



# Staying in the **LINES** Respecting boundaries, while expanding your perspective

BY LEONARD CARR



**WE ARE TOLD BY OUR SAGES THAT THE PEOPLE OF** great Torah learning build the world by increasing peace in the world. The learning of Torah teaches us about our rights and responsibilities in relationship to Hashem, to other people, and to the world. Appreciating and respecting boundaries, and honouring the ecology of life, is a fundamentally ethical and moral and, therefore, essentially spiritual approach. The deeper your appreciation of the issues being described, the higher your level of spirituality.

Infants exist only for themselves. They do not perceive a world beyond their own immediate impulses, sensations, needs, and feelings. Intellectual growth is about expanding your perspective of reality beyond the self. Emotional growth is the development of self-awareness and, through that, empathy for others. Spiritual growth entails learning to subjugate your

will to the will of Hashem. It leads to freeing yourself from enslavement to your material, egoistic perspective to become a true servant of Hashem and, through that, derive ultimate spiritual benefit. We progress on this journey from dependence, to independence, to inter-dependence. The transition is from being self-involved in your own interests and perspective to perceiving life as a big ecology of many interdependencies.

The more mature and cultivated the person, the more understanding he will have that one's personal interests are best served by balancing those personal inter-

ests and wishes with those of the greater good. The more you take care of the ecology, the more you protect and promote your own interests and well-being. The more you contribute and improve the world that you are part of, the more you ultimately benefit. The opposite is equally true.

Extreme forms of self-serving behaviour, like dishonesty and theft, seem on the surface to be acts of self-preservation. And yet they are completely self-destructive because they destroy your world. An ecologically attuned life is balancing your own best interests with the best interests of the wider ecology, like your partnership, family, community, country, or the whole world's needs with your own.

An ecological approach is appreciating interdependence and diversity. For example, the recognising of how other people's ideas, through challenging yours, help you to refine or confirm their validity and enhance the richness of your own. Appreciating how your inevitably limited perspective can be deepened by integrating it with other perspectives. This is the key to wisdom and insight.

This perspective is also the basis for true empathy. Empathy is an imaginative exercise. To be truly empathic requires being open and moved by what someone else is experiencing, to the point of almost being in his shoes, while retaining a clear sense

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of yourself as a separate individual. It is being evoked by the feelings of the other in a way that empowers you to most adequately and appropriately respond. It attunes you to what you would need if you were that person in that situation. A more nuanced way of understanding loving your neighbour as yourself is relating to his needs, based on that person's circumstances and vulnerabilities. This means trying to imagine his world and the peculiarities of his experience from, for example, the vantage point of his age, gender, culture, disability, and circumstances.

The blessing that we recite to express appreciation for our bodily health encompasses the acknowledgement that if what needs to be open is blocked or what needs to be sealed is ruptured then we could not survive. It is obvious how this applies on a purely bodily level. It applies equally on a spiritual, psychological, and relational plane as well. In spiritual life, we speak of the boundaries between the holy and the profane, the weekday and the Shabbos, between good and evil, light and darkness, reality and fiction.

The boundaries of your psychological world are, for example, the distinctions between thoughts and feelings, imagination and reality. If you confuse those, you become crazy. Also in the psychological sphere, we could speak of what belongs to you and what to others. For example, which thoughts and beliefs are truly your own and which have you swallowed and made part of yourself without truly digesting and integrating them. Or do you blame yourself for what, in fact, someone else did to you? Alternatively, do you accuse someone else of intentions that you do not wish to own up to? Maybe it's difficult to discern what belongs to you and what to the other – for example, to make a distinction between true empathy and emotional contagion. In the first, you tune into the other person's world and feel for him in a way that moves you to respond to what he really needs. In the latter, you become, as it were, infected with the other person's emotions and start to claim the support you are supposed to be offering him.

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In relationships, boundaries are defined by where the needs, feelings, entitlements, and aspirations of the other begin and where yours end. Acting appropriately means, for example, when to take on sole responsibility and when to ask for help; when to share, what to share, and what to withhold or keep private. A withdrawn or withholding person does not meet at the boundary. A self-absorbed, controlling, or overbearing person overreaches the boundary and becomes intrusive.

A nuanced appreciation of boundaries is the basis of healthy, satisfying relationships because it allows you to perfectly co-ordinate and balance give-and-take. Everything from good conversation, intimacy, and dancing, to good business dealings depends on give-and-take. This is the cornerstone of the relationship of host and guest. Knowing when and how to be both a good host and a perfect guest is the secret of great relationships.

Every interaction is a negotiation, both about the issue at hand, and at the same time about the rules and roles of the relationship. A healthy relationship is one in which both participants feel equally at home. To achieve this means being mindful of boundaries in all the ways described in this article. It means pausing with deep reverence and respect at the threshold of the other's person world, to allow the other to show you who he is and what he needs to feel comfortable to allow you in. This requires a quality that is probably the best predictor of relationship success, in every sphere of life, namely the willingness and ability to receive and respond to feedback. Feedback may be communicated directly to you by others. It is also derived from being attuned to and reading how others respond to you.

The ability to understand and respond appropriately to boundaries depends, first and foremost, on having self-awareness. Self-awareness is the ability to si-

multaneously pay attention to what other people or circumstances are evoking in you, and relate that to how your behaviour contributes to that reality. The recognition of this interplay allows you to make informed decisions about how to be most appropriate and constructive in the situation. This knowledge comes from learning Torah, through learning how to become the people that Hashem wants us to be, and thereby how to transcend our limited self-serving perspective.

No matter how wonderful someone is in other ways, if he is too arrogant, defended, or rigid to accept feedback, then when something in the interaction goes awry, you will find yourself getting hurt. You will be left with only two choices, either agreeing to live exclusively on his terms or walking away. In a relationship, even if someone is lacking in certain qualities that you would prefer, if he is open and willing to hear your point of view then he can adapt to your needs and preferences. People with this quality can grow and deepen their relationships.

Intrinsic to this quality is the alacrity and aptitude to reflect and take ownership of your behaviour, as well as the effects that your behaviour has on others. We sometimes upset or offend others despite our good intentions. What truly counts, however, is the real effect of your words and actions, regardless of your motives or intentions. It is never pleasant to be in the wrong or to be found wanting in some way. It is embarrassing at best, at worst humiliating. It takes courage to humbly accept the discomfort of missing the mark. It takes compassion to realise that you, like the rest of us, are, at times, a clumsy or messy human being. You will therefore inevitably make mistakes. If you can humbly and even humorously acknowledge that about yourself, then you can also create a kind, compassionate place in your world for yourself and others. ■