

His name was Nachshon, son of Amminabab, of the tribe of Benjamin. Let me set the scene for you. The Jews had just left Egypt under the leadership of Moses. Now, as they came to the shores of the Red Sea they looked behind them and the cloud of dust revealed that Pharaoh had changed his mind and was now pursuing them with his army of chariots. In front of them was the Sea, behind them the Egyptians. Seeming to have no alternative, the Israelites cried out to Moses: "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying let us be and we will serve the Egyptians? For it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." They threw up their hands in disgust, pointed their fingers in anger and complained. This was their way of dealing with this dilemma: that is, all except Nachshon. According to the Midrash, Moses stood before the Sea and lifted his staff, as God had commanded. But nothing happened. The hoof beats grew louder and panic rose in the hearts of the Israelites. Nachshon, having heard God's command to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to go forward!" and believing in the power of God and with the courage inspired by his faith, waded into the water.

He continued walking into the Sea until the waters reached his nostrils. What faith, what hope, what determination...it was then, and only then, say the rabbis, that the waters split and the Israelites were able to make their way on dry ground.

Human nature has not changed very much from Biblical days. Most of us, when faced by overwhelming problems throw up our hands and blame others for our predicament. This is our sin...we act like victims. We fail to understand that although the sea in front of us...it represents a choice – and we are free to act. If we have enough faith and determination we can change our situation in life. The simple act like walking into the water can change our world. Writer Rollo May in *Man's Search for Himself*, "Freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development."

Taking control of our own lives is a basic drive that we all share. It begins very early in life. Watch a baby! For a while the parents are able to feed the baby from a lovely silver spoon, you know the type, the one with the monogram on it that we all received for our first child. But, that doesn't work very long, for

one day it happens. The baby takes control of his own eating. He will no longer let you feed him.

You must place the food on the tray in front of him and he manages to eat what you want for as long as it takes him, and the rest he throws on the floor for the dog to eat. Adolescence is no different, it is a fight for who is in control. The greatest amount of tension exists between parent and child when the adolescent thinks the parent is attempting to control his life. Moreover, as an adult, we, too, crave to be in control. How many people would rather work for themselves, even if the hours are longer and the money less? We choose to do so because we can control our own destinies, and to us, as adults, this is what freedom and power are all about. "Control is not a need," says Dr. William Glasser, in his book *Take Effective Control of Your Life*, "It is the way we must function to fulfill our needs."

To be out of control, to feel helpless and dependant upon others, we have to admit, is a terrible sensation. Think of the time your car broke down on the highway. Unable to repair it yourself, you were at the mercy of some highway mechanic. Some of us get that same feeling when we sit down in front of a computer. We are overwhelmed, almost afraid to touch the keyboard, as if we were going to break it. Think of being in a hospital: no one wants to be there, though clearly this is the place and the time, where and when we feel completely out of control.

It is a place where others determine when meals should be served, when blood should be drawn, and when people can visit. Everyone wants to get out of the hospital as quickly as possible so that he or she can again regain control of their own life.

The ritual of Shiva, in my mind is also the mechanism by which one can recapture command when the world about him seems to be crumpling after the loss of a loved one.

A question, "what is fear?" "It is," as one psychologist describes, "a state of powerlessness, the loss of control over oneself and what one does with oneself." States Julian Miller, author of *Breaking Through*. "Fearful people listen to others, to social pressures and mores, often in opposition to their own judgments and desires, acting in according to how they think they should act. They exist in a dictatorship of the shoulds, oppressed by performance, by the need to be accepted, liked, loved, needed, and recognized as real." Taking control of our own lives means not depending on others to bring us joy...not attempting to satisfy others at the expense of satisfying ourselves. Taking

control means saying that the past is the past, and although we cannot change it, we have to live in it.

Taking control of our lives means possibly failing. But that's okay because we remember the old saying – a turtle only makes progress when he sticks out his head. Risk taking is part of the joy of being in control. If “freedom is man's capacity to take a hand in his own development” as suggested, then the more we grow into our freedom and out of helplessness and suffering, the greater will be our sense of inner security and safety. Freedom is a path not to danger, but to self-awareness, wisdom and compassion for ourselves and others.” [page 79, *Managing Your Anxiety* by Christopher Collins.]

From the earliest actions in the crib, right through our adolescence, and into our adulthood, we can readily see that – with every fiber of our body we really do want to be in control of our own lives. However, as we can comprehend from our opening story, we are often confronted with obstacles. There are times when everything seems to be going against us. The sea is in front of us and the Egyptians are behind us. But, the story tells us that we have a choice. We can either go forth into the sea with all its risks and threats, or we can stand on its shore, bewail our fate, and allow ourselves to be overwhelmed. The attitude we take can ultimately affect our entire life.

A person's outlook is determined by his attitude. We can either make ourselves miserable or make ourselves strong. There is a paradox that exists for us; it is true that we are helpless, tiny specks in a world of overwhelming forces, as well that we are controllers and creators of our own destinies. Koichi Tohei, grandmaster of Aikido -- a modern Japanese martial art that focuses on the unification of body and spirit, describes it this way: “Some people say it is a terrible world. The universe is meaningless. God hates men. Others say it is a beautiful world. God loves men. I cannot say that one is more true than the other. Both are right. The question, which do you choose? It is true that in the strange medley of life we cannot predict which notes we will be required to play. But, we can decide on the interpretation and the style of performance – in the words of Jacob Newton, “How to take the raw stuff of life, and make it a thing of worth and beauty – that is the test of living.”

“But,” as one author states, “Most of us do not really have a ‘survivor’ mentality anymore. We have been brainwashed, conditioned, coaxed and cajoled into becoming more and more passive, more and more apathetic.”

As such we seem to have a compulsive need to acquire, gather and collect various artifacts of our civilization.

We seem to have an urgent need to be constantly “feeding” ourselves objects: but somehow magically once possessed, they lose their value.

Waiting and hoping is the province of passive people – You know that kind of waiting...waiting for things to go better, for something to change, for some lucky thing to happen, for someone or something to come along to help, or maybe cure or ‘give’ peace of mind, enlightenment, tranquility, or even a raise. I am impressed with one rabbi’s distinction of the difference between wishing someone “mazel tov” or a “brachah.” In the former, either you have mazel or you don’t, and no amount of well-wishing, complaining or begging can change that. As for the latter, “brachah”, you can create your own blessing and work at it and be your own blessing.” Livracha Bracha, -- for a blessing, this we should wish each other.

I believe that the whole process of the High Holy Days forces us by means of an introspective technique to take charge of our lives. We are asked to take stock of what we have achieved and where we have failed in the past year. We are challenged to make conscious decisions for the changes we would like to make and are encouraged to set new goals for the future.

The message of Rosh Hashanah is that although we may failed to achieve everything we demanded of ourselves or that God has demanded of us, today will present an opportunity to start afresh. We can turn from one direction and go in another. Note that in Judaism prayer and thought are not enough. We are called upon to perform Mitzvoth, we are called upon to act. We accept nothing on faith alone. Even the Messiah must prove that he or she is really authentic by performing certain acts such as ushering in an era of peace to the world. Even the concept of being holy in Judaism, unlike other religions, requires that one must act in a righteous manner toward others. Judaism demands from us to act in a certain manner. Isn’t it interesting that if we were to ask a psychiatrist or psychologist or social worker about the best way to relieve depression, assuming that it was not chemically induced, they would tell us that a person must look beyond him or herself, and do something for other people.

Now it is true that we may not be able to control how we feel, but it is possible to control what we do. For instance, at a horror movie, it is hard not to be scared; and once scared, it is impossible to stop our hearts from racing. But

anytime we want we can get up and leave. When we do leave we will quickly stop being frightened and our heart rate will soon drop to normal.

Because, we always have control over the doing component of our behavior, if we markedly change the component, we cannot avoid changing the thinking, feeling and physiological components as well. Action takes away fear. Better to swim or hopefully walk to freedom than to give into the slavery of being controlled by others.

“There are only two ways to approach life – as a victim or as a gallant fighter – (Merle Shaim) “We can choose to see ourselves as victims or as agents of change. We can choose either panic or self-mastery. All we must do to change our destiny is act like Nochshom, and wade into the water and the sea of submission will miraculously part before us. Amen