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TORAH PERSPECTIVES ON BOUNDARIES, RESTRICTIONS AND SEXUALITY¹

Boundaries and restrictions

A significant portion of the Torah revolves around boundaries and restrictions. Many youngstersømental image of G-d and His rules can be described thus: A very powerful god, who for some mysterious reason, needs us to provide him with *nachas* by doing positive deeds, and who needs us to avoid transgressing his rules. If we break the rules we will incur his wrath upon us. In the worse case scenario the mental image of god will most closely resemble the gods of the ancient pagans who had no interest in morality or the welfare of people and were basically very powerful bullies whom one needed to appease in order to avoid getting õbeaten up,ö or worse.

A more accurate, Torah-true, image is of a G-d who is concerned with our welfare and therefore wants us to do the things that are beneficial for us and to avoid certain acts that will be harmful to us (not unlike a doctor who tells us not to smoke because of the harm it will do to us).

This perspective is reflected in the verse in Iyov (35:6-7):
... - This verse makes clear that our transgression cannot hurt G-d and our good deeds do nothing for Him. The rules of the Torah are strictly for our own benefit.

Nonetheless, those inclined to the first perspective will be able to find many Torah and Talmudic statements that seem to back them up (e.g., sacrifices bringing *nachas ruach* to *Hashem*, our misdeeds causing *Hashem* pain, etc.).

It is clear from *Chazal* (see e.g., Michtav MeEliyahu Vol. 3, pp. 257-260) that expressions such as õan *aveira* causing G-d painö are not to be understood literally ó rather we use these metaphors as a way of bringing closer to the human mind concepts that are beyond the mindøs ability to comprehend. Rav Dessler emphasizes that these metaphors serve an important function. For example, speaking about the pain our *aveiros* causes *Hashem*, so to speak, helps us

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feel that our behavior makes a difference. While we use such helpful expressions, Rav Dessler stresses, we must also be cognizant that understanding them literally is actually sacrilegious!²

The Torah perspective on threats to maintaining boundaries

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz, 3 in a discourse on the Torah perspective of boundaries, brings the *posuk* that forbids adding or subtracting from the *mitzvos*. The *posuk* then connects this to the *avoda zora* of Peøor: ... (-:)

What is the connection between adding to and subtracting from *mitzvos* and the *avoda* zora of Pegor, asks Rav Chaim?

Unlike other idols that had specific protocols as to the proper manner of their worship, the essence of Peøor was ono boundarieso of in fact, the more you treated it with contempt, the higher the level of worship it was considered! The *gemora* says that Peøor was the most popular *avoda zora* of because it symbolized no boundaries.

The main protection we have against descending into a moral cesspool is to maintain appropriate boundaries. Minimizing the significance of boundary violations jeopardizes the system. Interestingly, adding to a *mitzvah* (without being clear that itos not an integral part of the *mitzvah*) is also a threat to the system of rules. This is why the *posuk* connects the prohibition of both adding and subtracting to *mitzvos* to Baoal Peoor since they both threaten the integrity of appropriate boundaries.

Rav Chaim also makes a very interesting observation that the same perspective that allows people to reach the highest levels ó the appreciation of (mankindøs awesome potential) ó can, in its pathological version (narcissism) allow people to believe that they are above the rules!

Restrictions experienced as excessive deprivation can lead to a desire to throw off the intolerable burden.

Rav Chaim cautions that overly rigid boundaries are also problematic. That why the Torah provides soldiers in wartime an extraordinary exemption from the regular restrictions related to marriage (eishes yefas toar). The Torah recognizes that during wartime soldiers are unable to maintain their regular boundaries.⁴ Rather than allow them to descend into a situation of no boundaries (as in õPe@orö), the Torah creates a more flexible boundary for this occasion.

⁴ As seen by wartime atrocities committed by soldiers who always acted civilized in their civilian life.

It is interesting to note that many chronic boundary violators grew up in **overly** disciplined environments. Likewise, the increasingly popular õzero tolerance policiesö for drugs, violence, weapons etc. in schools and workplaces have often turned out to be counterproductive. Even in structural engineering over-rigidity creates weakness rather than strength. It is for this reason that skyscrapers are constructed to sway in high winds.

Similarly, Rav Dessler cautions us that resisting illicit temptations solely via repression is like pressing on a spring. The harder you press the harder it pushes back. Based on this concept, Rav Chaim Friedlander advises that we should frame our *avodas Hashem* in positive terms, focusing on the benefits of following the Torah rather than on the negative consequences of breaking the rules. Rav Wolbe gives similar advice regarding learning *mussar*. Likewise, Rav Matisyahu Salomon cautions parents not to frame *frumkeit* to their children exclusively in terms of owe dongt do this and we dongt do that.

Interestingly, studies show that diets and attempts to stop smoking that emphasize the positive consequences of eating healthy and not smoking are more effective than messages that emphasize the negative consequences of smoking and obesity. This should caution us not to become overly reliant on negative consequences as an educational tool.

The concept of a yoke – self-control

A related issue is the concept of \tilde{o} yoke \ddot{o} ó as in . The mental image many people have of this concept is that of a yoke of slavery \acute{o} a burden. In fact, Rav Matisyahu Salomon explains, based on a Zohar, a yoke is a tool 10 \acute{o} a way to more efficiently accomplish a

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Perhaps contemporary pornography is todayøs Peøor ó the refutation of all boundaries. It often seems that those who have experienced an overly oppressive form of discipline in their families are particularly vulnerable to succumbing to the lure of pornography.

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⁵ õBlanket policies that are often not clearly explained to teachers or students can create an atmosphere in which rules get in the way of relationships between students and teachers, to the detriment of keeping the schools safe." "Code of Silence: Students' Perceptions of School Climate and Willingness to Intervene in a Peer's Dangerous Plan." Syvertsen, A. K., Flanagan, C. A., Stout, M. D.; *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *101* (1). (Article available at http://www.apa.org/journals/releases/edu1011219.pdf.)

⁸ Said in a *Chinuch Vaad*. See also *With Hearts Full of Love* Rav Mattisyahu Salomon (Adapted for print by Rø Yaakov Yosef Reinman) Artscroll, 2009, pp. 179-180.

⁹ õThinking about the negative consequences of an addiction will only increase the desire for the addictive substanceí [because] the psychological defense at the core of any addiction is denial, so when contemplating any negative idea (such as getting cancer from smoking), your mind will crave the intense pleasure of the addiction as a way to override (i.e., deny) the frightening idea" --- [downloaded on December 26, 2010 from www.guidetopsychology.com/stopsmok.htm].

task that we want to accomplish (similar to the rigid backpack used by hikers, allowing them to carry all their equipment with minimal discomfort).

Likewise, the õyokeö of self-control has great benefits for those who embrace it. Walter Mischel and his colleagues conducted a study where preschool children were offered the choice between an immediate small reward and a larger delayed reward. Those children who were able to wait longer at age 4 or 5 became adolescents whose parents rated them as more academically and socially competent, verbally fluent, rational, attentive, planful, and able to deal well with frustration and stress.¹¹

People who grew up appreciating the intrinsic benefits of appropriate restrictions will view them as helpful tools and not as burdens. Those who were õbribedö with rewards or praise, or threatened with punishment as a means of eliciting compliance, are not likely to develop an appreciation for **self**-control. The overuse of õBecause I told you soö as a reason for expected compliance is also not likely to promote the appreciation for the intrinsic value of self-control.

Clinical implications of excessive feelings of guilt and shame

Overwhelming guilt and shame play significant roles in the emotional distress therapists encounter with religious patients. An important component of *chinuch* is learning how to deal with human imperfection and setbacks. While healthy and reasonable guilt serves a crucial function in *avodas Hashem*, overwhelming and unreasonable guilt is destructive and counterproductive.

Rav Dessler states: Shame is the result of internal dissonance and it holds the power to prompt a person to do *teshuvah*. On the other hand, very strong feelings of dissonance can bring the person to rebel against his Creator ó to silence his conscience by force.¹²

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz also discusses at length how the psychological turmoil from overwhelming guilt can be more dangerous to one spirituality than the transgression itself. 13

Sexual guilt and shame

The sexual arena is especially prone to feelings of overwhelming guilt and shame 6 and a frequent cause of emotional turmoil among *frum* adolescents. One reason is because, in regard to private behaviors, youngsters tend to believe they are the only ones transgressing and so they are more deeply affected by the severe comments they see in *seforim* - in contrast to how they

מכתב מאליהו (", '263): ", 'מכתב מאליהו ("', '263): ", ", ", ". ''): - ", ", ".

¹¹ õThe nature of adolescent competencies predicted by preschool delay of gratification.ö Mischel, Walter; Shoda, Yuichi; Peake, Philip K. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1988, Vol *54*(4), 687-696. (My thanks to Dr. David Pelcovitz for calling my attention to this study).

react to equally severe comments that relate to their deficiencies in other, more public, behaviors (e.g., *lashon horah*)¹⁴.

Rav Wolbe addressed the issue of sexual guilt in an Israeli medical journal 40 years ago:

The difficult period of adolescence is fertile grounds for the development of excessive guilt feelings. Masturbation is a serious transgression. The vast majority of young people stumbles in this area and are incapable of totally overcoming this problem. The result is guilt feelings. This is the place for proper guidance from rabbis and educators. Rabbis are not authorized to permit what is forbidden, but they can guide, reassure and encourage the youngster to develop patience with himself. In addition, promoting an active social life and introducing the youngster to the noble treasures of Torah will gradually bring him to **forget** to transgress. Rather than a constant battle which is for naught, a positive toiling in Torah and social activity will bring him gradually to wean himself off. This is the approach that is proper in our times. ¹⁵

Rav Wolbe is also critical of *mechanchim* who give their *talmidim* the impression that sexual feeling are inherently evil, rather than teaching them that these feelings are feelings of *kedusha* that require us to preserve and protect that *kedusha* status. Due to this improper *chinuch*, bemoans Rav Wolbe, *frum* youngsters enter marriage believing that they are going to be involved in *tumah*, albeit, a *tumah* that the Torah now permits!¹⁶

Rav Chaim Volozhin highlights the spiritual danger of excessive sexual guilt in a dramatic statement in the *Keser Rosh*. He criticizes those who quote from the *Zohar* regarding the severity of the transgression of masturbation; yet neglect to quote the end of this same *Zohar*, which says that Torah study corrects this transgression.¹⁷

In an extraordinary footnote, the quotes the :

Those stringent ones who are stringent and state that there is no correcting this transgression... they are the ones who induce an increase of sinning among us, and cause people to distance themselves from *Hashem*, since the sinner, when he hears that there is

no repentance for this sin will abandon all attempts to improve himself. These stringent ones cause the *Shechinah* to go into *golus* and rather than be called *chasidim* (stringent ones) should more properly be called õchaseirim" (lacking ones) and their punishment will be very severe. 18

Our surprised reaction to the following statement by Rav Dessler highlights how we perceive sexual infractions on a different plane than other equally egregious transgressions. õThe transgression of wasting seed is very serious ó and how much more so is the seriousness of wasting precious timeö!¹⁹

Family dynamics that encourage vulnerability to overwhelming guilt

We wouldnot expect our children to properly keep Shabbos without ever discussing Shabbos with them. Yet we seem to expect them to cope with their sexuality without any direction. This is especially problematic in todayes world. In *Child and Domestic Abuse: Torah*, Psychological, & Legal Perspectives, by Dr. Daniel Eidensohn, 2010, Vol. 1, p. ii, the author relates: õI once mentioned to the Noviminsker Rebbe that Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky had stated that children should be educated about sexual matters at the age of 16. His reply was, olt is too late for children today (this was 25 years ago). Even some 8 year olds know more than I do.ö

Every parent needs to think about when and how to discuss sexuality with their children. Consulting with a knowledgeable Rov is a good place to start.²⁰

Image of G-d

There is evidence that children image of G-d, the ultimate authority figure, is shaped by their experiences with their earliest authority figures. As Rav Matisyahu Salomon writes: õThe father and mother serve as a physical paradigm for our Father in Heaven" for their children. ²¹ If their parents were unreasonable, punitive, unpredictable, unforgiving, hypercritical, more focused on their own needs, then their childrengs image of G-d will resemble the gods of the ancient idol worshippers. Such children learn to feel overwhelmingly guilty even for minor infractions - how much more so for sexual ones.

A young man once told me that he has full bitochon that Hashem will provide him with his physical needs. He just canot believe that Hashem will take his emotional needs into

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Jewish parents.

21 With Hearts Full of Love Rav Mattisyahu Salomon (Adapted for print by Rø Yaakov Yosef Reinman) Artscroll,] 2009, pp. 65-66. This can be true of adults as well: " (:): רמב"ם [

consideration. Not surprisingly, this is what he experienced with his father who provided for his physical needs but was oblivious to his emotional needs.

Parents who are reasonable, forgiving, supportive, and focused on their children¢s needs create a similar image of G-d for their children. This prepares them to handle the guilt of masturbation in a healthier manner even if it wasn¢t discussed directly since they have a template to process guilt.

Overreaction by parents to minor infractions without consideration for extenuating circumstances results in the õsaint or sinner syndromeö in their children. If they canot be a saint they may as well be a sinner. They are unable to perceive gradations, where one option is bad but the other one is even worse. Children who grow up in this environment project onto G-d the same attitude. This leads to absurd situations such as a person who feels that if he canot stop himself from masturbating he might as well go to prostitute. Or since he feels very guilty for wasting time watching a õcleanö movie he feels he may as well watch pornography.

In contrast, parents who react to their childrenos infractions taking into consideration the specific circumstances involved will have children who will assume the same regarding *Hashem*. They will strive to be as good as they can and feel proud of their accomplishments even if they canot be perfect. When they õslip,ö their level of guilt feelings will be appropriate for the circumstances.

"Fearful" chazals

A vulnerable youngster¢s terrifying image of G-d is exacerbated by fearful *chazals* simplistically understood. Children who grow up with punitive and vindictive parents find it easy to believe the most frightening explanations. For example, *chazal* tell us that someone who embarrasses his friend in public has no share in the world to come. Some youngsters find it believable that this applies to anyone who did this even once. Children who grew up in a loving and forgiving environment will intuitively figure that this probably isn¢t the case. Perhaps they will assume it means someone who does this habitually ó as in fact the Rambam states.²²

The Steipler Gaon related that after every Yom Kippur he was approached by terrified teens who had experienced a nocturnal emission on Yom Kippur. They recalled the *Mishna* that states that the person this happens to should fear that they wongt finish out the year. (Here too, youngsters who grew up in a more rigid and punitive environment would be more vulnerable to panic in this situation). The Steipler had to reassure them that the *Mishna* is only discussing a married Torah scholar over the age of 40 for whom such an event is very unnatural. Such a person has to worry that perhaps this is a õheavenly sign.ö For a single teen, in contrast, this is a very natural phenomenon and not a cause for worry.²³

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A very common cause of extreme anxiety among religious youngsters is guilt over masturbation. They often õjustifyö their anxiety by citing the Kitzur Shulchan Aruch that masturbation is equivalent to murder. They are unaware that the Bais Shmuel brings evidence that this cannot be taken literally.²⁴

Inadequate hashkafik grounding in sexual issues

Many youngsters are unaware of rational reasons to refrain from pre-marital sexual activity. For many whom already have a distorted image of *Hashem*, this is just another way of depriving them of pleasure. In their eyes, this world was not intended for pleasure or even They are surprised to hear that according to the Yerushalmi people will have to answer for why they didnot enjoy the world *Hashem* provided for them.²⁵

An idea found in *seforim* that discuss this issue can be helpful. If one experience of a very pleasurable activity is enjoyed exclusively with one particular person then that will create a very strong bond between them (). Intimacy shared with countless people is not that intimate (e.g., a õsecretö shared with everyone).

Another important issue is the connection between emotional intimacy and the lasting pleasure of physical intimacy. Unfortunately, sexuality has become separated from intimacy in the minds of many people. 26 As a result many young men looking for a *shidduch* are obsessed with looks. They can't believe that their future level of enjoyment from physical intimacy is more dependent on their emotional bond with their spouse than with their spouse physical attributes. They are unable to comprehend that if they really like someone and develop an emotional bond with her, they will feel more attracted.²⁷

I find it helpful to point out to patients that most people would rather eat out in a mediocre restaurant with a close friend than in a fancy restaurant with someone they didnot particularly like.²⁸

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^{. &#}x27; and Marital Intimacy: A Traditional Jewish Approach, by Rø Avrohom Peretz Friedman. This separation is also found among well-intentioned therapists who recommend using pornography as a tool in treating problems in marital sexuality. Ito hard to understand how someone would try to treat a deficiency in intimacy using the ultimate in non-intimacy (pornography)!

²⁷ If they grew up with parents who were not able to overlook their minor imperfections they may, in fact, be unable to experience (:) "

In Summary: Youngsters with an accurate and healthy understanding of the Torah view of boundaries and who have benefited from a positive familial experience with boundaries are less prone to boundary violations.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe - Letters, Part 1 - letter 24. (To one who failed to protect himself from). (Free translation): My dear friend! Cease your searching for what the *seforim* say about that *aveira*. The sources that you have already found and copied for yourself ó dispose of them properly.

The *yetzer horah* that brings one to this particular is so cunning that any thoughts about the subject can stimulate one to fall again. This includes even thought of remorse and *teshuvah*. The only solution is, therefore, is to take the opposite path.... To forget about the *aveira*. That is, to give it no thought ó even after being . You must stop thinking about the whole subject of this ! How? By completely investing yourself and learning, with an attempt to be [to develop original thoughts in learning], and specifically learning with *simcha*....

This matter involves a great battle. Often you will be victorious. It is possible, however, that at times you will be defeated by the *yetzer*. If that, unfortunately, happens ó don't think about it and pay it no attention! Banish any thought about what happened and particularly beware of feelings of helplessness! This is the primary goal of the *yetzer* ó to knock a person down and make him feel hopeless. Don't allow him that victory! Continue to learn, and with joy, as this nothing happened! ... The only solution to deal with this issue is to be involved in learning and to become accustomed to thinking and learning; in the street, after you go to bed, etc., as much as possible ó but also to socialize and interact with friends... In addition, forget what you've seen in *seforim* about the punishments and difficulty of doing *teshuva* resulting from this *aveira*. Just look at the ²⁹ , what you find there should direct you in this area.

I am aware that these instructions are completely different than what you've seen, but this way has the approval of the Chazon Ish. However, it is difficult to become accustomed to **not** paying any attention and to **not** giving thought. Thoughts of remorse, anguish and hopelessness constantly arise. For this reason, I request that you reread this letter occasionally. *Hashem* should help you ascend to the heights of Torah and *yiras shomayim* until you completely

forget about this *aveira*. And with *Hashem*'s help you'll establish a house of Torah and father children [in purity]. There is no reason whatsoever to be concerned that what you have done in the past will have any effect on your ability to do this. Only strengthen yourself and learning and be

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