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Assertiveness Training

Imagine for a moment that someone you loved or cared about harmed you in some way. Hopefully it wasn't too easy to conjure up a scenario, but we all at some point are let down by those we are close to. How do you generally react in such a situation? While the context obviously matters, is there a recommended framework for how we should respond to being damaged by others? There is one verse in this week's parsha, as elucidated by the Rambam, that encapsulates an entire therapeutic approach to handling such circumstances.

Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), distinguished between three types of behaviors in such contexts; unassertive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors. To be unassertive when someone does something we don't

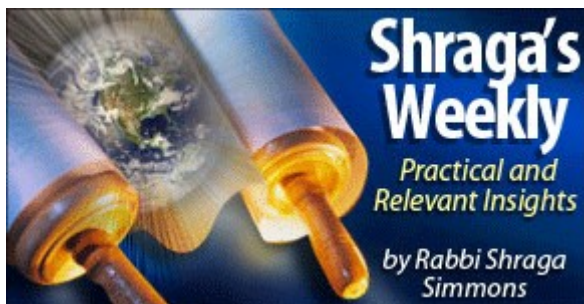
like, would mean that we react passively, keeping our feelings inside without expressing them at all. While this may seem like a good approach to avoid conflict, one of the problems associated with being unassertive is that it often leads to internal resentment and hostility.

On the other extreme is when we are aggressive. Instead of keeping it inside, we let it out in a harmful, often retaliative fashion. This could be in the form of insulting, offending, denigrating, or yelling at the other person. This may feel good in the moment, but hardly leads to positive long-term consequences. The behavior of choice is to be assertive. This is when we express what we are thinking and feeling in a non-aggressive, yet straightforward fashion.

In the beginning of Parshas Kedoshim the Torah lumps together in the same pasuk three concepts that don't immediately seem to fit together; (1) don't hate your brother in your heart, (2) reprove your fellow, and (3) don't incur a sin on his behalf (Vayikra 19:17). The Rambam in the sixth chapter of Hilchos De'os connects each piece of the verse, providing a similar therapeutic framework. If someone does something to hurt us, don't let the feelings fester inside, which will lead to resentment and hatred (unassertive behavior). Rather, the appropriate action is to approach the person and reprove him by initiating a conversation about his actions (assertive behavior). However, upon doing so, we must be careful not to incur our own sin by embarrassing the person (aggressive behavior).

The Rambam adds two important criteria that help ensure the effectiveness of the reproof and the avoidance of aggressiveness. First, the conversation should be conducted in private. This helps prevent embarrassing the other person. Second, it should be done in a gentle and soft manner. Tone of voice and word choice are essential to keeping the conversation productive and non-hostile. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg adds that we should try to speak in a way that is not blatantly accusatory. Ask clarification questions about what happened so that the person doesn't become defensive.

If we generally react to being hurt with either an unassertive or an aggressive behavior, it may be time to revisit our approach. Not only are these approaches not helpful in resolving conflicts with those we care about, they may also be violations of two Torah principles. While taking an assertive approach may require training and practice, it is a worthy investment that pays dividends in psychological and spiritual growth.



Higher Than the Angels

This week's Parsha begins with the Mitzvah to "Be holy." How do we achieve holiness?

The Torah provides many avenues, and keeping Kosher is a primary one. Imagine you're on vacation and you come upon a restaurant offering roasted pork at a good price. Your mouth waters and your stomach growls. But the food is not Kosher, so you pass it by. That's called mind over matter - the soul exercising control over the body. And that's holy.

But there's a much deeper level to the Mitzvah to "Be holy." Nachmanides explains that holiness is the result of exercising restraint in areas that are permitted to us.

Let's go back to our example of keeping Kosher. It may be no great challenge to refrain from eating roasted pork. But the question is: When we sit down to eat Kosher food, what is our frame of mind: Do we pronounce a blessing with concentration, appreciating God's gift of bounty? Do we eat slowly and with dignity? Do we focus on the fact that the ultimate purpose of food is to nourish the body - in order that we'll have strength to do good deeds?

Indeed, it has been said that "all holiness begins at the dinner table."

The story is told of the Baal Shem Tov, the great kabbalist, who looked out the window and saw his neighbor sitting at the dinner table. In the eyes of the Baal Shem Tov, the neighbor appeared not as a human, but as an ox. The neighbor was eating for purely physical reasons, just as would an ox (and the holy Baal Shem Tov was able to perceive this). Although the neighbor was acting in a *permitted* manner, it was not a *holy* one.

Sometimes a child will do something that demonstrates particular self-discipline, and the parent will say: "You're an angel!" But in actuality, the child is greater than an angel. An angel is a purely spiritual being, with no sense of "free will" to choose spirituality over the mundane world of animalism. But we humans - every time we make such a choice, we refine our soul, and achieve a level ... higher and holier than even that of angels.



The Path to Holiness

Acharei Mos-Kedoshim focus on sanctity. We, the Jewish people, are not only mandated to adhere to God's commandments, but through these commandments, we sanctify ourselves and become holy. In these two *parshiyos*, which are usually read together, the Torah gives us specific instructions as to how we might attain that lofty goal. It is not only what we must *do* that is of concern; equally significant is that which we must *avoid* doing.

"Do not imitate the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelt, and do not imitate the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, and do not follow their statutes." [1] And this applies to all lands of

our sojourns.

It is always tempting to be part of the group - to follow the masses and to adopt that which is in vogue. Therefore, at the very outset of our history, Hashem warns us that if we are to survive as Jews, if we are to retain our faith, then we cannot imitate the ways of the nations among whom we dwell. Our morals, our ethics, are all rooted in Sinai and are not given to change, but the rules that regulate the lives of the nations, the laws by which they live, are in a constant state of flux. That which only yesterday was considered immoral may very well be accepted today, and this holds true for every aspect of life. Just consider the language that has become politically correct, the manner of dress that is termed "high fashion," the entertainment that is regarded as "culture," the manner in which the young are permitted to address their elders, the breakdown of our families, and you will see for yourself the wisdom of this prohibition.

But what if we don't see it? What if we are comfortable and have no objection to what society advocates? Then remember the concluding words of this passage: "Do not follow their statutes." The only way in which we, the Jewish people, have survived centuries of exile, the only way that we have maintained our Jewishness in a hostile world, the only way we have resisted the onslaught of assimilation was to cling tenaciously to our Torah laws and divorce ourselves from even those statutes to which at first glance we may have been drawn. Our way of life, our values, our morals and ethics are all rooted in Sinai and that Divine

Voice from Sinai binds us eternally in every culture, in every century.

Trust: The Basis of All Relationships

One of the mitzvos mentioned in this *parashah* is, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind."^[2] This statement is not meant to be taken only literally; it also means that we must be careful not to give misleading advice. We also have to insure that we do not have hidden agendas and that our motivations for giving advice are pure. The question that must arise, however, is, why the Torah doesn't simply state that we are not permitted to mislead others. Why use this figure of speech, "place a stumbling block before the blind"?

The Torah wants to impart to us the seriousness and the importance of trust. Even as no sane individual would countenance tripping a blind person or allowing him to step in front of a moving vehicle, so too, misleading someone who is unaware is equally deplorable. We all know how painful it is to discover that we have been betrayed by people in whom we placed our trust, so we should take care not to do this to others. All relationships are built on trust. Neither individuals, nor families, nor societies can survive when trust is missing. When we come to this understanding and realize that deceiving or misleading someone is no different than allowing a blind person to walk into traffic, we will surely be more sensitive to every word that we pronounce.

The Golden Rule

Love your neighbor as yourself."^[3] Rabbi Akiva proclaimed that this is a fundamental principle of the Torah, from which we learn how to relate to our fellow man. The question is asked whether it is possible to love another as we love ourselves. The great Chassidic master, the Baal Shem Tov, responded by reminding us that, even as we are aware that we have many faults and yet still love ourselves, similarly, we should feel kindly toward our fellow man and love him despite his faults.

Rambam (Maimonides) teaches that this commandment instructs us to love every Jew as ourselves, by acting lovingly toward them and being as careful of their feelings, their possessions, their money, and their dignity as we would our own. On the other hand, Ramban (Nachmanides) teaches that the Torah does not demand that we literally love someone as we love ourselves. As a matter of fact, we have a ruling that, in times of danger, our own lives take precedence. What God *does* demand is that we desire for others that which we desire for ourselves, and we *treat them with the same respect and consideration* as we want for ourselves.

Hillel the Elder paraphrased this commandment, saying, "What is hateful to you, do not inflict upon others," and instructed a would-be convert, "That is the entire Torah. Go and study it. The rest is commentary."

The Path to Holiness

In this week's *parashah*, we discover the

meaning of spirituality. "*Vehiyisem li kedoshim, ki kadosh Ani Hashem* - You shall be holy for Me, for I Hashem am holy ..." [4] is God's proclamation.

But can ordinary man aspire to holiness? Is that realistic? Yes, the Torah states, not only is it possible for him to attain such a goal, but *he has a mandate to do so*. Our *parashah* does not present this command as a theoretical concept, but it details the exact steps that we must take to realize that goal. As a result, most of the essence of the Torah is mentioned in this *parashah*, for it is through the adherence to these mitzvos that we can become holy. These mitzvos range from revering parents to loving our fellow man as ourselves; from refraining from taking vengeance to being on guard against gossip; from being kind to the stranger to paying the day worker his wages on that selfsame day; from keeping the Sabbath to not worshiping or fashioning idols, and many more; every aspect of life is addressed.

Moreover, God commanded Moses to teach these commandments to the entire nation: "*Kol Adas Bnei Yisrael*" - every Jew had to be present to underscore the fact that sanctity cannot be attained through a hermitlike existence, nor through self-abnegation, meditation, or climbing the Himalayas, but only through reaching out to others in *chesed*, justice, consideration, and love, thereby bringing them and ourselves closer to Hashem.

Road Map to Sanctity

The Torah never leaves anything to

speculation, but provides us with a clear road map that shows us how to attain our goals. Our Sages outlined several paths, each leading to sanctity:

1) Separate yourself from that which is immoral and sinful.

Obviously, our Torah's definition of immorality and sin is a far cry from that which our 21st-century culture has come to accept as the norm. As responsible Jews, it behooves us to study exactly what "immoral and sinful" connote.

2) Sanctify yourself with that which is permitted.

Thus, we are charged to temper all our actions and words with discipline; i.e., we are permitted to eat, but not to be gluttons; we are permitted to shop, but not to be shopaholics; we are permitted to drink alcohol, but not to become drunk. Thus, we sanctify wine by making *Kiddush*.

3) To make God beloved through our deeds and words.

As Jews, we are charged with the responsibility of being ambassadors of God. Thus, we have a mandate to inspire people so that they might praise and love Him. By demonstrating kindness, refinement, and consideration, we bring honor and glory to God's Holy Name. And this does not only pertain to major world-shaking events, but to our everyday interactions as well, such as saying "thank you" to a clerk in a store or to a flight attendant, giving someone the

right of way when driving, and not grabbing someone else's parking space - and there are myriad other examples.

4) Even as God is compassionate and forgiving, we must be compassionate and forgiving. We must strive to emulate God's attributes of mercy and forgiveness in our interpersonal relationships, for therein are to be found the essence of holiness. At first glance, this may appear to be the most difficult of all, but if we bear in mind that we want God to forgive us for our trespasses, then surely, we must also be capable of saying those two powerful words, "I forgive."

1. Leviticus 18:30.
2. *Ibid.* 19:14.
3. *Ibid.* 19:18.
4. *Ibid.* 20:26.

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