

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Hillcrest Jewish Center

In Praise of Interdependence

D'var Torah for Yizkor

5780



Let me begin this dvar Torah by sharing the words that Rabbi Howard Stecker, the Senior Rabbi of Temple Israel in Great Neck, shared at the last New York Board of Rabbis meeting.

"A few years ago I was sitting with a group of parents in our religious school and I asked, what qualities do you want to instill in your children? I made a list. The qualities included hard work, honesty and compassion. One quality that rose to the top of the list was independence. Parents unanimously said they wanted their children to become independent.

Looking back at our tradition, I had trouble finding references to independence. In fact, I'm not sure I could identify a Biblical or rabbinic word that quite conveys the concept. עצמאות - atzma'ut, the modern Hebrew word for independence, does not seem to go too far back.

What you do have going way back in our tradition is ערבות areivut, which is interdependence. Areivut is the notion that we are responsible for each other, we need each other. We give and we get.

Let's start with the exciting world of romantic dating. I want you to imagine that you're coming up with a profile for yourself for a dating app.

How does this sound for a profile? I'm so-and-so. I'm not good at keeping track of my finances and I need someone to help with that. I'm not good at matching my outfits and I need someone to tell me, "Don't leave the house wearing that!" I occasionally suffer from low self-esteem and need someone to help me regain self-confidence. I have family members that are high maintenance and need someone who will be patient with them. I can be cheap and need someone to convince me to splurge from time to time.

You probably wouldn't say all of that in your profile, instead you would likely talk about all the marvelous qualities you possess and the gifts of heart and soul that you will bring to the other person, and of course that makes sense.

However, in a loving, committed relationship, both people know that they are areivim ze bazeh, that they are interdependent. We know that we need each other. We know that we give and we get.

I wonder - is there a way for us to acknowledge early on, as we get to know each other, not just what we bring, but what we need, without scaring away the other person?

This isn't just true of romantic partnerships. It's true of all of our significant relationships. Parents and children dance a dance of interdependence throughout their shared lives.

Why not own interdependence as a part of life? It's how we are constituted. Lover to lover, parent to child, siblings, friends, we need each other. We give and we get. Sometimes the proportions change - we give more, we get more - but we are fundamentally interdependent."¹

Again, what I have quoted so far are the words and thoughts of Rabbi Stecker.

Now, I would like to ask you and myself the following question: If we, human beings, are fundamentally interdependent, if we need each other, as Rabbi Stecker suggests, why do we have such a big problem owning it. Why do we insist on independence as a supreme value? Why do we continue to lie to

¹ <https://www.tign.org/rabbis-blogs>

ourselves, to family and friends, to others on dating apps, job interviews, and college applications?

The answer is that our society not only sees independence as a sign of strength, but it sees interdependence as a sign of weakness. A self-made man or woman, a person who by the plain definition of the expression does not owe anything to anybody, is one of the most admired prototypes in American society.

Many wonderful people sitting here today would gladly give their children and grandchildren their time, their wisdom, and their money, but would feel dismayed at the mere thought of the reversed situation. "Rabbi, I don't want to bother my children" or "God help me if I lose my independence and I need my children's help," are replies I get from congregants when I suggest that maybe they should ask their children for help with a challenging situation.

Rabbi Stecker mentioned that the word עצמאות - atzma'ut, the modern Hebrew word for independence, doesn't appear in Biblical or Talmudic sources. The truth is that independence, as a synonym of self-reliance, has a very bad rap in the Torah. We read a few weeks ago: *"Beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God — who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage...and you say to yourselves, 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me'" (Deuteronomy 8:14,17).*

In other words, it seems that God wants us to recognize that we are interdependent. My wealth, health, education, work opportunities, and life opportunities are not the product of my own power, but the product of a combination of many blessings and people, including my parents, spouse, friends, teachers, co-workers, and all the people who helped open doors for me, and even the people who closed doors, thus allowing new doors to open. Indeed, God wants us to be interdependent. God wants us to feel a deep sense of gratitude towards everybody who made us into who we are, beginning with Him.

In preparation for this dvar Torah, I put together an exercise. I asked children and adults, alike, to bring to mind two acts of kindness – one done *for* them and one done *by* them. Then I asked which one was easier to bring to mind.

The overwhelming majority recalled a mitzvah they did or an act of kindness they performed, far more easily than one done for them. Recalling what others do for us, whether it be from our loved ones or total strangers, reminds us of situations where we are vulnerable, and creates a sentiment of debt.

While nobody likes to feel vulnerable and have a sentiment of debt, the truth is that we are all vulnerable, and that our debt, to our parents, loved ones, friends, teachers, and God Himself, is beyond repayment.

If we made it this far, whether we like it or not, it is because we received help. Lots of help.

“Self-made,” “independent” and “self-reliant” may look good on a job resume or college application. If you are a widower, it might help you get a date in Florida, but if you end up convincing yourself that you are a “self-made,” “independent,” and “self-reliant” human being, you will live a lonely life, without help, without gratitude, and devoid of God’s presence. I believe that by fostering an unrealistic sense of independence, not only will we prevent others from helping us, but also we will be prone to suffering unnecessarily, maybe not now, but in the future.

You probably know the story.²

One day a man said to God, “God, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like.” God showed the man two doors. Inside the first one, in the middle of the room, was a large round table with a large pot of stew. It smelled delicious and made the man’s mouth water, but the people sitting around the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths.

The man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. God said, “You have seen Hell.”

² Allegory of the long spoons. See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_long_spoons

Behind the second door, the room appeared exactly the same. There was the large round table with the large pot of wonderful stew that made the man's mouth water. The people had the same long-handled spoons, but they were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking.

The man said, "I don't understand."

God smiled. It is simple, he said, just look.

He saw the souls in Heaven sitting across from each other, not trying to feed themselves, but trying to feed the person sitting across from them.

The truth is that not only do we need each other in Heaven; we need each other here on earth, too.

I began with Rabbi Stecker's reflections. Let me end with his reflections, as well. Rabbi Stecker writes about Mitch Albom, the author of *Tuesdays with Morrie*; a story about Mitch's relationship with his professor Morrie Schwartz. *"Morrie suffered from ALS, a debilitating disease, and toward the end of his life Morrie needed help to perform the most basic functions. At one point Morrie says the following to Mitch: 'In the beginning of life, when we are infants, we need others to survive, right? And at the end of life, when you get like me, you need others to survive, right? But here's the secret: in between, we need others as well.'"*³

Indeed, we are all connected on a very deep level. If this is true, every single day of our lives, it becomes more evident now, as we are about to remember those who enriched our lives with love and compassion, beauty and kindness, thoughtfulness and understanding.

Let us take advantage of this sacred opportunity. Not only to foster a sense of gratitude towards our loved ones who no longer walk the way of the earth, but also to commit ourselves to live a life of interdependence, a life in which we cannot survive in self-reliance and self-sufficiency, but in each other's blessings.

³ <https://www.tign.org/rabbis-blogs>

And so we pray:

Master of the Universe: bless all of us with a year of interdependence and gratitude, with a year in which we are attentive to our many blessings and where these blessings are coming from. Help us find within ourselves the kindness and compassion to offer help and the humility to accept it.

Make us always mindful of your continued presence in our lives, and bless all of us and our loved ones with a good, sweet, and meaningful year. Amen.