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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 youngsters' mental 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 beaten up, 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 *ān aveira* causing G-d pain are not to be understood literally or rather we use these metaphors as a way of bringing closer to the human mind concepts that are beyond the mind's 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

¹ Presented at an Ohel Workshop on Boundary-Crossing Sexual Behavior in Children & Teens on Feb. 2, 2011 in Brooklyn, NY.

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 Peor: ... (- :)
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What is the connection between adding to and subtracting from *mitzvos* and the *avoda zora* of Peor, asks Rav Chaim?

Unlike other idols that had specific protocols as to the proper manner of their worship, the essence of Peor was ñno boundariesö ó in fact, the more you treated it with contempt, the higher the level of worship it was considered! The *gemora* says that Peor was the most popular *avoda zora* ó 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 it's 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 Ba'al Peor 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 (mankind's 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's 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 ñPeorö), the Torah creates a more flexible boundary for this occasion.

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

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 *ōyokeō* 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 *ōbribedō* 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 *ōBecause I told you soō* 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's spirituality than the transgression itself.¹³

Sexual guilt and shame

The sexual arena is especially prone to feelings of overwhelming guilt and shame *ó* 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

¹¹ *ōThe 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).*

¹² מכתב מאליהו) " , (263 ' :
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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 *chaseirim* (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. “The transgression of wasting seed is very serious and how much more so is the seriousness of wasting precious time!”¹⁹

Family dynamics that encourage vulnerability to overwhelming guilt

We would not 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 today’s world. In *Child and Domestic Abuse: Torah, Psychological, & Legal Perspectives*, by Dr. Daniel Eidensohn, 2010, Vol. 1, p. ii, the author relates: “I 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, “It is too late for children today (this was 25 years ago). Even some 8 year olds know more than I do.”

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’s image of G-d, the ultimate authority figure, is shaped by their experiences with their earliest authority figures. As Rav Matisyahu Salomon writes: “The 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 children’s 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 can’t believe that *Hashem* will take his emotional needs into

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²⁰ A helpful resource is a book by Sara Diamant and Talking to your children about intimacy: A guide for Orthodox Jewish parents.

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

