart. But I know it is his job to fall. And my job to help him back up again, so he can fall again – it’s our job as well. To fall and help each other up. And I know that if my wife weren’t a pediatrician I would spend many of my evenings fretting in the ER. Instead I fret at home.

And often late at night when I can’t sleep, I find myself thinking of all the things that are going wrong in the world. The wars, the horrible things we do to each

other. The mistakes I have made. The bad decisions. The missed opportunities. That's when, completely awake now I usually crawl out of bed look in at my sleeping boys and hope to God that they can hold onto their innocence – Their belief in all things good. And I pray that by the time they start college the world will make more sense than it does now. And then I start responding to work emails because I want an empty in-box....something I still believe I can control. But I can't.

Many of us still haven't learned that we can't have an empty in-box and that you need to give up control to fall in love – with a person or life. It requires courageous surrender. And in my work here at Hillel I see it as the most profound obstacle blocking people from the happiness they desire. Even in this world of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube... where virtually every moment of life is captured with status updates, tweets, or a photo— where images and thoughts once deeply private are now routinely shared with thousands of people without a second thought—We still don't know how to be truly vulnerable with each other how to truly relinquish control in and for love – a love and acceptance we all seek.

It is far easier to be physically naked before someone than it is to be emotionally naked. Yes it requires risk, but in our fear of letting go, we create walls instead of doors. We hold onto grudges. We stop talking to each other. We pretend we don't care – that it doesn't hurt. Protect our image.

Forgiveness is surrender. It is letting go of the hurt and the pain and the resentments. Letting go of our portfolio of anger, frustration and sorrow that define so much of our lives. It is an awakening to the reality that we have open

wounds that could be healed. How do we become more whole? By learning we are all broken. All of us. Some of us are just better at hiding it.

Friends, partners, sons and daughters, parents – people not able to say what they are feeling -- not able to step into the wild unknown of vulnerability – insecurity. Living so deeply in our heads we can't feel our hearts – we can't feel. The poet Rilke writes: “And so we wait for the one thing that will infinitely increase your life.” We wait, and we take cover and lament that we aren't closer to the people around us. But we don't do the things that will truly increase our lives. The things that will give us the relationships we seek – Like saying I love you. Like saying I am sorry. Like saying I feel hurt. Or afraid. And when someone actually does say those things. Do we hear it? Do we understand the vulnerability behind it? “And then all at once you know: that was it. You rise, and there stands before you the fear and prayer and shape of a vanished year.” Of a vanished relationship, a vanished opportunity a vanished life. We are so desperate for control that we diminish, if not sacrifice, the lives we desire -- the relationships we desire, in our quest.

But it doesn't have to be this way. By surrendering our emotional controls to another, our lives can expand. By letting go we may feel free. On the seventh day, our Creator did not just rest, the Holy One let go of control. “And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God stopped from all the work of creation.” It was God's first and perhaps most important lesson to us -- There is a time to let go. To surrender. With the Sabbath this idea was imbedded into the very fabric of Jewish existence. Stop trying to control everything and make it perfect. Even God after creating man and woman never said things were perfect.

All God said was, it is very good – there is a difference. Even God wasn't a perfectionist. We are obsessive, God isn't.

When we say the Shema we acknowledge that God is God and we are not. We are reminded to just be human, imperfect screw ups. It allows us to see more clearly that we are doing the best we can and trust those around us are as well. The blessing t'hyat hametim. That God revives the dead is the same blessing we say when we haven't seen a friend in a year. Think about this. When we take down our stone walls and wipe away the grime it is like the dead are revived. We are revived. It is a miraculous feeling.

Letting go is a trait I am committed to cultivating this year the vulnerability of acknowledging what is already true. That in admitting I don't have complete control or much control of anything really. I can let go of the stress and anxiety that only block me from experiencing the beauty in life. And that faith is what I really have. A faith in those around me and that even when things are scary and it appears the world is crumbling – the infinite small and large tragedies – it rarely stays that way. Our lives and our souls naturally gravitate toward the light. Toward life. T'hyat h'matim the revival of the dead. The revival of hope. Of possibility. Of redemption.

I want to remember the exhilaration and peace of giving up control – Of surrendering. Courageous surrender. Ferocious surrender. Surrender as the ultimate act of faith. At once a faith in the world around us, the people around us – And faith in some Higher order in the world – call it God, physics or chance. I call it God. It is also very good practice for dying – the final life lesson and the ultimate

surrender. And the experience we are to communally share over the next 24 hours – collective surrender.

Our Sages comment that when we are born our fists are clenched and when we die they open. If we haven't learned that lesson in life we will learn it with our deaths. What would it be like to spend a year with our fists unclenched, our stone walls torn down? The words "Life" emblazoned clearly on our hearts. A year of living courageously of letting go. Accepting our insecurities. Of taking emotional risks – in the name -- of Love. In the name – of Life.