

Giving What They Need
Rabbi Jay M. Stein
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Toledot 5768

I have to be honest, I don't remember saying it. Apparently, at some point over the High Holidays I asked for feedback on the work we're doing. Though I write everything out, nothing is unscripted and this idea must have slipped through somewhere. I went over every sermon, every interlude and I cannot find the reference, but a couple of people have come to me subsequently to offer their advice, their counsel and they each prefaced their comment by saying, "Normally I wouldn't offer this feedback, but you asked for it." I don't believe either part of that sentence. I don't believe I asked for it and I certainly don't believe that the only reason they are offering it is because I asked for it.

However, I did receive a wonderful letter from one of the most elegant, respectful and insightful people in our congregation. They wrote on September 23, 2007

Dear Rabbi Stein,

CONGRATULATIONS ON A WONDERFUL SERMON!!

Your Kol Nidre sermon, in my opinion, was your best. It was uniquely you!! It was funny, (like Rabbi Peli, you used humor to make a point) it was profound, and you engaged the audience. Instead of just listening to a sermon, the congregation became involved.

If I heard you correctly, you also invited the congregants to give you advice. So, lucky you, I will join the many members who will tell you what to do – "for your own good, of course."

This is what every rabbi needs to learn – **THE NOTS.**

1. IT IS **NOT** THE RABBI'S JOB TO BE PERFECT.
(If he were, what would the congregation talk about?)

2. IT IS **NOT** THE RABBI'S JOB TO PLEASE EVERYBODY.

Of course if a congregant complains about the rabbi's performance, it is wise to remember that this information probably says more about the person's need to give advice and to be heard, so the polite thing to do is listen attentively, try not to take it personally, and say something nice like "Thank you for telling me. I'll think about it." Then quickly leave. After leaving it is suggested that the rabbi does not mutter naughty words under his breath nor should he evoke images like holding the congregant's head to the ground while shouting "that's what I think of your advice."

- Of course what he tells his wife is another matter.

So much for the advice.

This week when we meet Isaac, we are also introduced to his two sons, the son he loves, Ishmael, and the son Rebecca loved, Jacob. Yet, as the story unfolds, it is Isaac that helps Jacob. Sure, there's a bit of deception and deal making but the end of the story is exactly how everyone wants it. Let me tell you what I mean.

One day Esau is absolutely starving. So much so, that he begs for food from Jacob. Jacob is in desperate need of his father's blessing, maybe because he was lacking in real world skills or maybe because we are all in desperate need of our father's approval. Either way, Esau is clearly more independent and the most able to fend for himself, while Jacob needs the blessing. Esau knows this and that is why he is so willing to give the blessing. When it comes time for the blessing, Jacob preempts Esau's return, offering his father food before Esau gets back. Isaac, already on in years, has grown blind so, therefore, the deception is made easier. Isaac is unable to see what is going on which prompts the gemara to make the following comment in the name of Rabbi Yohanan, "*Asur l'adam l'histakel b'tzelem dimut adam rasha*" – it is forbidden for a person to gaze at the form of an evil person." Essentially, the Talmud teaches us to stay away from bad people. Commenting on the devious nature of the Rebecca-Jacob scheme, to steal the birthright blessing, the Talmud explains this blindness as a self-protective measure to keep Isaac clean of the action. He becomes blind so that he doesn't have to witness, and thereby become complicit, in the crime. So the Rabbis seize this opportunity to teach us to stay away from evil people and corrupt companions. However, Rabbi Yohanan has chosen his words carefully – his comment isn't so obvious. When Rabbi Yohanan says, "*Asur l'adam l'histakel b'tzelem dimut adam rasha*" – it is forbidden for a person to gaze at the form of an evil person." He is not saying, "Don't look at the evil person." he is not saying, "Jacob should have seen right through this scheme and distanced himself." No! Rabbi Yohanan was saying don't look for evil in people. Rabbi Yohanan brilliantly divorces the action from the person. Jacob may, and I stress may, have done something wrong but Isaac isn't looking for his son's mistake.

The truth is, no one is cheated in this story. Jacob buys the birthright blessing. In a scene with which we are all familiar, Esau, who is starving, sells the blessing to Jacob for a bowl of beans. Jacob buys it. Now, I know we could have a long discussion about whether or not Esau had the right to sell his blessing or not, but that is another sermon – for today it is clear that Esau sold it and Jacob bought it. The only thing left to do was to execute the transaction. That's where Rebecca gets involved by helping to develop the plan. The plan is hatched and now the only remaining piece of the puzzle is getting by Isaac. So, Jacob comes to his father with the right food, with the right feel, having dressed as his hairy brother and still, he is unable to pull it off. His father says, "*Hakol kol yaacov v'hayadayim yidei Esav*" – "It sounds like Jacob but it feels like Esau." Then, without any further inquiry, he blesses him. In that split second, Isaac makes a decision to remain blind to the deception. Now the entire family is complicit in the scheme. Isaac has chosen to ignore his instinct. Isaac has chosen to overlook the flaw so that he can bless his son – Jacob is the son that reminds him of the part of himself that he rejects. Jacob is not the favorite the son. Jacob is the son that Isaac wasn't all that proud of. Isaac, having allowed himself to be laid on the alter by his father at the age of 36, decides he will no longer permit others to determine his destiny and, indeed, he grows to be a strong independent, self-reliant person, who recoils from a son who lets the world happen to him. In one brief split second, Isaac

let's his son, the mama's boy, off the hook. He stops being so critical of Jacob and blesses him. Isaac has to close his eyes in order to feel his son.

As a father, I can't imagine what it would feel like to have a father that didn't love me. I can't imagine the feeling of having a brother who is obviously favored and I can't imagine living in a household that is clearly unbalanced. Yet, that is Jacob's life and, in one moment, the entire family conspires to correct the dysfunction. Maybe it's too little too late – but at least it's an attempt. At least they try. So, should we not do the same? It means they, most all, for just a minute, try and turn a blind eye. Maybe we ought to do the same. Maybe we ought to cut the people we love, be they friends or family, a little slack. Maybe we shouldn't be so critical.

I know whenever anyone asks me about a book I have read, I give a detailed analysis of the work, often deconstructing every detail. I do this because it makes me feel smart. I confuse destruction with analysis. We all do the same. We all say the words “For your own good, of course.” while we know it isn't, or maybe we don't realize it isn't. Look, we all make believe there are things that aren't wrong in our lives. We all make believe that our families are completely normal.

The narrative about Isaac and Jacob isn't so much about open signs of affection, it's about giving those we love, the people we care about, what they need. Sometimes that means to overlook their flaws, overlook their warts, overlook their mistakes, their foibles, their missteps. We can't always be critical under the guise of wanting to help – constructive criticism is sometimes very destructive.

Ed Koch, the former mayor of New York, used to say, “How am I doing?” I'm not sure what motivated him to ask that question but we could pose any number of psychological rationales. Either he was so confident that any criticism foisted on him would not hurt because he had a very strong desire to get better at what he was doing; or he was in desperate need for the stroking that often precipitates public office. Maybe he was good at taking it, or maybe it was the people who were giving it were good at giving it. Maybe they really wanted him to get better at being mayor. Maybe he was better able to differentiate between the people who wanted to raise him up, from the people who wanted to bring him down.

Different children need different forms of encouragement. Different people in our lives need different types of feedback, but everyone needs a break once in awhile. I realize that a child of nine is different from a child of seventeen. I recognize that we are responsible for those around us who are near-and-dear to us. I understand the protective impulse to care for those people whom we care about, but we must also ask ourselves if the advice, the counsel, the criticism, is necessary or even helpful. We all feel responsible for each other and we should. We must also learn when to turn a blind eye, permitting those people, helping those people, find their own way.

My friend who sent me the letter included a snoopy cartoon. In the first frame Lucy is yelling at Snoopy “What are you following me around for?” In the second frame “Am I supposed to be honored by your presence?” In the third frame, “Go on! Get Out of here! What makes you think everyone wants you around all of the time?” In the fourth frame Snoopy, standing alone, thinks to himself, “She's right ...I must make an awful nuisance of myself sometimes...” In the fifth

frame it is clearly another day, Lucy has changed from a red dress to a purple one and upon seeing Snoopy calls out “Snoopy! Oh my God I am so GLAD to see you! Just knowing you’re around makes me feel good.” This leaves Snoopy with a quizzical look and all the time I’m reading the cartoon I’m thinking, why didn’t Lucy just not say anything – clearly in a fowl mood she takes out her anger on poor little Snoopy – lucky it is just a cartoon and lucky for Lucy Snoopy is an ever-faithful dog. We don’t have the same luxury in real life or with real people.