

There's nothing quite like talking with an old friend. My oldest and dearest friend is a fellow I have known since we were six or seven years old. My family was in the Philadelphia area this week, visiting my parents and my brother's family. I got to see my old buddy as well, and we spend quite a while standing outside and talking one evening.

My buddy's name is Zar—at least, that's what our family calls him. It's actually the first syllable of his Polish last name. Zar has been through some tough times over the past few years. His marriage ended in divorce, the business he is in has been decimated by the economy, and Zar moved back into the house across the street from the one I grew up in. One of his sisters lives there with their mother. Zar's father died while I was in rabbinical school, and unfortunately, his mother is not doing well at all, physically and mentally.

Zar does his best to keep his mom oriented and on a normal schedule. That sometimes angers her, like when she calls from her bedroom for someone to bring her ice cream at 3:00 am. So it caught Zar by surprise when they were watching the news one night and heard a story about a bank being robbed and the perpetrator's mother turning him in, when his mother turned to him and said, "You know, I would never do that to you. I wouldn't turn you in if you robbed a bank."

We began to ruminate about various moral scenarios. I mentioned David Kaczynski, a man I will always regard as a moral hero because when he realized his brother was probably the infamous Unabomber, he turned him in. We agreed that when it came to something so egregious, there would be no choice but to do the same thing. But what about a bank robbery in which no one was physically harmed? If you were only thing that stood between your loved one and prison, would you, as the saying goes, drop

a dime on your loved one? What about for stealing a pack of gum from a convenience store? Morally, stealing is stealing. But I completely reject the notion that was put to me by a minister one day, that sin is sin. When I said to him that he believes in a God that makes no distinction between murder and jaywalking, he simply repeated, “Sin is sin. God cannot wink at sin.” If you were told that in the future, one of your loved ones was destined to steal and get away with it, and it was for you to choose between it being a bank robbery in which no one was injured and the theft of a pack of chewing gum, I would think we would all answer without hesitation. In case I’m wrong about that, for the record, I would choose the chewing gum.

My friends, this is more than hypothetical conversation. It’s a real life question that we all face from time to time: where are our moral and ethical boundaries? If a clerk at Target gives you an extra dollar back in change, you would point out the mistake and return the dollar, correct? If your

answer is no, then I'm really glad you're here tonight and you need to come more often. If the clerk gave you an extra penny back in change, I think most of us would do the same thing, point out the error and give back the penny.

But what if you discovered the error when you were already in your car, ready to leave? Would you go back inside and return the dollar? Would you go back inside and return the penny. I am going to be brutally honest and self-revealing: I would go back in the store and return the penny, but not for the right reason. I would do it because during my years in retail management, I saw countless clerks upset because their tills were a few cents off when they were reconciled at the end of the day. I would do the right thing—but if not for that previous experience, I can't know that I would. And if I had already driven home and discovered an extra penny, I can't assure you I would drive back to the store.

So tonight I ask you to think about your own moral and ethical boundaries. I also ask you to think about the moral and ethical boundaries you expect others to observe. Finally, I ask you to compare and contrast the two sets of boundaries.

Of whom do you expect more, yourself or others? It's fine if both sets of boundaries are the same. It's admirable if you expect more of yourself than you do of others. If you expect more of others than you of yourself, then again I am really glad you are here tonight and yes, you *really* need to come more often.

Let's end by bringing in one final variable. Yes, we have expectations of ourselves and expectations of others, but one of the most important things we learn from Torah is that God has expectations of us. As we will soon be reading in Deuteronomy, those expectations are not

beyond our grasp. God did not create us to be perfect, nor does God expect us to be so. Jewish sacred texts are full of simple statements like *Cherish your colleague's honor as if it were your own;*¹ or *When one pleases his fellow creatures, God is pleased, but when one does not please his fellow creatures, God is not pleased.*² One of my personal favorites is that if you shame someone in public, you lose your share in the World to Come.³ None of these are too hard for us to achieve, but all have the power to make a palpable difference in the world.

In conclusion, my friends, in these days before Tisha B'Av when we are taught that the reason the Temple was destroyed was because of senseless hatred amongst the Jewish people, we would do well to check our moral boundaries and expectation of ourselves and of others, and measure them against the beautiful yardstick we read

¹ Pirkei Avot 2:15

² Ibid 3:13

³ Ibid 3:15

in the haftarah just three short weeks ago, when the prophet Micah explained exactly what God's expectations of us are: *Only to do justice, love goodness, and walk humbly with our God.*⁴

⁴ Micah 6:8