

The Importance of Boundaries **by Rabbi Steven Conn**

The following d'var Torah was given by Rabbi Conn at Yom Kippur services (Oct. 9, 2008).

There are many songs about falling in love But there are few songs about how to keep love alive through all the challenges and changes we face in our lives. Maybe that's why there are so many songs about heartbreak.

Our congregation will soon begin its search for a permanent rabbi. The rabbi search will be one of the first really big agenda items we will take on as a newly merged congregation. This search gives us the opportunity to find stable leadership for our congregation; a leader who can help us transcend the past and look toward the future. I hope it will be a wonderful experience for the entire congregation.

I find myself in a unique position as an interim rabbi. I cannot, thankfully, be involved in helping to screen or evaluate candidates. But I am charged with serving as a resource and helping to facilitate the process. In that role, I need to tell you that there are some things you ought to know before you start.

The process of rabbi and congregation finding each other is often compared to a courtship. The interviews and visits by rabbis to the congregation are kind of like the dating phase of a relationship. Each side puts its best self forward. Each side tries to determine if there is really "chemistry" with the other. In the end, if rabbis and congregations do well, they select a partner who is not just "well qualified", but also a good "fit".

The rabbinic search, then, is a lot like the "falling in love" part of a marriage; the time when there is the greatest interest in the relationship. But what happens to the relationship between rabbi and congregation once "love" becomes marriage. What happens when challenges and changes occur? That's the part that we don't talk about very much. That's also part the part that determines whether these relationships succeed or fail.

I believe that one of the biggest challenges in the relationship, for rabbis and for congregations, is maintaining proper boundaries. Success or failure in this area often determines the success or failure of the entire relationship.

This insight comes not just from modern day experts in the field of religious studies, but from the Torah itself. From the very day that our ancestors first installed spiritual leaders, maintaining proper boundaries became a critical issue.

Our Torah portion this morning is set in the days following the installation of the first kohanim, the first priests: Aaron, the High Priest and his four sons, Elazar, Itamar, Nadav and Avihu. As soon as the celebration ended, Nadav and Avihu bring

what the Torah calls “strange fire” into the Holy of Holies, the area of the Tabernacle that contained the Ark of the Covenant. That area was off limits to everyone except the High Priest.

For some reason, Nadav and Avihu decided to cross this boundary. When they did, God struck them down and they were died on the spot. By violating the boundaries God set, Nadav and Avihu lost their lives, brought grief to their families and made the Tabernacle “impure”—unfit for use by the priests and the people. God institutes the ritual of Yom Kippur to help purify the sanctuary and make it fit for use again—and, most of all, to bring healing to Aaron and the people.

Reading this story, we may well ask “why did God punish Nadav and Avihu so severely? After all, they didn’t hurt anyone or damage anything in the Tabernacle?”

Our tradition offers many answers. Maybe Nadav and Avihu entered the Tabernacle in order to seize religious authority from Aaron and Moses. Alternatively, maybe Nadav and Avihu were drunk and acted recklessly and impulsively. Or Nadav and Avihu may have become arrogant and selfish; acquiring an inflated sense of their importance when they received their new titles. Or maybe Nadav and Avihu were just over zealous in their desire to serve God; so overwhelmed by their love of God that they forgot that we must also hold God in awe.

All these explanations have one thing in common. Whether Nadav and Avihu were rebels, scoundrels, fools or simply overwhelmed by their own spirituality, they put their own interests ahead of the community’s. They broke the rules in order to meet their own personal needs.

Even more than the priests of ancient Israel, rabbis today play many roles. In congregational life, rabbis function as teachers, counselors, fund-raisers, administrators, worship leaders, officiants at life cycle events, community activists, program coordinators and more. In each of these roles, the rabbi represents not just himself or herself, but the synagogue, the Jewish community and even Judaism itself. As rabbis we do not choose to represent all these transcendent entities. That choice is made for us as soon as we become religious leaders.

And because we represent so much more than just ourselves, our interactions with others are inevitably loaded with a lot of emotional freight. How much? Let me share with you a few examples.

First, of all, I can tell you that, over the years, I’ve been given a lot of credit that I really didn’t deserve. I’ve been told that my prayers healed the sick, that I singlehandedly inspired a troubled teenager to turn his life around, that I made the Bar Mitzvah the most wonderful and spiritual experience ever. I’m certainly proud of my accomplishments as a rabbi, but nobody’s that good!

On the other hand, I’ve also been blamed from time to time for things I had absolutely nothing to do with . . . but that’s another story.

Again, the reason for all the undue credit and all the undue blame we rabbis receive is that we are seen for more than we are; not just people, but representatives of something bigger than ourselves.

Standing for so much to so many people is a big responsibility—and it's not for everyone. As rabbis, we can never be fully ourselves---and just ourselves--in the eyes of our congregants.

Rabbis have an especially big responsibility when it comes to roles like teaching, counseling and mentoring. In each of these situations, the relationships they create are by nature unequal. On the one hand, the rabbi is authoritative and trusted—otherwise he or she cannot be effective in the role. At the same time, the student or congregant is vulnerable and looking for guidance from an authority figure in whom they have to place great trust. Relationships like these resemble the relationship between a therapist and a patient, a doctor and a patient or an attorney and a client.

Not surprisingly, then, as students or congregants share deep feelings and detailed personal information, a kind of intimacy naturally develops. A student or a congregant can easily mistake this intimacy for more than what it really is. At this point, rabbis need to make sure that boundaries are very clear.

In particular, we have to make sure that, unlike Nadav and Avihu, we don't let our personal needs get in the way of the needs of the people we serve. Yes, underneath all the roles we play and the things we represent, we rabbis are people too, with our own needs, and sometimes our own pathologies. We need love, we need companionship, we need a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on just like everybody else. And we spend a lot of time in the synagogue, interacting with staff and congregants—often more time than we do at home or as private citizens. It's almost natural to seek to get our needs met in the setting where we spend most of our time, and where the relationships we create seem so intense and so special.

But if we put our needs in front of the needs of those we serve, we violate our sacred commitment to serve the congregation. We violate the community's trust. We exercise undue influence on a vulnerable person who needs us; an influence that can be, at its worst, coercive or even abusive in nature. How can people say “no” to someone they so respect and depend on?

It's very easy for a rabbi to step over the line. Especially if he or she is stressed. Especially if he or she is dealing with personal issues or problems. Especially if he or she has untreated psychological issues that get in the way of exercising good judgment.

In any case, the consequences for the congregation can be devastating. Members of the congregation may lose trust in the office of the rabbi altogether. They may become unable to get their own legitimate needs met safely. They may

become disillusioned not only with a particular rabbi but also with Judaism itself. They may sow divisions in the congregation. For all these reasons, the success of a rabbi in any congregation, especially this one, depends on his or her ability to maintain boundaries and separate his or her rabbinic self from his or her personal self.

I need to stress that this burden needs to be shared by the rabbi and the congregation. Despite all the roles that rabbis play, and all that we see rabbis representing, we as congregants need to see ourselves as partners and collaborators with the rabbi.

I always hated to hear the synagogue I served in California referred to as “Rabbi Conn’s congregation.” I would often correct the speaker and say “no, it’s our congregation.”

And so too Beth Tzedek is our congregation; it belongs to all of us. We all need to maintain ownership and take responsibility for what happens there.

Rabbis need partners; partners who can share constructive feedback and make their expectations clear. That’s especially true when it comes to boundaries. Congregations need to recognize when there are signs of a problem. For example, when the Rabbi begins cancelling meetings, or not showing up to regularly scheduled meetings. Or, when the rabbi talks a lot about personal problems. Or when the rabbi spends an inordinate amount of time with particular members; or cuts him or herself off from others. When we see signs of a problem, we need to bring these concerns to a rabbi in a concerned and compassionate way.

In addition we need to insist that rabbis set boundaries proactively to ensure their own mental and physical health. It’s hardest for rabbis to maintain boundaries when they feel overworked or underappreciated. Believe me, the needs of a large congregation like this one are limitless and could easily consume all a rabbi’s time. We need to resist the temptation to claim all the rabbi’s time. And rabbis need to resist succumbing to this temptation because it makes us feel indispensable. Instead, we should insist that rabbis take their days off. We should also support outside activities that can help rabbis be more well-rounded individuals. And we should create schedules where it is possible for a rabbi to have dinner with his or her family at least some nights of the week.

All these proactive steps can help a rabbi avoid burn out, and find healthy ways to meet his or her needs outside the congregation. We may lose some rabbinic time in the short run. But in the long run we will ensure that our rabbi can serve our congregation better and longer.

Our Congregation has a lot to offer a prospective rabbi. Our members are warm and welcoming. We show a tremendous passion for our synagogue. We are blessed with many knowledgeable people who are committed to maintaining a rich

spiritual life for our community. And there are plenty of people who want to learn and grow Jewishly.

The most important thing that a rabbi needs--not all rabbis know this-- is a not just an attractive congregation that will embrace him or her upon arrival. Even more important, a rabbi needs a congregation that will actively partner with him or her throughout their relationship: This partnership includes creating a vision for the community together. It includes providing meaningful and constructive feedback to each other. But above all, being a good partner means helping the rabbi to excel in the many roles he or she must play; and maintain the proper boundaries that are necessary for the long term health of both rabbi and congregation.

What I am asking you to do—to be an active partner with your next rabbi, may seem like a lot of work. But isn't that what maintaining any relationship is about? It may seem like our closest relationships come about through magic—through the right chemistry, the right fit, that serendipitous moment of finding each other. But we need more than magic to sustain these relationships. Any relationship worth having: love, marriage, friendship, or the relationship between rabbi and congregation—which contains elements of all of the above--requires effort, commitment and vigilance to succeed in the long term. As we know only too well, without all this effort, commitment and vigilance, we open the door for heartbreak and despair. We have too much drama in our world already, and especially here in our synagogue. May this year usher in a new era of quiet and contentment, of partnership and re-commitment, of healing and peace.