

HAVE WE LOST CONTROL?

The salient psychological fact of our times on this eve of the year 5729 is the almost universal feeling that we have lost control of our lives, our future, our destiny. Contemporary man has begun to believe that he no longer directs the course of events, that the tides of the times carry him along without consulting him and without asking his leave.

That this is so is, in itself, quite amazing. For modern man is secular, and secularism is based on the idea that man is firmly in control, that he determines his future, that he can and ^{and should} does/fashion his own life.

And yet today, despite our breathtaking triumphs in space technology and our incredible feats in the transplantation of human organs, we are beset by a pervading sense of impotence. We feel that while we have conquered other worlds, our world has conquered us. We have learned to replace individual organs in the human body, but the human being as such ^h as himself become a replaceable cog in the machine of society.

One look at the world scene will convince us that modern man may be quite justified in this feeling of futility and exasperation and powerlessness. We are engaged in an endless bloody struggle in the distant jungles of Asia, and no solution is

forthcoming no matter who wins the election. We sit by stunned as Biafra is destroyed in an African replay of the old European genocide -- and nothing is done about it as the tragedy reaches its inexorable climax/ We are caught in the enormous tides of social and racial revolution in this country, and we are carried along by them, unable to influence them. Immorality is pervasive in our society, and we can do nothing to stem it. Even the economic facts of life are so stubborn that they cannot be moved: recently we were told that no matter which presidential candidate wins, he will be able to do nothing about the "Phillips Curve" -- he will be able to keep the rate of inflation low, or decrease unemployment, but he cannot do both. Quite obviously, we have lost control.

Archibald MacLeish, who comes closest to being our national poet, has recently written an article called, "The Great American Frustration." The American today is frustrated, and he contrasts starkly with the American of a hundred years ago who was brash, self-confident, assertive -- anything but frustrated. Not only do political and social and economic events seem to have slipped out of our control, but technology, which used to be our pride and our salvation, has now proven that it does not care about us. We no longer direct technology to fill human needs. It follows its own inner laws, and is not responsive to human purposes. Things are done not because human beings need or want

them but simply because they can be done. The most apt symbol is the receding headlights on some autos of this past year or two: an invention which was invented because it could be invented, not because anyone needed it or it did anyone any conceivable good. So Americans have lost control of everything, even that of which they were proudest and in which they placed their greatest faith.

As Jews, too, we suffer an escalating sense of frustration. We survey the campus, and we recognize that despite a ray of hope here or there the colleges and universities are the breeding grounds of assimilation and inter-marriage -- which grow with each year. The fringes of our community are eaten away by constant attrition. We look to the Middle East, and we know in our hearts that peace is further away than ever before. Closer to home, Jewish organizations are becoming less and less Jewish. Only this Sunday the press reported the opening of the campaign for Federation. The chairman of the campaign was quoted as saying, "Guys ~~our~~ age no longer are interested in purely Jewish-oriented activity...my own kids aren't..." How futile to try to remind him that "guys our age" throughout the ages, and in our times too, have given their lives for "purely" Jewish activities; that the needs of Jewish education are fantastically greater than the pittance allotted for it by Federation; that if we continue this starvation diet for Jewish education we are not going to survive as a community, in which case all our children will, Heaven forbid, be as un-Jewish as his "kids" who aren't interested;

that without a Jewish future, Jews can be of little use to the colored minority or the white majority; that it is not our business to go into competition with the Federal Government's welfare program or the City Office of Urban Affairs. After all our years of cooperation and friendly reminders and pleading - we are confronted with this vulgarity. Here too - we have, alas, no control.

And so, personally too, each of us experiences this sense of futility and exasperation, this helplessness and despair: we have lost control.

To be honest, this humbling awareness is not altogether bad. It supplies a needed corrective for the cockiness of secular man who has always imagined that given enough Ph.D.'s, enough government grants and industry investment, any problem can be licked if only we want to. It is an antidote especially to American arrogance, that typical naive superciliousness which imagines that the "American Way of Life" is the only viable one, the "American Dream" the only vision, and "American know-how" the solution to all human ills, if only the primitives would bother to learn it. Indeed, this shocking awareness of our limitations and our helplessness is part of the spirit that Rosh Hashanah seeks to instill in us. On this day do we say: ve'yeda kol pa'ul ki attah pe'alto, ve'yavin kol yetzur ki attah yetzarto, "May every existing being know that Thou hast made it; may every creature realize that Thou hast created it." Spirituality consists in the acknowledgment that we are pa'ul, not only po'el; that we are the objects of events, and not the subjects who

determine them; that to a large extent we are the pawns and not the players in the game of life. Theologians have called that "Kreatursgefühl", the awareness of our creatureliness, of our severe limitations in the face of God and the world. And it is true that we are limited in what we can do -- sometimes tragically so. How often have I met parents who have given their children a superb Jewish upbringing: a happy home, an intensive Jewish education, the proper degree of permissiveness, inspiration, all the necessary ingredients for raising a loyal and committed Jew or Jewess -- and yet, despite all this, a child may decide to leave the fold. Parents who have truly tried their best, will always feel regret, but they should feel no guilt. For we never were completely in control of ourselves or our children. There are so many things beyond us. How helpless we feel, how tired, how weary, how futile.

And yet, and this is the burden of my remarks, when this feeling of futility is taken to an extreme, when it crowds out every feeling of human potency and possibility, it becomes noxious and dangerous. When a man concedes that he has lost all control, he has abdicated morally and spiritually. Both from a sociological and psychological and from a Jewish and spiritual point of view, weakness is a worse sin than boldness, futility is worse than the feeling of omnipotence, and utter inferiority worse than obnoxious superiority.

It stands to reason: the man who acknowledges his helplessness, has made himself helpless. The coward who hides behind the slogan of "bashert," has written his own prescription for failure. The student who begins with the attitude that he has no control over his academic achievement, will fail in his courses. A man and a woman who take a detached view of their marriage, wondering whimsically whether they will be unhappy or miserable, and making no effort to control their future, are slated for unhappiness. The businessman who forfeits all initiative because things are not under his control, has already declared his bankruptcy.

Well, then, what is the truth: are we in control or are we not? Can we do anything about our lives or is that only an illusion? Are we driving or are we driven, are we steering or are we drifting, are we controlling or are we carried along?

Judaism recognizes that both are true. Man is strong and he is weak. He is potent and he is impotent. Much of his life is beyond his control -- but not completely. Clearly, we are not fully in control of life and of events. But Judaism declares it an irresponsible lie that we have no control whatever. A margin of freedom is available to each of us, even if most of life is determined. What we do with that core of freedom, how we act with that slice of life that we can control -- on that we are judged on this Day of Judgment. Maybe much of life is really "bashert," but not all of it -- and in that area where we have a choice, where we

can exercise discretion and judgment and control and responsibility, that is where our humanity is tested, where our dignity as men and our responsibility as Jews stand trial.

Some time ago I heard a story about a young man in the Coast Guard. Very early in the game he suddenly was called to take part in a desperate assignment: a terrible storm and a ship in distress. As the men began to move the big boat to go to the rescue, the young man, frightened by the assignment, cried out to the captain, "We will never get back!" Above the storm the captain cried back, "We don't have to come back but we do have to go out."

We will never know, in that complex rescue operation we call living, whether or not we shall "come back." We have no way of knowing in advance exactly what will and what will not yield to our will and our effort. That is in the hands of God and His agents. But it is up to us whether we shall go out. And that is all that is really important. This is for me an article of belief: there is nothing shameful about trying and failing; there is everything disgraceful about failing to try.

So that on this Rosh Hashanah, in this age of "The Great American Frustration," in this period when men and women seem to have abdicated their responsibility and to have forfeited whatever control they still can exercise over events, at a time of this sort it behooves us to emphasize and to stress that at least to some extent man is free, he is responsible, he can be in control, he must go out into the rough stormy seas of life and find his way and rescue what he can.

In the U-netaneh Tokef prayer of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we declare, following the Mishnah, that all human beings appear before God for judgment on this day like bnei maron. What does that mean? The Talmud gives several explanations. One is: sheep. Just as the sheep climb over the mountain single file, so do we each appear individually before the Almighty for judgment. The other explanation is: ke'h'alayot shel beit David, like the legions of David's army. But what does David's army have to do with the bnei maron? Rashi provides the answer: David's soldiers were proud and self-confident men. They acted with adnut and marut -- like masters, like people who are in control. Bnei maron means that we are judged to the extent that we are willing to exercise marut, to master and control. That is what we are judged for as human beings and as Jews: whether we submit to the pressure of events like mindless sheep in a flock, or whether we are willing to stand up and exercise our wills and determine the outcome of the battle like soldiers in the legions of David. Will we be sheep or will we be soldiers? -- faceless members of a flock, or dignified sons of David? Will we give up or will we take over? Will we fail to go out into the storm because we are afraid that we can't come back, or will we go out anyway -- and then find that we can come back? God did not create man because He wanted to be a divine puppeteer playing with His puppets. He created us in His image so that we, like Him, can learn to be creative and controlling: bnei maron.

Listen to how boldly the Rabbis conceived of this idea.

After Abraham's circumcision in his old age, he sat before his tent

basking in the midday sun. Then God appeared before him, and sent him three angels disguised as visitors who stood before Abraham. After they left, and Abraham was informed of the imminent destruction of Sodom, Abraham decided to pray for its survival. At this point we read, ve'Avraham odenu omed lifnei ha-Shem, "and Abraham stood yet before the Lord" (Gen. 18:22). Rashi quotes the Rabbis who ask: is that really so? Was not Abraham sitting, and God -- in the form of His angels or messengers -- standing before Abraham? Yes, answered the Rabbis, that is true: God was standing before Abraham! But that would sound disrespectful of the Lord, and so a purposeful tikkun soferim or scribal correction was entered into the Biblical text out of deference for God. But the fact remains: God stood before man.

What an amazing idea! Not always does man have to get on his knees and lie prostrate before God. Sometimes God stands before man. If man is willing to exercise his conscience, if he is willing deliberately to exploit all his powers and his intelligence and his talent for moral purposes, then God stands on him and waits on him and is willing to treat His human creature as -- a master. As bnei maron! Given noble intention and self-sacrificing initiative, God is willing to be a messenger of man in carrying out His will. Tzaddik gozer ve'ha-kadosh barukh hu mekayyem. The pious man decrees, and God carries out. Man can be in control. If he wants it badly enough, and for purposes good enough -- God will help him exercise that control.

Of course life is rough and tough and sometimes seems to defy

all our efforts at improving things. From Vietnam abroad to poverty at home, it seems so very hard to do anything about the stubborn and immoveable facts of life. But it simply is not true that we can do nothing. Maybe we can't do much -- but we can do something. Maybe we will fail if we try. But we dare not fail to try. One need by no means agree with our contemporary rebellious youth. One may be repelled by their crudeness and discourtesy and sometimes sheer stupidity. But let it be said in their favor that, impolite as they are, lacking in constructive programs as they are, at least they have declared that they will not be pawns and puppets in the game of life. At least they have tried to change the dreadful situation in which we all find ourselves. At least they are trying to exercise some control. Maybe they are crashing into the structure of society like a bull in a china shop. But better a bull in a china shop than sheep in a flock marching mindlessly to mass destruction. Bnei Maron!

As Jews on Rosh Hashanah we therefore affirm this doctrine of freedom and responsibility which both encourages us and challenges us, which strengthens us and summons us. Let us despair neither of our human condition nor of our own Jewish situation. We are in trouble -- but we can get out of it. Not everything will go our way, but we can make enough of a change to count. With honest effort and unrestrained initiative, we can

exercise some control. Three times in the last twenty years, the State of Israel has proven to all the world that man, even when outnumbered and outmaneuvered, can exercise his control. Israel has demonstrated that when there is no alternative to triumph but defeat, no alternative to survival but extinction, no alternative to success but failure -- then we shall not be sheep but we shall be men, we shall be masters, we shall be bnei maron, we shall recapture the spirit of the legions of the House of David. God Himself will wait upon us.

It is this spirit which must inspire us as we welcome a new year. It is this knowledge which must grace us as we stand before the divine bar of judgment.

Let us confront our responsibilities as free men. In response to the shofar, let us recall how Abraham acted like a master of his own destiny. Alah Elohim be'teruah -- God Himself, as it were, rises up and stands before us when we assert our spiritual dignity and moral initiative. To the call of the shofar, let us divest ourselves of the sheepishness of the spirit, and with high resolve determine that we shall control, that we shall pass the test of bnei maron. As dutiful descendants of the House of David we shall, with the help of Almighty God, this year begin to create a better world, a greater country, a stronger Israel, a more flourishing Jewish community, a more sensitive awareness of the call of Torah, warmer and happier families, and more committed and deeper selves.