

Nobody calls me “Steve” anymore. In fact, I often feel like my first name is “Rabbi.”

In my experience, it's difficult for people to separate the professional me, “Rabbi Conn”, from the personal me, “Steve”. For years, I have asked people to call me “Rabbi” when I am functioning in my professional role and “Steve” in social settings. Some people have real problems making this distinction. Even when we are sitting around in someone's backyard, just shooting the breeze, there are people I am personally very close to who just can't bring themselves to calling me by my first name.

It can be challenging to have a personal life when your friends won't call you by your first name. But it is impossible to have a personal life when you yourself don't recognize the distinction.

As a rabbi, it is easy to get caught up in the endless demands of a congregation, and the adrenaline rush of being needed all the time. One of the most difficult challenges I have faced in my career was acknowledging that I needed to step out of the role of rabbi not just to take care of my family, but also to take care of my own needs. For much of my rabbinate, I did a terrible job at self-care. I was always there for others, but never there for myself. What I learned is something that many of you already know, we neglect ourselves at our own risk. Years of ignoring our own needs, takes its toll on us, mentally and physically. I learned this lesson the hard way, over the past ten years or so. And although I am much better at taking care of myself, I still struggle to find the balance between being there for others and doing what I need to do for me; between a life of service and a personal life.

I know that I am not alone in searching for this balance. If you want to find other people who are prone to give too much of themselves, the synagogue is a great place to look. If you want to find people who tend to be a little too self-involved, the synagogue's not a bad place to look either. Few of us have learned the secret to finding the proper balance in life. Finding this balance is a struggle we engage in every day—or fail to engage in at our own peril.

The Rosh HaShannah Torah readings illustrate dramatically just how difficult it can be to balance our desire to help others with our need to care for ourselves. The choices we need to make are not always easy or clear cut. Even Abraham, the champion of justice and the paragon of faith, trips up trying to balance his own needs with the need to make sacrifices on behalf of the nascent Jewish people.

In today's Torah portion, Abraham's wife Sarah, finally gives birth to Isaac, the son God has long promised them. Abraham tries to raise Isaac alongside his other son, Ishmael, whose mother is Sarah's servant Hagar. But Ishmael makes trouble for Isaac; and Sarah demands that Ishmael and Hagar leave the household. But Abraham resists because of his love for Ishmael. At this point, God steps in, and commands Abraham to send Ishmael away; so that Isaac will be able to carry on the covenant with God. This time, God needs Abraham to place the needs of the future Jewish people ahead of his love for Ishmael.

Interestingly, in tomorrow's Torah reading, God and Abraham switch roles. At the beginning of the reading, God seems to be asking Abraham to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice on a distant mountain. Abraham seems all too enthusiastic to prove his mettle by giving up his beloved son for God and covenant. But when the time for the sacrifice comes, God holds Abraham back. Abraham, though, has a hard time hearing the message. Abraham is so intent proving how much he is willing to sacrifice his beloved son that the angel has to call Abraham twice before he puts down the sacrificial knife. Abraham has already shown God he can be selfless; now he needs to show he can take care of himself and his family as well.

These two stories about Abraham illustrate the dilemma so many of us face; a dilemma that the great teacher Hillel expressed as follows:

אני מה, לעצמי וכשעני. מי לי, אין אני לי אם

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am only for myself, what am I?

None of us can be self-effacing all the time. We cannot give up our identity and person-hood and devote our lives solely to serving others. Judaism does not demand this kind of self-sacrifice; or even condone it. We need to be for ourselves as well. We too, have to constantly weigh our needs and the needs of others. We too, have to ask Hillel's questions, every day

אני מיה, לעצמי רק שאני. מי לי, אין אני לי אם

If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

But if I am only for myself, what am I?

And the answer to questions makes all the difference in our lives; the difference between happiness and misery, between fulfillment and frustration, between a life full of meaning and a life devoid of meaning.

Each of us needs to be for ourselves, but not only for ourselves. Each of us needs to take care of ourselves, advocate for ourselves, make sure our healthy needs are met—without becoming self-indulgent, self-involved or just plain selfish. To achieve the appropriate balance, some of us need to become more self-centered, some of us less self-centered. To help us understand what we need, let's turn to one of the oldest personality tests around; once again from Pirkei Avot. The Mishnah teaches us that there are four kinds of people. There are the people who say “what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine—these people are scoundrels. Then there are the people who say “what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours—these are your average people. There are also people who say “what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours—these people are considered to be pious. And finally, there are those who say “what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine—these people are just clueless.

It seems to me that the key to this ancient personality test is to stay away from the extremes. We never want to be the person who operates according to the principle “what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine”. When we think this way, we are engaging in self-involved, self-indulgent, just plain selfish behavior. We all have people in our lives who truly believe that “what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine”. These people are “takers.” They base all their relationships on what they can “get” from the other person. These relationships last exactly as long as the “taker” can continue to get what they need from the giver. We need to stay as far away from the takers in our life as we can; even if they are members of our own family. This advice seems obvious—yet many of us continue to give to the takers in our lives because they wear us down with their insistent neediness, and because giving meets some deep-seated emotional need. We will get to the roots of this unhealthy behavior a little later.

Most of us here today are not “takers”—yet we can easily get caught up in this kind of behavior from time to time. The person who steals the prime parking spot for another driver who has been patiently waiting for it, the person who cuts off other drivers in traffic to get ahead, the person who lets the dog poop on somebody else's lawn and doesn't scoop it up, the person who pads the bill when someone else is paying for dinner, or the person who is always leaving their kid with you, but never invites your kid over to their house. These are all examples of times when we let ourselves think, even for a minute, “what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine”. I am sure we could think of lots of other examples. We see this kind of behavior around us all the time. And when we are on the receiving end of such behavior, we find it annoying, infuriating and frustrating.

Of course, it is harder to see when we ourselves are behaving in this overly selfish way. Which is why the rabbis suggest that our default approach to others should be “what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours.” We are appropriately self-centered when we assert our own needs, but do so with the understanding that our needs are no more or less important than anyone else's. For example, being in a hurry doesn't give us the right to cut the line—everyone is in a hurry. At the same time, we are not obligated to let someone else go in front of us just because they don't have the patience to wait like everyone else. In the same way, we need to give ourselves time to exercise, to enjoy time with friends, or to pursue our hobbies, interests and causes. Having time for ourselves is part of a healthy life and a healthy marriage. But we can't just leave our spouses with all the errands, the household chores and the responsibility of watching the kids or grandkids. We need to recognize that our spouses have needs too. These needs

are not more important than ours, but they are equally important---and a healthy relationship depends on working together so that everyone's needs are met. Most of the time, remembering that "what is mine is mine and what is yours is yours" will help us to be appropriately self-centered.

As important as it is to care for ourselves, being appropriately self-centered is not enough. That is why the Mishnah teaches us that a person who says, "what is mine is yours and what is yours is yours" is pious. Giving of ourselves is not just for rabbis, it's something we all should aspire to. In Jewish tradition, God has put us on this earth not just to enjoy the life, but also for *Tikkun Olam*, to repair the world. We are charged with trying to leave the world a better place than we found it; a charge that gives our lives meaning beyond the boundaries of our daily existence. Making the world a better place, helping others, also makes us feel good; especially when we help in an appropriate way. The sense of well-being we derive from really making a difference--in the world, in the community, even in the life of a single person--can add a profound sense of meaning and fulfillment to our lives.

So how can we give of ourselves to others in a healthy and appropriate way; a way that allows us to rise to the level of piety, at least sometimes? By always remembering that "What is mine is yours, and what is yours is yours." Offering help to someone does not make their problem your problem. In fact, it is a good general rule that if we are more invested in helping someone than they are invested in helping themselves, our efforts will fail miserably. We may even end up doing more harm than good. Some of us need to learn the difference between helping the people we care about in our lives and trying to "fix" them.

In the same way, we need to recognize that what works for me may not work for you. We are all good at sharing the success stories in our lives: how we lost those twenty pounds, the great doctor we went to who found the treatment that worked, the resources we used to help care for aging parents. But the people we want to help are not always looking for a quick solution. And even if they are, what we have to offer may not be right for them. If we really want to help others appropriately, we cannot forget that "what is yours is yours." Every situation is unique and, often, our job is not to solve the problem but to be a resource. Effective helping requires good, compassionate listening. It requires taking the other person's thoughts and feelings seriously. It requires being able to give advice, but not require that it is taken as a condition of further help. Most of all, it requires finding a way to help the other person by doing just enough, but no more. Just as we are most effective in helping another person when we remember that the problem is not ours but "yours"; so too, we are most effective when the solution does not come from us, but from the person we are trying to help.

Sometimes, maybe without even realizing it, helping others can become an avenue for getting our own needs met in an unhealthy way. Helping becomes not an act of piety, but a transaction in which we make "what is mine yours and what is yours mine." Some of us, for example, give of ourselves not just for the fulfillment that comes from giving, but in order to stoke our self-esteem. We may not value ourselves very highly; so we seek validation from others. We need to have people need us, thank us, depend on us, in order to feel worthwhile. As a result, we may find ourselves giving more than is healthy or appropriate in order to feel valuable. Worse still, our own lack of self-esteem creates a void that no amount of giving can ever fill. After a while, we just end up feeling worn out and unappreciated from all the giving.

There are others among us who see giving as a way of getting not just our emotional, but also our physical needs met. Perhaps without even realizing it, we help others so that they will feel indebted to help us. Our relationship becomes based on a transaction; "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours". Rather than relating to each other as humans, in this kind of a relationship, we use each other to get our needs met. And when the relationship is no longer useful, we cast it off. In its most extreme form, we call these relationships co-dependent. Long before psychologists coined this phrase, the rabbis recognized that when we let all of our boundaries fall away, to the point where "what is mine is yours and what is yours is mine"--we are indeed engaging in unhealthy behavior that is clueless about how we should relate to other people.

When we do need help getting our needs met, we should never feel like we are taking on a debt that has to be paid off. Nor should we feel like there is something wrong with us because we cannot take care of ourselves. Yes, some of us ask for help too readily. We really should not be asking for help until we have done as much as we can to care for ourselves. But for many of us, the problem is that we wait too long, or stubbornly refuse, to ask for help. Asking for help is not necessarily a sign of weakness. Asking for help in the right way can be a sign of strength, a

way of being for ourselves. There is a reason why Hillel phrased his question, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” We are not meant to be fully self-sufficient. Rather, we are meant to do as much as we can for ourselves, and then ask for help. As long as we are the person most invested in our own well-being, asking for help can make it possible to get our needs met in a healthy and responsible way.

If you are anything like me, you have probably fantasized about a time in your life when everything will be peaceful; when nobody will need us and we won't need anyone. It's a nice thought, but it's never going to happen. If we look at the world through Jewish eyes, there is always someone out there who will need us, even if it's not a child or a parent or a friend or a client. The world is always in need of *Tikkun Olam*, of repair. The capacity to help is a fundamental part of what makes us human, and a fundamental way that we find meaning and fulfillment in our lives. Indeed, “if I am only for myself what am I?” But we can't begin to repair the world if we ourselves are broken. It is also a mitzvah to attend to our own needs—even if we need help from others to do so. “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” We must constantly ask ourselves both halves of Hillel's question. Because, as Hillel himself recognized, the most pressing challenge in our lives is to find that balance between our needs and the needs of others. Which is why he followed these two questions with a third “if not now when?”. May this be the year that each of us finds the proper balance in our lives, the year that we can feel good about being there for others, but also about being there for ourselves.