



## THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

### Boundaries, Limits, and the Sacred Work of Restoring Trust

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Teaching, reading and writing for a post-patriarchal world

In preparation for writing this piece, I decided to read some articles about setting boundaries.<sup>1</sup> I know I am very far from the mainstream in my thinking about the topic, and I didn't quite know just how far. In line after line in all of what I read, I see traces of several unstated assumptions that, to me, point to much that I find troubling in the modern, capitalist version of patriarchal societies.

- **The primary unit is the individual.** All of what I read rests on this premise: boundaries are for individual self-care, which is elemental and a pre-condition for relationships.
- **Care for each other is elusive.** We get others to do what is important to us by getting them to understand the consequences of not respecting our boundaries; not because they care about us.
- **Dialogue is to be avoided.** All the examples I found about communication appear to minimize communication and leave out relational elements that could bring people together to find solutions that work for all.

Overall, the feeling tone that I have after reading these articles is one of grief for the loss of interdependence, of the understanding that we are one, that we are part of each other, that we are part of life, and that flow is possible.

However much the articles and dictionary definitions I have looked at insist otherwise, I still get the deep message that the function of boundaries is to keep others out and to tell others what to do or not do to protect our own safety.

#### **Are Limits Different from Boundaries?**

Years ago, seeing how much I consistently cringe every time someone brought up the topic of boundaries or its cousin, 'children need limits', I engaged in a series of conversations with my late sister Inbal. This article, almost 20 years later, is still the fruit of those conversations.

I didn't, at the time, have this wrenching, simple clarity about the assumptions I now see behind the framework of seeing boundaries as essential. Nor did we articulate to each other what our different assumptions would be. I am filling in the gaps, seeing what would be the assumptions that would make boundaries unnecessary even as we learn to honour our limits – a distinction I come back to soon.

- **The primary unit is the whole.** In a thriving relationship, family, community or organization, the well-being of each

individual is inextricable from the well-being of the whole.

- **We are a mothering species. We care.** Within an interdependent context of relationship, our primary orientation is to each other's needs – so long as it's not beyond our capacity to do so.
- **Dialogue is key to well-being.** We are relational beings. We learn how to care better for each other and the whole through communicating about needs, impacts and resources. Any time there isn't a specific agreement in place that supports us in knowing what to do, and if we don't have intuitive clarity with each other, we work it out through dialogue.

At the time, we were trying to understand what may be the nugget of life wisdom, the true need, behind the idea that children need limits. Her son was young, maybe three, and they lived a life with no rules. It wasn't a permissive household, either. It was dialogical, relational and collaborative. They made decisions together. Even before words were available to the young one, he was part of decision making. His needs, as *he* felt them, not as *they* assumed them, were in the mix. He didn't *need* any limits.

Teasing it apart, looking at one instance after another, mixed with long passages I was reading out loud from Jessica Benjamin's essays, we finally landed on one of the insights that became central to her approach to parenting, launched in 2002 in her article '[Compassionate connection: nonviolent communication with children](#)' that appeared in *Mothering* magazine.

We understood the deeper need behind 'children need limits' and we both resonated with it fully. Sustaining the web of human life depends on all of us being able to orient interdependently. This means some things that are easy and obvious, and others that may be a stretch within the ethos of self-sufficiency and the priority of individual autonomy that characterize our modern, capitalist societies.

Living interdependently includes knowing what we need, and being able to articulate it and make requests. It also means recognizing that others aren't instruments for our needs, nor obstacles to

our needs; that they are living beings with their own needs, and they might not have the capacity or willingness to do what we want. Even beyond that, they may have requests of their own that are important to them, and that the totality of needs and available resources might sometimes mean that we end up stretching to do something that isn't our immediate preference, because it serves the whole, of which we are a part, better.

Recognizing others' needs and the limits of their capacity, sometimes even when they would want to give us what we want, is a steep and complex pathway. This, to us, was the nugget we were looking for. This was enough for a distinction that Inbal then made between arbitrary limits and natural limits. Natural limits arise from the needs of others, not from some rule. Instead of 'It's your bedtime', it might look like: 'I'm tired after playing with you all this time. Would you go to your room so I can rest and do some reading?' What's the difference? The first one, the bedtime reference, is an arbitrary rule. It doesn't arise from anyone's *felt* needs, and has no relational content to it. The second one is grounded in the adult's needs, and is also caring for the child's choice. It also leaves open the possibility that the child would say 'No', would articulate their own needs and reasons for the 'no', and that, together, the adult and the child will find a pathway that works for both of them. That was life in my sister's household.

I want to say it again, as I am about to return to the distinction between boundaries and limits which is the main focus for me here: expressing the adults' actual limits that arise, organically, from within their existence as living beings *is* what becomes the opportunity for the child to know that their needs, their flow, or what their attention is focused upon are not all there is; that others exist, which exerts natural pressure, from the truth of life.

In that way it's simple to say that natural limits for children are essentially the limits of the adults. 'This is how far I will go; I don't see a way to cross this line', says the adult in this case, or any of us, in any situation where we want to honour our limits. It's a message about us and says nothing to the other, whether a child or

another adult, about them. The usual message of what Inbal referred to as arbitrary limits, which is more similar to what amongst adults is referred to as ‘boundaries’, is a very different one. It says, ‘Don’t cross this line’, which is a demand, an attempt to tell the other person, whether child or adult, what they can or cannot do.

Boundaries separate us from each other. By telling us, creatures who thrive on choice, what to do, they are likely to generate resistance. Limits, the ones that arise organically from within, are ways of sharing information about ourselves with each other. By telling us what is going on for another person, where they are challenged and what support they need, they are likely to generate tenderness and willingness. From then on, we can do what our large brains are fantastically able to do: find solutions to the need-puzzles we encounter that incorporate everyone’s needs and available resources, and that have the least unwanted impacts.

## **Restoring Trust as a Path to a Future**

Patriarchy – the system that emerges from scarcity, functions in separation, and results in powerlessness – arose from massive loss of trust in life in response to cataclysmic events that outstripped a group’s capacity to metabolize – either overwhelming natural disasters or invasions. Loss of trust of such magnitude, reinforced generation after generation through individual and collective strategies of control, leaves us very vulnerable and brittle.

In the last several hundred years, and in an accelerated fashion in the last several decades, we have also been torn away from land and from each other. In the global north, in particular, many of us pass our formative years in nuclear families. Nuclear families are almost always overstretched to attend to everyone’s needs. A family with two adults and however many children is not a stable structure, no matter how much we are told it’s the ideal and the imagined norm.

Within such a structure, the needs of children are, very literally, overwhelming. For many

years, I’ve thought that for a parent it would be excruciating to see a need that their child has and to be unable to fulfil it. This understanding, more than anything else, has given me compassion for the many times when parents reframe a child’s need into something else. It then makes it bearable to say ‘no’ to the child, or tell the child, all the time, what to do, and then hear the resulting impact in the form of crying or a tantrum. More bearable than acknowledging the child’s needs – and mourning, with them, the capacity limitations that make it impossible to meet those needs.

This means that way too many of us emerge from childhood with experiences of having our needs thwarted so often that holding on to them slips away from us. The training that we get in being born and raised in patriarchal society is to ignore our livingness. It’s a fresh assault on each of us. Childhood is being trained to go against the natural flow that comes from within.

The diminished capacity that we are born into also means that way too many of us don’t have the visceral experience of butting up against others’ needs and learning to creatively choose, together with others, how to address the situation in a way that cares most optimally for all the needs within available resources. This is part of how mistrust gets passed on: we come of age without models and visceral experiences of working things out with others.

I see boundaries, as they are framed in modern culture, as an expression of this pervasive mistrust. The only way to preserve self is by keeping others out. Why? Because they, like most of us, can only demand what they want, rather than endure the vulnerability of making a request and possibly hearing a ‘no’. Tragically, the two reinforce each other. The more we protect ourselves from others’ demands by erecting boundaries around ourselves, the more desperate they are when they need something and encounter the wall of our boundaries. The more we see each other not honouring the true limits we each have which, most of the time, we don’t sense and don’t know how to express, the more compelled we are to create boundaries to

keep others out so we can, somewhere, rest and care for ourselves.

This way of attending to our collective mistrust is not going to get us into a future for all. It's all too likely to create, instead, micro-shocks to all, that will only deepen the mistrust. Since restoring trust is essential if we are ever going to realign with life, something else is needed. Here's where limits, instead of boundaries, seem promising.

Expressing our limits already requires some semblance of trust. First, it's trust in the life within us, a willingness to notice and honour our own limitations and to recognize them as limiting our capacity – to be with others, to stretch towards saying 'yes' to a request, to be vulnerable, to do one more task, or anything else. Seeing it in this light requires tenderness towards ourselves instead of the constant pushing that our societies, at least in the global north, make the norm. Tenderness is one key quality that is soft enough to be an antidote to the harshness of patriarchy. Accepting rather than judging our limitations is a key milestone on the path of liberation from patriarchal conditioning. It melts away shame, and opens us to receive from others where we are lacking. This aligns us with life in all its mystery. It supports the humility that makes patriarchal hubris less and less likely.

Expressing our limits also requires trust in others, which is where it becomes an act of gentle defiance of the rules of the game. It invites us to surrender to the unknown, not trying to control anything or anyone. 'The choice people have to make', says Rachel Naomi Remen, 'is never between slavery and freedom. We will always have to choose between slavery and the unknown.'

The unknown, in this case, is whether people will meet us in the vulnerability of our expression of limits. And we can't know that. This is why I refer to the work of restoring trust as sacred. It requires us to lean deeply into the assumptions that I gleaned from my conversations with Inbal, especially the one about caring being central to being human. This

pulls us lovingly out of separation and back into life.

When a group of people embrace this together, we can begin to bootstrap ourselves. Then we can begin to look at collective capacity, not individual capacity. If I can't do something, somebody else can. We can create agreements that support me and sustain me. I don't want us to bank on any one of us ever having enough capacity. We are too wounded! My faith continues to be that together, in trust, we still have a small chance.

## Note

- 1 Here are the ones that stood out to me the most: Timothy J. Legg, The no BS guide to protecting your emotional space, Healthline, 10 December 2018; available at <https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/set-boundaries> (accessed 15 August 2021). Joaquín Selva, How to set healthy boundaries: 10 examples + PDF worksheets, Positive Psychology, 24 February 2021; available at <https://positivepsychology.com/great-self-care-setting-healthy-boundaries> (accessed 15 August 2021). And Sharon Martin, How to deal with people who repeatedly violate your boundaries, PsychCentral, 11 July, 2016; available at <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/imperfect/2016/07/how-to-deal-with-people-who-repeatedly-violate-your-boundaries/> (accessed 15 August 2021).

## Reference

- Kashtan, I. (2002). Editorial: Compassionate connection: nonviolent communication with children, *Mothering* magazine, 110, January/February; available at <https://www.mothering.com/threads/compassionate-connection.1621414/>, accessed 15 August 2021.

## About the contributor



**Miki Kashtan** is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community ([www.NGLcommunity.org](http://www.NGLcommunity.org)), and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native

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