

From the Rabbi

November 2014

“No and Yes”

Headlines about rape and sexual assault on campuses keep pouring in. Even if we or our children or grandchildren are not in college, we really need to care about this.

My youngest son, a college senior, is part of a cadre of students who, under the auspices of their university, teach their peers about sexual harassment and related issues. They run sessions for everyone from sororities to the lacrosse team to the Hillel board. Under their trained direction, students discuss the Talmudic fine lines between consent and rape, and between minding one’s own business and becoming a responsible bystander. In simple, symbolic terms, between “no” and “yes.”

I say “Talmudic” because the distinctions and nuances of this old-new dance baffle me with their complexity. I am sure they confound many a well-intentioned student who for the first time confronts situations requiring personal ethics, self-control, and lightning-quick judgment.

I know we should be doing better institutionally to prepare our kids for this brave new world, especially when it comes to developing their personal ethics. It’s hard enough to give our high school students enough helpful information about the subject of Israel so that they can sort out fact from fiction when they arrive on sometimes-hostile campuses, let alone try to fortify them with deep grounding in

Jewish sexual wisdom. Of the total high school juniors and seniors in our congregation, only a fifth of them attend our weekly classes and take advantage of discussions about Jewish views of human dignity and decency. Those students are being exposed to a course on Judaism and human sexuality taught by our education director and faculty, as well as general conversations with me about personal decision-making when we leave the womb of our parents' homes. Among our goals is to assure that any and every one of our kids who comes out as gay will feel fully respected and accepted within our community, and likewise trans-gender kids.

One of my rabbinic colleagues in Westchester runs an annual retreat to give high schoolers an intensive dose of sexual ethical choice-making. Perhaps we should consider replicating his program, at least in part. Until we do, we need to encourage each other to have conversations, to study relevant ancient and modern texts together, and to speak fearlessly about, well, our fears.

What larger values from the Jewish tradition come to mind? For one, *panim el panim*, "face to face." On day one of my Rabbi's Mitzvah Class each semester, I put the kids and parents through an exercise where they have to "see" the "aleph" of the divine "I" (*anokhi* in Hebrew) in the face of everyone they meet. My hope is not that they grow to like everyone or appear likeable themselves, but that they learn to "subject-ify" rather than objectify other persons, and that with respect to sexuality they eventually come to see a potential sexual partner as "partner" rather than "opposite number."

Another value is *lo ta'amod al dam rey'echa*, "do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." The topic of bystander responsibility, says my son, is one of the most important new twists in this educational endeavor. Our kids are brought up in an atmosphere of acceptance and tolerance, which they unfortunately confuse with a reticence to speak out when a peer behaves dangerously or even immorally. College kids are now being taught to jump in when a fellow human being is under attack, or even when they suspect violence in the works. Our Torah has been telling us this for three thousand years. It has never won us friends, but it enables us to live with ourselves. So it should be for our young adults.

A third value comes to mind: *kavod atzmi*, "self-respect." This principle requires us to be self-defensive in the face of threat, i.e., to take our own worth seriously. But it goes deeper, and here I get confused as my own Talmudic instincts come into play. The current thinking is that one must not discuss the role of what we older people call provocative behavior or dress. The argument is that anything that might displace blame from the perpetrator to the victim is off-limits. Since the victim is never to blame (another Jewish principle), one must not give the perpetrator even a scintilla of an excuse in his or her defense.

I get it, but I cannot simply jettison the notion that one's comportment is a matter of deep self-respect, *kavod* for the "*aleph*" in one's own face. I would want our kids to learn to revere the *tzelem elohim* or divine image in their own personhood,

irrespective of the presence of friend or foe. I want them to care about the way they appear in public, not because of what untoward message it might convey to others, but because of what it says about themselves *to themselves*.

What saddens me about all of this is the necessity – and let there be no doubt about its urgency – to reduce all of this awareness training to a set of mechanical moves, i.e., to a script of permissible sexual speech and behavior. One needs to learn what language is okay and what is not; to learn what to respond, and what a given response does and does not mean, regardless of what one actually intends it to mean. Given the reality, the context, the inexperience of the players and the dangers of alcohol, drugs, peer pressure and human desire, all of this is mandatory.

But it begs us – not the college student educators, but those of us in the world of Jewish life education - to mention another category of precious values. One might call it *ahavat chesed*, “loving kindness;” the passion whose core is compassion; the sanctification of sex in a loving, trusting covenantal bond. That’s an area of study beyond the scope of the university’s curriculum. That’s my job and yours. We have to speak about it, and obviously to model it with our lives. We have to assure that our kids grow up to believe that trust between humans is not only achievable, but also laudable and desirable. Praiseworthy! Joyous! Essential to a life well lived!

Only in this way will our children be able to transcend the wooden script of “no and yes” and reach the summit of sacred interaction, the place where “I-It” crosses over

to "I-Thou." I wish that for all of our beautiful children, and indeed for all people everywhere.

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