

## Kedoshim: Limits

I recently came across an article by Rabbi David Wolpe in which he posed a series of difficult questions. He asked:

“What are we thinking when we put a 14 year old child wearing a \$1,000 gown and \$400 shoes into a limousine to attend a prom?

“What are we thinking when we bring a 10 year old to a concert where the principle virtue of the performer is that she is scantily dressed and exudes sexual allure?

“What are we thinking when we send children to parties where there will be drinking, drugs and people treating their bodies as though they were disposable?

The questions are obviously addressed to parents, and I am sure we could add our own issues to this list.

The answer is that in too many instances we quite simply, do not think. We do not think about the long range consequences of our decisions. We do not consider the implications of these choices, nor do we realize the messages we are giving.

He is pointing out that by allowing our children so much freedom, by not setting any limits, by allowing them to do things that may be excessive, we are actually encouraging, enabling and even causing behavior that we may not support or condone. In so doing, we give off mixed messages, or sometimes the message is not even mixed, but is just plain harmful.

Children, especially adolescents look to their peers and to the media to discern what is hip and what is in. But they look to their parents to understand what the parameters are, and what is appropriate and acceptable, what they should incorporate into their lives, and what is not. Their radar is always on. They see how parents respond to their requests, as well as how their parents act with their peers in social settings.

Although written thousands of years ago, this week’s Torah portion offers important insights and guidance into parenting in our contemporary society.

The central focus of this week’s torah reading is the commandment by God to be holy. “*Kedoshim teheyu, kee kadosh anee adonai elohechem*. You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

To Rabbi Wolpe’s questions, I would add:

How often do we speak with our children about the concept of striving to be holy?

Do we ever discuss the notion of being a member of a people who is distinguished by the fact that we are chosen and that our mission entails seeking to be holy through our actions?

How often do we place matters in the context of doing something or not doing something because we are commanded by God?

In its litany of laws and legislation, this week's reading sets out guidance on a wide range of subjects by offering a set of rules and regulations. Rules and regulations means there are things that are permitted, and there are things we are not allowed to do. In other words, there are times when the answer may be no.

This concept is often foreign to many of us.

On the surface, it may seem easier to say "yes" and to avoid confrontation. It may very well be the path of least resistance, but avoiding conflict does not mean that it will lead to avoiding pain.

Kids need and even seek our guidance. The truth is they are often puzzled by our failure to offer it. Parents remain the first and most important teachers of their children. We need to help them understand what is acceptable and what is not, what is permissible and what is not, and a word too often absent from our lexicon is the word, "no."

Adolescents need parents who are able to set firm limits, but today parents want to be their children's friends. Afraid of growing old, they try to act like their kids. Afraid they not appear to be distant or detached, they do not want to be marginalized or irrelevant. They are afraid of how kids will react if they do not allow them to do what they want to do. And so they either consent to requests regardless of their merit or let the children make decisions.

By doing this we place our children in uncomfortable situations, and abrogate our role and responsibility as parents.

This pertains to many aspects of life, including the most profound question many parents ask their children today: "Do you want to continue with religious school?" What are we saying to our children when we let them make this decision? We are telling them: "Although I have just spent tens of thousands of dollars on a party for you celebrating your becoming a member of the Jewish people, I do not have the right to place any demands upon you. I will not convey to you what values are important to me for you to take on. I cannot expect you will make the right decision, but I hope you will decide to forego your free time, or other things to uphold the ideals of our faith and to learn more about it."

I fear what the long-range impact will be of placing the future and fate of the continuity of the Jewish people and of 3,000 years of a noble and beautiful heritage in the hands of over-indulged 13 year olds.

This is but one example of the subtext of allowing our children the freedom to decide things that we should be deciding for them.

In addition to the concepts of holiness, commandment and God that permeate this morning's portion, we also encounter a verse that talks about love. It is no coincidence, for the themes are all intricately tied together.

The prayer that precedes the *shma*, known as *ahava rabbah*, affirms that God shows His love for us by giving us the Torah, a compendium that contains mitzvot, rules to live by. Our sages comment that what God did reflects and parallels the love of a parent for a child. Love is shown not just by what we do for a child, and not just by what we give to them, but also by being able to love them enough that we are not afraid to guide them. We must never shirk our responsibility to place limits, to let them know that not all is permitted. We must love them enough to say no, so that they in turn will learn to be able to say no as well, when they are in uncomfortable or compromising situations. If they never hear it from us though, they will not know how to say it.

So let us think about the gifts we give our children. Truly one of the best gifts is to not always give them what they ask for.

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