

THE ABILITY TO SAY NO; OR, SETTING DIVINE LIMITS

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A reader writes:

The question on which I would like guidance deals with when we should act harshly towards others. Clearly there are times when strong action is needed. The story of King Saul's not killing the Amalek comes to mind. It is relatively easy to know that we should not act when influenced by great anger or other strong emotion (though not easy to do). However, the ego is often subtle as your recent posting indicated. It is when my actions would directly affect another in an apparently negative way that I am most hesitant to do anything. And there are times hesitancy is not good, and adequate time for contemplation not available.

When I feel like taking strong action against another person, how can I know that my own desires are aligned with the desires of G-d?

Thank you.

Dear Reader,

Thank you for sharing your excellent question. I'll try to address some of the underlying issues that relate to your question (rather than serve as an on-line counselor). First a word of background:

G-d is understood as having performed both the Exodus from Egypt (representing pure caring and loving-kindness) as well as having given us His Law (representing the "musts" and "must nots" in our lives). These two aspects of G-d, we declare daily (in the Shema) as a matter of faith, are not disparate, but rather are parts of the same One. Strict justice always appears to be at odds with limitless loving-kindness and there are religions which had such difficulty with the Torah concept of G-d's Oneness that they separated a loving god (perhaps calling him a son) from the strict god (perhaps calling him a father) and then struggled to work out an amalgam between the two. It should not surprise us, then, that this unity requires effort to understand and to replicate in our own lives. It's not easy to say NO (setting limits, abiding by convictions) when that response would seem to undermine another part of our being, the desire to satisfy the needs of all of those around us, particularly those about whom we care greatly. The issues involved in resolving the apparent contradiction are:

1. Clarifying the Mandate. If I don't know what is really obligatory (and what is prohibited), then I'm probably imposing mandates by whim. Ditto if I don't know what my true abilities and limitations are.

If I do not continually struggle to know the difference between the statement "I don't want to" and the statement "I cannot," then I am likely to be imposing my will based on societally conditioned responses that have little to do with my life-mission.

2. Clarifying the Need. Our understanding of another person's needs is always approximate. I might go so far as to say that my understanding of _anything_ pertaining to another person (their meaning, their feelings, their rationale, their stress) is, at best, approximate. If I stop expending effort to clarify their need (either because I'm assuming that I already know it, or because I do not care enough to keep on trying), then I have lost the connection with that person. My "no" will then be painful evidence of the emotional break with that person. However, my "yes" isn't any better in that case, if you think about it, since I've just said "yes" and hid behind my "goodness" to shield my lack of caring!

3. Empathy. Empathy is the choice to share the feelings of another person. While granting that I cannot fully know the feelings of the other, I can strive to share with a certain "blank check" approach, "I wish to share whatever you are experiencing, even as I may never come to know what that feeling is." Empathy (the choice to try and share the feelings of the other) needs to be distinguished from sympathy, which is basically my need for your stress to go away.

The keys, then, in relating to your question can be summarized as follows:

As I become clearer about my obligations and limitations, and as I grow in my understanding of your needs, I can elect to, or refrain from, filling your apparent need without forfeiting my sharing the stress which my "no" engenders.

G-d cares, knows the mandate, and shares the stress associated with upholding that law. We are called upon to replicate, if by successive approximation, His attributes. I must act in the best way that I can at the moment I am asked, and then utilize time for reflection to consider the route I am taking towards imitating the Divine.

What I have written here is necessarily brief as this is not a book, it is an e-mail posting on a matter which requires much thought. I look forward to your questions to provide additional clarification.

Best wishes.