

**Boundaries**  
YK Kol Nidrei 2018  
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Final

An elderly man in Phoenix calls his son Bob in New York and says, “I hate to ruin your day, but your mother and I are divorcing. Forty-five years of misery is enough! I’m sick of talking about this, so call your sister in Boston and tell her,” and then he hangs up.

The son frantically calls his sister, who goes nuts upon hearing the news. “I can’t believe it. After all these years!” she cries.

She calls her father and yells, “You are not getting a divorce! Bob and I will be there tomorrow. Until then, don’t do a single thing, do you hear me?”

The father hangs up the phone, turns to his wife, and says, “It worked! The kids are coming for a visit, and they’re paying their own way!”<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of this very sacred Day of Atonement, I certainly don’t want to give any of you the idea of lying to your family, no matter how much you may want to see them. I’m sharing this joke because families are attached in very complicated ways. It can be difficult figuring out healthy ways to connect and separate. The struggle for establishing our individuality is something we all face at different stages of development and plays out with our relationships with family members, friends, coworkers, and community. It comes down to boundaries. How do we draw the line between ourselves as individuals and those around us? Where do we start as a person and when do we merge to become part of a couple, family, or group?

It all starts at the very beginning with our immediate families. Judith Viorst from Necessary Losses describes the process we all go through separating from our mothers at a very young age as we establish our own sense of self. Viorst states that around five months of age, we enter a stage of differentiation where there is a recognition that our mother and the entire world exists outside our boundaries. At nine months, the second stage features the baby starting to physically crawl away from his mother. And the third stage, called rapprochement, one strives to reconcile separateness, closeness and safety.<sup>2</sup> With each stage, there is loss as there will be necessary losses throughout our lives. But at the very beginning, these losses give one the experience of new discoveries and personal growth. Viorst writes, “These losses are necessary because we grow by losing and leaving and letting go.”<sup>3</sup>

Even a young child is starting to sense and develop his/her sense of boundaries. On the other side, for those of us who are parents, we have a different struggle. We have to grapple with when to let go and when to hold tight at every stage of our child’s life. It is with the hope of raising our kids to be independent adults and good citizens. And is it too much to ask, that they will visit us without lies, deceit, or excessive guilt?

From the time we are little and in through adulthood, we all have to wrestle with where we draw our personal boundaries. How do we establish the line between ourselves and others? This changes or should change as we grow through childhood and hopefully become healthy adults. There are always boundaries we need in order to protect ourselves.

I remember as a young child, we lived for a few brief years on an unruly street called Pheasant Run. Kids would approach me on the sidewalk when I was in Kindergarten and ask, “Nancy, do you have any money?” “Nancy, what is that you are eating? Is it chocolate? Can we have it?” Now there were no threats, but I felt I had to give it to them. If I had ten cents, I handed it over. If I still had half a candy bar, I gave it away. Even the two coveted cookies, I earned for being good during the day and eating my dinner, I readily relinquished. I remember trying to practice in my bedroom saying, “No.” I would stand in front of the mirror or a friend and just try to utter this word out loud. This was very hard for me because I didn’t want to disappoint the kids or let anyone down.

For us as adults, we can still struggle with saying no to our parents, friends, and coworkers even when we know it’s not right for us to acquiesce or give in. I have a friend who is 56 years old and she still drops everything to run over to her very unappreciative aging mother who is verbally abusive much of the time. The cost to her is obvious. She is frustrated, feels overburdened, and is very resentful.

As individuals, we have to wrestle with how far we will go, how much we will give, and what we will do for others. It’s a continual struggle between guilt and the need to keep relationships strong. I’m sure our therapists and psychologists here today can offer great insights into this subject. I look forward to hearing from you.

One of the elements that is important for establishing healthy boundaries, is having a healthy sense of ourselves. It begins with knowing who we are. I don’t know if any of you are Games of Thrones fans but Arya Stark when she is at the headquarters of the Faceless Men, the House of Black and White, is asked repeatedly, “Who are you?” She is supposed to say, “No one,” but she knows exactly who she really is, she is the youngest daughter of Eddard and Catelyn Stark of Winterfell.

So if I were to ask you, “Who are you?” What would you say? Most of us would use descriptive words. I’m a teacher, mother, brother, scholar, athlete, business man, artist, lover, or adventurer. But if we go deeper than what we do, what are we? Can we identify our core values and seminal traits? Who are you at your core?

In order to set any kind of boundary between ourselves and others, we have to know who we are and I find that this can change over time. Our upbringing can shape our personality, the people we meet influences us in both conscious and unconscious ways. And we can learn and transform from challenges and experiences. David Hume, Scottish 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher,

believed that even though our physical shape changes over time like that of a tree, we are still the same. At any given moment, we are perceiving things such as feeling happy or angry. When you link our perceptions over time and see what causes us to feel and act in the ways that we do, we get a picture of who we are. Our mind, our thoughts and perceptions over the course of time gives rise to who we are.<sup>4</sup>

Who are you? What are the unique qualities, traits, and perceptions that makes you who you are? Knowing our self, where we have come from and what it is we need today, can be an important step in establishing healthy boundaries between ourselves and others. Once we know what is of upmost importance to us, then we will know where that line must be between us the myriad of people we come into contact with.

As important as it is to have a sense as to how far we will go for others, we can all think of situations where one can become too rigid or inflexible. Such a person's boundaries are set in stone. A friend may only be willing to do certain activities, eat at specific restaurants, or acknowledge views or opinions they agree with. We may have a parent who is exceptionally stubborn. One can hear such phrases such as, "Over my dead body, will I agree to ..." or "I will never ever do such and such a thing." People will issue absolutes and take stands prematurely. The outcome of this is that their relationships with others can be harmed and they may miss out on experiences that can be fulfilling. What underlines such rigid boundaries is a desire or need to have control over others and over oneself.

I have a girl friend who married a delightful man who is not Jewish. She is in her forties, never married, and had many lackluster dates and boyfriends until she met the One. They dated for years and then they got married this summer. Her parents didn't come to the wedding. It was their way of protesting. They believed that it was wrong for her to marry someone outside of their faith. What was sad for me was that she had an aunt, uncle and cousins present. Her own brother walked her down the aisle. I found myself thinking how her parents were missing out. They missed out on a beautiful wedding and getting to know their son in law. How sad it is when people take such stands. My friend to her credit, still calls and visits her parents. She decided long ago not to let her parent's strict beliefs stand in the way of her loving them.

Clearly as individuals, we have to have a balanced approach as to where we set our boundaries. We have to know ourselves and be in touch with what is most important. I would like to assert that our core values and our relationships with family and friends are of critical importance. Hillel famously stated in Pirkei Avot,

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני.  
 "If I am not for me who will be for me? And if I am for myself alone, what am I?"<sup>5</sup> (1:14)

These famous words demonstrate the importance of taking care of ourselves while also caring for the needs of others. We need other people in our life. We are social beings and no matter

how much people may annoy us, we need them. Those who are happiest are those with friends, family, and feel a sense of belonging in a community. In order for these things to happen, we have to be able to compromise, be flexible, and work with others. And so Hillel's teaching is one of balance between meeting our needs while forging deeper connections with others.

Boundaries are certainly important in Judaism. Also in Pirkei Avot<sup>6</sup>, we are taught to put a fence around the Torah. It's a way of protecting the laws and giving some space around them. This is sort of like when the traffic light turns red, most of us know there is a delay before the light turns green for the incoming traffic. It's to give a little space to make sure an accident doesn't happen. The fence around Torah is most readily seen in the prohibitions regarding dietary rules, Kashrut, or the observance of Shabbat but is meant to protect a person from accidentally transgressing.

The ultimate boundary is who is a Jew. When does a person get to cross the line between gentile and Jew? It's a bit complicated. Halachically, from a Jewish legal perspective, if a person's mother was Jewish then Mazal Tov, you are Jewish. The Reform movement though makes it both harder and easier by recognizing patrilineal descent. And so if either parent is Jewish and the child is raised as a Jew, than Mazal Tov he/she is Jewish. And then there is conversion. Once a person converts to Judaism, they are considered as though they were at Sinai and they and their children are Jewish.

Judaism is ultimately a religion of community. We are a people. This is why we don't advocate for people to go off into the mountains in isolation. We don't take vows of silence. Can you imagine what that would be like at the dinner table or family gathering? I don't think we can be quiet for a few minutes much less a day or more. We need a minyan, a group of ten Jewish adults to say Kaddish and to publicly read the Torah. We are to celebrate holidays and life cycles with our community. And it isn't always easy. Hence the joke, "You have two Jews, and three opinions." So we debate, argue, and hopefully come an understanding or we just agree to disagree. The rabbis of the Talmud decreed that it's by majority rule that issues are to be decided. It makes a lot of sense. It's not always possible to have one hundred percent agreement but we can strive for a general consensus and when that's not possible, go with the majority.

Why do we go to such lengths? It's because life is most meaningful when it is shared. As annoying as our brother or sister can be, they are still our siblings. Our friends may get on our nerves from time to time, but we still have all those years of shared memories. Our significant other can get under our skin but the love we have shared makes it all worthwhile. And here we are in a sanctuary, observing Yom Kippur, our Day of Atonement. All of us so very different, with diverse backgrounds, and yet here we are praying, reflecting, and coming together as a community.

Boundaries are very important for families, groups, organizations, and nationhood. You need to have ways of defining who is in, who is out, and how you welcome newcomers into the fold. Most of us can find a sense of belonging in our groups and when we are with the right kinds of groups, they can reinforce our core identity. Being part of synagogue community, for example, can provide not only an extended family and friendship circle, but can give a person opportunities to contribute, feel valued, and connect with something bigger than themselves. It is a place where one can feel validated on an individual level but feel a sense of belonging with others.

Ultimately, we all need some boundaries, some separation from others, in order to live and grow. And yet, we need to be able to compromise and recognize the needs and desires of others. It begins with knowing ourselves and taking the time to reflect on who we are today and what we need to be fulfilled and whole. With this knowledge, we can then reach out and strengthen the relationships we have and even be willing to forge new ones. We can be an active part of our families and communities without losing our sense of individuality.

Boundaries are necessary and subjective, may we be wise in how we erect them, flexible when it's in our greater interest to do so, and may we all find meaning and connection with those around us.

#### Notes:

- 1 <http://grouptravel.org/family-reunion/family-reunion-jokes-funny-jokes-one-liners-funny-stories/>
- 2 Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst, pg. 45-46
- 3 “ “ pg.16
- 4 A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume Pg. 305
- 5 Pirkei Avot 1:14
- 6 Pirkei Avot 1:1