

YK Morning 5776: The Practice of Tzitzum
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Power is often seen as a zero-sum game; there is only so much power in the world and if one person has it, those around him or her must not. When we think of power, we often imagine people who have power OVER other people: a bully has power over his victims. A boss has power over her employees. Stripped of its connotations, however, “power” simply means “the ability to act.” Martin Luther King Jr. noted that power, properly understood, “is the ability to achieve purpose.”

And since power lies in our ability to act, we can each find moments of power in our lives. We have innate power; a strength that comes from within; a force that cannot be given to another. The idea that we empower others is a misnomer – rather, we create space for other people to exercise their power. In the same way, we can withdraw that space. **In other words, we cannot make people act, but we can prevent people from feeling able to act.**

Father Greg Boyle , a Jesuit priest in south Los Angeles, founded Homeboy Industries, an organization that provides gang members a way out of gang life through employment and education.

In his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*, Father Boyle recalls a common conversation he has with gang members, referred to here as homies, that walk into his office. It is a conversation that illustrates the extent to which these homies have been disempowered. He writes,

“I have the intake form, and I’m interviewing the homie seated in front of me. “How old are you?”

And the homie says “me?”

And I’m thinking, *no, what’s your dog’s age?*

We are the only ones in the room and he says, “me”?

[I respond], “Well, yes, you.”

“Oh, I’m eighteen.”

“Do you have a driver’s license?”

“Me?”

Again, I think, *no, I was wondering if your grandmother is still driving.*

[But what I say is]: “Yes, you.”

“No, I don’t have a license.”

The toxicity gets so internalized that it obliterates the “me.”

This complete loss of self is one of the extreme consequences of disempowerment. But we each encounter—and contribute to—small acts of disempowerment every day.

When we interrupt someone during a conversation, we send a message that the person we are interrupting does not need to be fully heard. When we do something for someone else rather than teach her how to accomplish the task on her own, we remove a person's ability to complete the job independently the next time. When we speak on behalf of someone who is perfectly capable of speaking for himself, we remove his ability to express his own opinion.

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I confess that I have done each of these things. I interrupt people, sometimes find it easier to complete the task rather than explain the necessary steps, and on occasion have spoken on behalf of the person standing next to me. My intention is never malicious: often I interrupt because the conversation is so exciting that I can't hold in my thought any longer, and when I do things for other people I am trying to help. But the unintended consequences of these actions can be negative because they remove people's ability to exercise their power.

When we take power away from others, everybody loses. Those who have been disempowered shut down; their sense of self-worth is diminished. Disempowerment can make us feel unheard, or perhaps ashamed. And we, who have disempowered others, find ourselves left with a narrower view of the world, unable to benefit from what the other has to offer.

Yom Kippur is a time for forgiveness. Over the past ten days and the month leading up to them, the Jewish calendar has created space for us to forgive ourselves and others, and to apologize to those whom we have wronged. Some of our missteps we easily recognize, while others require us to dig deeper. In order to do the hard work of *tshuva*, we must first recognize the ways in which we inadvertently disempower others and then take steps to change the way we act in the world.

The 16th century Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac Luria taught that in the beginning, there was God. In fact, God filled the entire universe, leaving no room for anything else to be created. So in order to make space for creation, God contracted; God pulled back. By doing so, there was room. This act of contraction is known as *tzimtzum*.

We too can practice *tzimtzum*. When we learn to recognize the ways in which we unintentionally disempower others, we can work instead to make space for each person to feel powerful, fully able to act.

Someone who practices *tzimtzum* knows how to refrain from commenting sometimes, to step back and let someone else drive the conversation. *Tzimtzum* is the key to making space for each person to feel powerful, fully able to act.

Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of our Fathers, provides three different methods through which we can do so; three tools that can help us check our own actions and allow other people to feel their own ability to act.

First, we read “דן את כל האדם לכף זכות”, *judge every person on the scale of merit* (1:7). In other words, focus not on people’s shortcomings but on their strengths. Some refer to this as giving another individual the benefit of the doubt.

Imagine the following scenario: last time you were annoyed or frustrated with someone – maybe they cut you off in traffic, or in line at the grocery store. Perhaps they took too long to bring the check.

To judge each person on a scale of merit means to expand our assumptions. To feel that annoyance or frustration but then, rather than acting on it, to imagine all of the reasons this person acted in such a way.

Maybe she is late for something really important. Maybe he doesn't see very well and didn't realize there was a line in the first place.

By providing ourselves with multiple explanations for people's actions, by giving them the benefit of the doubt, we can diffuse our own reaction. Not only do we save ourselves the tzuris, we also expand our evaluation of the other and invite an opportunity for empowerment. We react in a way that creates space for someone else to act.

When we look for the positive in people and we assume good will by giving someone else the benefit of the doubt, we invite the opportunity for people to empower themselves.

Our second text from Pirkei Avot reads¹, "*al tadin et chavercha ad sh'tagia limkomo*," don't judge another person until you have been in his place. We don't know what someone else's day, week, month, year, or life has been like. We don't know what has brought them to the moment of encounter or what they bring to the moment of encounter. If we act without considering how much we don't know about the other, we again rob someone else of their ability to act; we take away their power.

The Cleveland Clinic in Ohio produced a video to illustrate this very concept. In the video, you walk through the doors of the hospital

¹ Avot 2:5

and immediately begin to see thought bubbles pop up to indicate what individuals are thinking:

“Has been dreading this appointment. Fears he waited too long.”

“Wife’s surgery went well; heading home to rest.”

In one crowded elevator, one person is worried about how he will take care of his wife who has had a stroke, another is recently divorced, and a third just found out he is going to be a dad.

The powerful message of this video scrolls across the screen at the end, “if you could stand in someone else’s shoes...hear what they hear...see what they see...feel what they feel...would you treat them differently?”

This is slightly different from giving everyone the benefit of the doubt – rather than assuming the good, it is refraining from assuming at all. Rather than creating the multiplicity of explanations for what a person has been through up until the point at which you meet them, Pirkei Avot tells us to instead let people act from their own histories. We owe it to those we encounter to avoid judgment until we know their stories.

Our own experiences make us who we are. Acting with empathy, in a way that refrains from assuming what someone else’s experience

has looked like or should look like, honors that truth and gives each person the space to fully have his or her experience.

In the third text from Pirkei Avot (1:15) we find, “*emor m’at, aseh harbeh* - say little, do much.” The very spirit of this four-word message teaches us two key conversation skills.

First, say little. This is not an encouragement to provide one-word responses when in conversation, but rather a suggestion to ask more questions. By asking questions, we learn, and with learning comes a better understanding of another person’s perspective. When we invite people to share their wants and needs with us, we no longer find ourselves making assumptions about those wants and needs. This, in turn, keeps us from acting upon potentially incorrect assumptions. *Emor me’at*. Say little. Open a space for others to be powerful.

Aseh harbeh, do much. In conversations, the “doing” is found in active listening. We can ask all the questions in the world, but if we are not attentive to the answers, if we do not listen to the responses that people give us, we risk further disempowerment by suggesting that people’s answers are not important for us to hear.

By giving people the benefit of the doubt, acting with empathy, and saying little while doing much, we practice tzimtzum; we contract and leave space for others to feel empowered.

Near the end of Tattoos on the Heart, Father Greg Boyle tells another story. Driving a homie home one night, he realizes he's almost out of gas:

"Oye, dog, be on the lookout for a gas station."

[Jojo] doesn't seem to wholly trust my judgement. He leans toward the gas gauge and dismisses my call.

"You're fine," he says.

"Como que I'm fine - I'm on ECHALE, cabron." Waving at him, I say,

"HELLO, E means empty."

Jojo looks at me with bonafide shock.

"E means empty?"

"Well, yah, waht did ya think it meant?"

"Enough."

"Well, what did ya think F stood for?"

"Finished."

After I thank him for visiting our planet, I realize that this is exactly how the dismantling process has to play itself out. Homies stare into the mirror and pronounce "EMPTY." Our collective task is to suggest instead "ENOUGH" - enough gifts, enough talent, enough goodness. When you have enough, there's plenty.

Or if their verdict is "FINISHED," we are asked to lead them instead to "fullness" - the place within - where they find in themselves exactly what God had in mind."

Our lessons from Pirkei Avot move us from interactions in which we unintentionally disempower to a place of *tzimtzum*. Each of these steps creates space for people to feel seen. Or, as Father Boyle puts it, allows people to feel like they are ENOUGH; helps them find fullness in themselves.

Though we cannot empower others to act, we can recognize the power within each human being and honor it.

As we observe this Day of Atonement, may each of us find ways to recognize our own power and leave room for others to act on theirs as well. And may we be driven to expand our assumptions, act with empathy, and listen actively to ourselves, our family, our community, and our world. *G'mar chatimah tovah*. May you be sealed for blessings in the year to come.