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Are We in Control of our Destiny?
Rosh Hashanah 2016/5777

Who shall live?

And who shall die?

I was thinking recently about an old friend of mine and the haunting story she told me about a relative of hers and her experience in Germany during WWII. The woman was on a bus when a policeman boarded and asked everyone to show their i.d. cards. This was at a point when arrests and round-ups of Jews had already begun, so the woman had a sense of what was hanging in the balance if she were to display her i.d. card to the officer, thereby revealing her Jewish identity. As the officer walked down the aisle, she began to cry, imagining the fate about to befall her. When a stranger sitting next to her asked what was wrong, she furtively revealed her predicament. Without hesitation, the man began berating her at full volume, “You foolish woman! How could you have left it at home?” When the officer turned in the direction of the commotion, the man said, “My wife is so stupid. She left her i.d. card at home when she knows she’s required to carry it with her.” The officer quieted him down and said, “Don’t worry about it, sir. It’s okay this time.”

Who shall live and who shall die?

It sounds so random. As though chance encounters on city buses are the difference between life and death. And, indeed, sometimes they are. But surely Judaism does not endorse the notion that we are merely bouncing around in a randomized cosmic game of pinball.

Unetaneh Tokef is a central prayer of these Holy Days. It teaches us that what we do during the Days of Awe has an impact on what will happen to us in the coming year. As the prayer warns, on Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...

According to the Talmud¹, on Rosh Hashanah, the completely good are sealed for a year of life, the completely wicked are sealed instantly for death, and for the 100% of us in between, our life hangs in the balance. What we do in these ten days determines our destiny for the coming year.

We don’t need to read this prayer literally to absorb its message that we should change ourselves and reshape our lives. As the prayer continues, “we are not a people resigned to fate.” We believe we have the power to control our destiny. This central message of these High Holidays compels us to do the work of *teshuvah*—to reflect on our lives, to seek forgiveness, and to make a commitment to evolve.

¹ Rosh Hashanah 16b.

Yet despite its insistence that we can control our fate, *Unetaneh Tokef* paradoxically contains a laundry list of what might happen, good and bad, to us in the coming year that could be beyond our control. “Who will be tranquil and who will be troubled? Who will be taken before their time?” The text seems to acknowledge that a great deal of what befalls us is really not in our control at all. “Who by fire and who by water? Who by war and who by beast?” Children pulled from collapsed buildings in Aleppo, Syria or shot while in the park did not control their fate. Nor, I dare say, could their parents.

My sense is as Jews, we seldom talk about the lack of control we have over events. We’ve become accustomed to thinking of Judaism as a faith that emphasizes our power as individuals, and as a community, to influence conditions here on the planet. Yet *Unetaneh Tokef* challenges that notion.

Circumstances and—I don’t know, call it luck, both good and bad—play a role in our fate. Think of that German Jewish woman on the bus who was saved by the kindness and quick thinking of a stranger when so many others perished. Was she any more righteous than the millions who died? Were her tears heard on high? And if hers, why not those of legions of others?

Unpredictable things happen to all of us. Yet most of us believe that hard work and effort pay off. We may even exaggerate their impact on future events. We encourage our children to take their studies seriously and to get good grades and to take up a sport, play the violin...Sure, we do this because we want our children to live rich lives. We also do it so that eventually they will land good and fulfilling jobs and make a nice living. We fill out our own resumes, too, and our LinkedIn profiles. We network with the right people. We invest in the right mutual funds. We go to the doctor. We go to the gym. We eat a mono-unsaturated diet of quinoa and kale. We are in control.

Right?

Multiple studies show that Americans have a strong belief in meritocracy and that deeply held American conviction that hard work leads to success. According to one set of surveys, 60% of Americans believe that the poor could become rich if they tried hard enough.²

But according to the Pew Research Center, people in higher income brackets are much more likely than those with lower incomes to say that individuals get rich primarily because they work hard.³

“Who shall be employed, and who shall be jobless?”

² Howard Steven Friedman, “America’s Incomplete Thoughts about Inequality and Meritocracy,” blog post, 7/24/2012. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/howard-steven-friedman/americas-incomplete-thoug_b_1696282.html

³ Robert H. Frank, “Why Luck Matters More Than You Think,” *The Atlantic*, May 2016 edition.

Could it be that our own actions play a smaller role in economic mobility than most of us realize? One study showed that people overestimate by 300% the impact that extra work can have on enabling the poorest 20% of Americans to move up.⁴

E.B. White said: “Luck is not something you can mention in the presence of self-made men.”

Why is it that those who are successful are more apt to attribute their success to their hard work? The reason may be that our efforts are more salient in our minds than the advantages we’ve been given.

According to what psychologists call the availability heuristic, our personal narratives are influenced by how often something reoccurs and how noteworthy an event is. Since most people who are successful probably had to work hard to achieve their success, their efforts are more readily available in their minds than factors that are more in the background, such as where they were born and the educational and economic advantages they might have received. Additionally, disadvantageous events in our lives are more prominent in our minds than those that affect us positively. We more readily recall obstacles that impeded us than advantages that helped us.

How many recreational runners are with us today?

When you’re running into a stiff headwind, you’re very aware of it. Am I right? You’re heading north on the lakefront, and the wind is out of the north at, even, let’s say, 10 mph. And you just can’t wait to turn around so you’ve got the wind at your back. All of you lycra-clad cyclists in the crowd, and I know there are a lot of you, you also know what I’m talking about. When you are pushing through a headwind, you remember every pedal stroke, right?

Now, let’s say you head out on a calm day. No wind resistance to speak of. You feel fast. You feel strong. You *are* strong! After all, you’ve been training. So, no wonder you’re flying along.

And that’s just a fundamental feature of how our minds, and how the world, works. We’re more aware of the barriers than of the things that propel us forward and upward.

When we’re successful, we tend to downplay the advantages we had that contributed to our success and play up how hard we worked to get there.

The upside to this is that a lot of us work hard as a result. We believe that, as I once heard it put, “The harder you try, the luckier you get.”

⁴ Michael W. Kraus, Jacinth J.X. Tan, “Americans overestimate social class mobility”, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, January 2015.

But is there a downside as well to this worldview?

In his book, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, sociologist Robert Putnam chronicles the enormous changes we have experienced in American life over the last 50 years, using the town of Port Clinton, Ohio, where he grew up as a microcosm of these changes. Inequality of income and wealth has increased dramatically over this period. Prosperous families tend to have stable family, religious and economic lives while working class people live with high rates of crime, substance abuse, insecure employment and family dissolution. Putnam looks wistfully back on his childhood days in the 50s when Port Clinton was a relatively classless place and children went on to be more financially successful than their parents. Today, Port Clinton is a place where the number of single-parent households has doubled, incomes are falling and the child poverty rate has quadrupled in the last 15 years. Those who have made it financially now live in newly constructed neighborhoods apart from the rest of the community.

Since Putnam's childhood, the ratio of CEO salaries to employee salaries in the US has increased tenfold. In 1950, the ratio was 20:1, in 2000 it was 120:1. Today, it is 204:1.

Putnam is complimentary toward affluent parents who give their children tremendous advantages by making sure they attend good schools, participate in extra-curricular activities, get tutors when needed, and are involved in civic and religious organizations that help to support the well-being of the family. These advantages increase the likelihood that our children will attend and finish college, and, in so doing, double their earning power relative to those with only a high school diploma.

But in patting ourselves on the back, we also risk drawing certain conclusions about those who are less financially well off, including those who, perhaps.....or so we often assume....have not given their children these advantages.

Putnam's study of his high school classmates, and a Longitudinal Study of a Wisconsin high school class from 1957, suggest that we would be wrong to draw this facile conclusion. Irrespective of their upbringing, Americans don't typically travel far from their economic origins.⁵ When there have been significant increases in socioeconomic status, that upward mobility has correlated with structural economic changes that carried groups of people up or down the financial ladder en masse. In other words, it's not so much individual effort as macro-economic changes that allow people to move up the economic ladder.

This is troubling news, since we like to point to our own success or that of others who grew up poor and then "made it" as proof that we can all break free of our circumstances.

The "rags to riches" theme of Horatio Alger's 19th century novels still captures our imagination today. Notwithstanding economic data showing that social mobility is lowest in America and other countries where income inequality is high.

⁵ Nicholas Lemann, "Unhappy Days for America," *The New York Review of Books*, May 21, 2015.

Even those who were able to work their way through college years ago and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, so to speak, had the advantage that college tuition was low enough that this was possible to do. The bootstraps have gotten increasingly flimsy.

So, those of us who are well off tend to underestimate the structural challenges faced by those who are poor...or black...or refugees from war-torn countries. And, perhaps more importantly, those of us who are affluent underestimate the structural benefits we have enjoyed.

Is this not a core message of the Black Lives Matter movement? That white people who disparage the violence, the drug abuse, the unemployment, the young single-parent families in poor communities of color, have taken it as an article of faith that success in America is available if you're willing to work for it, when, in fact, some people in our society are born with the wind at their backs while others face an unrelenting headwind?

The implications for society are that, if those of us who are doing well think we achieved our good fortune solely on our own, we may be more reluctant to support the public good—education, and infrastructure—to name two factors, that contributed to their success. And, in fact, we see this playing out today. On average, wealthy Americans are the most resistant to taxation, regulation and government spending needed for infrastructure and schools.

The theme of this time of the year reminds us that we have an opportunity to grow and change, but our lives and our actions are not completely in our control. Good fortune and luck play a larger role in our lives than we might think. If fate has smiled on us, we might have the tendency to be overly self-congratulatory and more critical of others.

The upside to believing we have tremendous agency is that it motivates us to work hard. The downside is that it can lead us to be judgmental of people who are less well off, blaming them for their bad fortune instead of working to make changes in our society that will improve everyone's lot.

You may have heard how the Hassidic rabbi, Simcha Bunam used to say one should carry around two notes, one in each pocket:

One pocket – *Bishvili nivra ha'olam*—the world was created for me

The other – *Ani Afar v'avak*—I am but dust and ashes

The purpose of the first is to pick us up when we are down and the other is to humble us when we are feeling haughty.

I've been thinking that perhaps we too should have two notes in our pockets. One would read "I'm in control of my destiny."

The other would read "I'm a product of my circumstances."

When we are feeling quick to blame others or our circumstances or the economy or our teachers or our bosses for our misfortune, we should take out the note that says “I am in control of my destiny.” And when something befalls us or others because of circumstance or chance, whether good or bad, we should read the note that says, “I’m a product of my circumstances.” In this way, perhaps we might develop equanimity, cultivate gratitude, and live with greater humility.

The important dilemma we face while holding these two notes is knowing which one to choose at any given moment. A well-know expression of this tension, commonly referred to as the Serenity Prayer, goes as follows:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference

In fact, this is exactly what we are reminded of on these Holy Days: we are bidden to do the work of *teshuvah*, which reminds us that we have an opportunity and a responsibility to make amends and grow, but Rosh Hashanah is also the day on which we crown God as sovereign, a recognition that there are bigger forces at play in our lives that are beyond our control.

Rebbe Elimelech of Lizhensk (1717-1787) taught that our judgment of self and others needs to be informed by our Wisdom Eye, an inner quality that enables us to be aware of the Divine Presence and that is not biased by self-interest. The research on the role of luck vs. effort indicates that seeing the world through our Wisdom Eye is not something that comes naturally to us, but one that requires intention and awareness. There is no greater challenge for us than to recognize our biases and work to align our judgment with a source deeper and greater than our ego or self-interest.⁶

This brings to mind Abraham Isaac Kook, a renowned Kabbalist and the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel. He was a person of great wisdom, prodigious intellect and also of remarkable piety. He once wrote in his diary. “I am not worthy of being called a *Tzadik*—a righteous person. I should be so lucky as to merit from God the ability to say wholeheartedly, I am average, but striving, with God’s help, to walk in the way of the righteous.”

It seems to me that Rav Kook, a revered figure throughout the Jewish world, modeled humility and the ability to recognize the role that good fortune plays in one’s life.

We should be sensitive to the fact that successes and challenges—both ours and those of others—are often a result of how lucky *we were* in being born to our parents, or growing up in a particular neighborhood, attending one grade school rather than another. Armed with this awareness, might we be more compassionate to others *and* ourselves?

⁶ Marc Margolious, “Shoftim: Mishpat Tzedek, Compassionate Judgment.”

This appreciation for the role of luck in our lives need not diminish our commitment to *teshuvah*. This holiday urges us to improve ourselves and the world around us. Our challenge is to develop our ability to view the world through our Wisdom Eye so that we can discern which message we need to hear, which note we need to pull from our pocket and read—“I’m in control of my destiny” or “I’m a product of my circumstances.”

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. As we turn our Book of Life to a new blank page, we recognize this opportunity not to be clouded by our biases and to cultivate our Wisdom Eye so we can see ourselves and others in the clearest possible light. May this clarity help us to be more honest with ourselves, to be grateful for what we have, to judge ourselves and others more fairly, and to exercise our responsibility to create a more just and compassionate society.