

Asking for Help

At a conference a few years back, there was a man named Tom Wessels who wrote a fascinating book called “Reading the Forested Landscape.” He is a forester who often teaches at Keene State College in New Hampshire.

In his book and life’s work, Wessels taught this group of rabbis an important lesson about the natural world: our senses are keen to what we can see in front of us, but much less successful at understanding what is going on underground.

Most of us look at a grove of trees and see each tree as an individual, each pursuing its own growth patterns, each tree, at least to the visible eye on its own.

What happens beneath the surface is utopian:

Each tree helps the other.

Roots extend from one tree to another to another.

Each root system turns into a massive aid system where nutrients are shared from tree to tree, ensuring that when there are times when vital nutrients in the soil are needed each tree is able to have its share.

It is true: Trees, as living entities, need nurturing from their fellow trees. And trees do not ask or have feelings. It just happens.

For the rabbis listening to him this set off a lightbulb: if the natural world is so good at supporting itself in a cooperative way, in what ways can we, who serve a range of communities, do so for human beings?

The thing about nature is that trees don’t ask other trees if they have the help. It’s a mutual aid society that is based on survival in the environment.

Yet we humans often to have a much more difficult time asking for help. What the natural world does so elegantly restrains the human in a web of emotions that include shame, embarrassment, and fear of being uncovered as an individual or family that is unable to make it.

This web seems to be created by the sense that if we have to ask for help we are indicating to another person that we have failed. That our self-reliance isn't so reliant, that our need from the other human is real.

Perhaps it is because we live in a society, in the United States, where the idea of complete independence is a concept that we thoroughly ingrain into our beings.

Would that this would be the case.

The Jewish ideal is interdependence:

we need each other and we are here to care for one another.

In that caring, we realize our core values of what it means to be part of community where we are able to rely on one another.

Yet this interdependence, so central to Jewish life and so natural to the trees, often feels unnatural when we find ourselves seeking help for ourselves or our families.

In addition to our internalized idea of the American ideal, often lurking below the surface are two emotions: shame and embarrassment.

Neither is prized in Jewish life.

Shaming the other is explicitly condemned in Jewish tradition. The Talmud refers to shaming as the "spilling of blood." This idea refers to when a person loses all blood from the face, making her seem whiter. Similarly, when we embarrass another we can make a person blush, a physical response to something we have said or done.

In worship we concretize it these values.

Here are two examples.

On Yom Kippur, we never shame or embarrass any fellow congregants when we do our multiple confessionals of where we have done wrong in the past year. Each of us has, of course, done a variety of what is there in the alphabetical list of wrongs. Yet we do not recite our wrongs out loud as individuals because doing so will lead others to come up to us and ask, “So what did you do that you confessed this?”

The real purpose of Yom Kippur is that we offer up our prayer communally, to avoid shaming or isolating members of the community. We use the “we” of Hebrew as we recite the acrostic--ensuring that our communal repentance is the focus, not individual behaviors.

Another expression comes in a prayer we say daily.

The prayer right before the Sh'ma, which talks of God's love for us, we say “so that we may never be ashamed.” *v'lo nayvosh l'olam vaed.* Before we recite our belief statement, we reiterate the powerful idea of being a community, loved by God, who will imitate God by not shaming other human beings.

So how does one ask for help--and how does one receive and act upon such a request.

For those of us in a position to help, we must make the conditions right for a person in need to ask. We must keep in mind that the person in need may have gone through internal turmoil to even be able to ask. Whether or not we can favorably act on the request, it is important to listen and respond in a way that shows that the person was heard.

If you ever find yourself in a position to ask for assistance there are ways to do it.

First, do not let yourself drown in embarrassment or shame before asking. All of us never know if we will be in your shoes someday. Life changes, circumstances change.

Second, know with whom you are speaking. There are people throughout our lives that are able to help and others who may not be the best resources. Consider what your need is and then think about with whom you would discuss it.

Third, be prepared for honest questions from the person you are asking. Hopefully that person will be responding from a place of compassion.

Offering assistance such as this is known in our tradition as *tzedakkah*. It comes from the root word for acting justly, for people a person who acts justly. Know that in a world with so many injustices, we have an obligation when we are able to do so to help others when asked.

It may be small, it may be large, yet in the aggregate, our acts of both being able to ask for help and being able to give it contribute to *tikkun Olam*, the true perfecting of the world.