

Nice to meet you!

By: Leah R. Adams, PsyD

“Nice to meet you.” These four words are so simple yet can encapsulate so much. I recently spent some time at Kutsher’s Country Club where this was, of course, a common refrain amongst guests. I lead an interactive discussion where we took this simple phrase and used it as a springboard to greater heights. We began with a basic analysis of the meaning of the words. “Nice” implies that we will talk about something pleasant and positive; “To” is a directional term implying that, hopefully, this discussion will push us in a certain direction in our personal growth. “Meet” alludes to the idea that this discussion includes relationships with others and, “You”, we will focus on the individual. Our sources ranged from Biblical to modern day psychology books and from the deep and introspective to the comical.

Let us start with the last word of our phrase first, “you”. Think about something that you are proud of which makes you feel good. This can be an action involving one or more people or even an ideal that you are actively working towards achieving. At the hotel one guest responded that she is proud that she helps a blind friend with daily activities. Your example can be anything. Keep that idea in your mind, as we will revisit it later.

In Parshas Eikev (8:17) the Posuk states that we should shy away from the mentality of “Kochi ViOtzem Yadi Asa Li Es Hachayil Hazeh” (the power and strength of my hand brought me this wealth). This attitude is one of taking sole credit for my accomplishments. It is one of aggrandizing myself and is viewed as negative in the Torah. Now, wait, just a moment ago we focused on what makes us proud, we focused on our accomplishments, as an exercise in self-esteem. Yet, here it seems that the Torah is telling us not to do this!

The ban on “Kochi ViOtzem Yadi” type thinking is meant as a reminder to us that all that we have and do comes from Hashem. He is greater than us and empowers us to do this. Perhaps, in addition to this rule reminding us that Hashem helps us, we should use it to remind us that others help us achieve as well. If that is the case, then maybe I am not so great after all. Perhaps I am even not much of anything because all that I do is actually attributable to others.

In Pirkei Avos (2:13) Rabbi Shimon teaches us “Al Tihi Rasha Bifnei Atzmecha”, do not consider yourself a Rasha (which many of us would internalize as worthless in addition to bad). Earlier in the same Mishna we are taught not to daven by rote. In a shiur I attended given by Rabbi Chaim Zev Levitan, Morah Diasrah of Congregation Bais Yosef Meir in Olympia, the Rav analyzed how the first and second part of the Mishna work together. The Rav explained that we must feel important enough to believe that Hashem actually listens to our prayers and so, this ritual should not be done by rote. In order to believe that Hashem is listening, I cannot view myself as a Rasha. Once I accept this then I feel more important. Once I feel important enough to speak to Hashem the act itself reinforces this belief and I could not possibly fall into the emotional trap of considering myself a Rasha. It is a self-reinforcing cycle. So, what is the difference between the “kochi” attitude and not believing myself to be “rasha”? As with many other concepts in Judaism, an understanding of this requires maintaining a delicate balance.

This is achieved when I recognize that there is a difference between being proud, and taking SOLE credit for my actions.

In his book “From Pulpit to Couch” Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski relays an interesting story. Before he himself had gained a name in the field, he was studying the text of a particular expert. When relatives called about another relative who was in emotional distress, he referred them to this specialist. Several days later he received a call from none other than this famous expert! In shock he asked the specialist why he would consult a newcomer to the field. The specialist explained that while it is true that he IS the expert in the technique, Dr. Twerski was a greater expert in his knowledge of the patient. A colleague of Dr. Twerski’s explained to him that only the one who “wrote the book” (for our purposes, the one who felt that he knew his stuff) could be confident enough to ask another for help and use this help wisely. In other words, his admitting that he could use help, or that he benefited from help, did not diminish his greatness at all. On the contrary, it actually enhanced it.

In the Haftorah of Parshas Eikev, (Yeshayahu 49: 17), the Navi Yeshayahu tells the people that “Miharsayich Umacharivayich Mimech Yetze’u”, meaning, those that seek to harm you, presumably your enemy, will be removed from you. When I was in High school at the Hebrew Academy of Cleveland (sometime between the dawn of man and yesterday) I recall learning that the Metzudas Dovid explains the Pasuk differently. (I apologize as my memory slips me as to which teacher taught me this and by right I should give her credit according to the precepts that we set forth here in this article.) Rather than translating “Mimech Yetze’u” as ‘being removed from you’, the words can be translated as ‘from you’. According to this explanation the Pasuk would teach us that those that seek to harm us actually come from us. The existence of the self-hating Jew or Sinas Chinam between Jews is testament to this idea. I will go out on a limb to posit that this concept holds true for the individual as well. Often times your own worst enemy is. . . yourself! I recognize that this may be stretching the idea and will follow my own advice in hoping that there are Rabbinic sources that would back up this leap. After all, if others much greater than me have discussed this idea before me then this empowers me.

Let us return to the first question that we raised, what are you proud of? Let us now take it one step further and ask yourself, whom else can I credit with my accomplishment? When I asked the audience at Kutsher’s for examples of this second step, the respondent who answered earlier that she helps a blind friend immediately credited her mother because she “taught me to be kind”. Another group member said that she is proud that she delivers meals and encouragement to the sick. In addition to herself, she credits her friends that do it with her. As we explored both cases we all came to the conclusion that having shared the credit did not diminish the individual’s pride in any way. In fact, it actually magnified it with the idea of being associated with such special people.

The next step in this process of understanding our self-worth and being proud of ourselves is extending it to affect how we deal with others. In shul this past Shabbos there was a woman with mobility issues who had great difficulty in getting out of her chair. I noticed that just before the Amidah, just before she *would* have started to struggle with getting up, another woman in shul walked up to her and offered her arm as a support to help her get up. Besides for the beauty of watching as one person anticipated the needs of another (the topic for another great discussion) it was actually a great

example of self-esteem coming to the rescue. The “helper” has to have had combined all that we have just discussed. She has to have recognized that although she is not necessarily an expert in proper positioning (I asked, she is not a physical therapist), which might have made her feel unable to help in this situation, she realized that she is endowed by Hashem with enough strength to help someone else. She is not limited by this idea of lack of expertise or recognition that her strength comes from Hashem, but is actually empowered and motivated by these ideas to do something. The woman who accepted the help so graciously has to have accepted these premises as well. In order to accept help with pride one realizes that accepting the help does not prove weakness but actually character strength. One recognizes the fact that each person’s physical capabilities come from Hashem and are not a reflection of the individual. When viewed in this light it is a win-win situation.

One caveat to the concept of self-esteem as it relates to our relationship with others is as follows: we need to make sure that we are communicating our needs as well as our desire to help in clear ways. As a classic example of when this can go wrong I introduce you to Amelia Bedelia, a fictional character in children's literature who interprets everything in life in its most literal sense. When asked to dust the furniture, she takes out the dusting powder and sprinkles it all over the furniture. When asked to dress the chicken she takes out little clothes and ribbons and, you guessed it, literally dresses the chicken. In one of these hysterical tales of misguided good intentions the lady of the house finally recognizes that she needs to rephrase her requests in a manner that even Amelia Bedelia could not possibly misinterpret. I am pretty sure that even Amelia Bedelia could not misinterpret our title and so I say to you, through the pages of this magazine, “Nice to meet you”!

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