

Parashat Vayechi

The Blessings of Rebuke

Turning Discomfort into Blessing

A good friend once told me, “Chana Bracha, you are more direct than a New Yorker!” I guess she meant that I’m a no nonsense person who has no problem telling people a piece of my mind and heart even if it may not always be the most comfortable thing to share with them. Since childhood, I always wore my feelings on my sleeve, and could never ever say even a half lie to benefit myself. My clear blue eyes would always reveal the naked truth. If I were to blame, I never would seek cover. If others were the culprit, I told them to their face. Recently, someone, let’s call her Minna, tried to give me some feedback about both positive and negative encounters that she experienced with me. I was very happy that Minna mustered up the courage to bring issues up that I know was not easy for her. Yet, in order for me to truly understand her point, I needed more details and examples. When I requested this, Minna was very vague and evasive. As much as I tried to understand what she was getting at, and as much as I truly desire to work on myself and grow, I was still left in the dark. While many people prefer to beat around the bush in order to avoid insulting anyone, my experience is that being direct often is most helpful in the long run. Actually, the most uncomfortable things in life can become the greatest blessing. This is perhaps why the *Eishet Chail* (Woman of Valor) is compared to pearls rather than to gold or silver. The pearl develops through a grain of sand in the oyster, which is actually an irritation to the oyster. Great achievements come about through irritations and it is our task in life to transform every irritation to a shiny pearl.

Can Anyone Give Rebuke Today?

I’ve often heard people say that today no one is on the level to give rebuke. We are not enough loving or caring, and perhaps today no one is on the level to receive rebuke, being interested enough in truly hearing and working on themselves? These sayings have their root in the following Talmudic teaching:

מסכת ערכין טז/ב

אמר רבי טרפון, תמה אני [אם] יש בדור הזה [מי] שיכול להוכיח אם יאמר [לון] טול קיסם מבין שיניך אומרים לו טול קורה מבין עיניך אמר רבי אלעזר [בן עזריה] (תמה אני אם יש בדור הזה מי שמקבל תוכחה אמר רבי עקיבא) תמה אני אם יש בדור הזה מי שיודע להוכיח אמר רבי יוחנן [בן נורי] מעיד אני עלי שמים וארץ שהרבה פעמים לקה עקיבא בן יוסף על ידי שהייתי קובל עליו לפני רבן גמליאל וכל שכן שהוסיף בי אהבה לקיים מה שנאמר, (משלי ט) "אל תוכח ילך פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאהבהך:

Rabbi Tarfon said, “I wonder whether there is any one in this generation who accepts reproof, for if one says to him: Remove the toothpick from between your teeth, he would answer: Remove the beam from between your eyes!” Rabbi Akiva said, “I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to reprove!” Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri said, “I call heaven and earth to witness for myself that Akiva was often punished through me because I used to complain against him before our Rabban Gamliel. All the more he showered love upon me, to verify the statement, ‘Reprove not a scorner, lest he hates you; reprove a wise man and he will love you’” (*Mishlei* 9:8); (*Babylonian Talmud, Arichin* 16b).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

This Talmudic section comes to teach us how difficult it is to give and receive reproof. Nevertheless, Rabbi Akiva was able to receive rebuke, which only increased his love for the *rebuke*. Yet, there are people whom it is not worthwhile to rebuke, as it will only distance them more. Another Talmudic passage teaches that we must rebuke even a hundred times, this mitzvah pertains as well to a student towards his Rabbi:

מסכת בבא מציעא לא/א
 אָמַר לִיָּה הֵהוּא מְדַרְבְּנָן לְרַבָּא, וְאִימָא, (וּיקרא יט) "הוֹכַח" - חֲדָא זִימְנָא, "תּוֹכִיחַ" - תְּרִי זִימְנִי? אָמַר לִיָּה, "הוֹכַח" - אָפְלוּ מֵאָה פְּעֻמִּים מִשְׁמַע. "תּוֹכִיחַ" - אֵין לִי אֶלָּא הָרַב לְתַלְמִיד, תְּלַמִּיד לְרַב מְנִין? תְּלַמּוּד לּוֹמַר, "הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ" - מְכַל מְקוּם:

One of the Rabbis said to Rabba: "*hocheach tochiach*" (you shall surely rebuke) (*Vayikra* 19:17). Perhaps *hocheach* means once, *tochiach* twice? He replied, *hocheach* implies even a hundred times. As for *tochiach*: I know only that the Rabbi [must rebuke] the student: whence do we know that the student [must rebuke] his Rabbi? From the phrase. "*hocheach tochiach*," implying under all circumstances (*Babylonian Tamud, Baba Metzia* 31a).

What does it mean to keep rebuking our fellow one hundred times? Do we really need to take this literally? It is possible to understand that this Talmudic passage teaches us that sometimes the person giving the rebuke is not worthy of saying what needs to be said, and at other times, the person who transgressed is not ready to hear what he is supposed to hear. It may be that only after one hundred times both prerequisites can be met: that a person can actually say what needs to be said to the person who really needs to hear it in a way that he can hear it (Rabbi Yosef Farhi, *Life Coaching from the Parasha, Pearls of Torah wisdom from everyday living*).

Purify before Reprimanding

I once had a student who easily flew into a frenzy and felt that other students had wronged her. She often accused them while raising her voice. Needless to say, her words of reproof were never heeded. When she came to me for guidance of how to deal with her feeling of being mistreated, I told her that as long as she was so emotionally invested there was no point in trying to reprimand anyone, as it would only backfire on herself. I always try to live by what I heard in the name of the Lubawitcher Rabbi z"l: Just as the doctor needs to prepare for giving an injection by insuring sterile needles and purifying the skin with alcohol, so must we purify ourselves before being ready to give rebuke. We need to check into ourselves whether our motivation for giving our message to the other is from true love and care or from our *yetzer hara* (negative inclination). There is a 'shadow pleasure' in disparaging others in order to become elevated at their expense. If our intention is ungodly in this way, our words will never enter the heart of the person we rebuke. Before reproaching anyone, we need to purify ourselves from personal agendas. When we give rebuke from our pure heart of love, from the depth of good, it will surely enter the heart of the other, and bring about meaningful improvement. Still, there is no guarantee; every person retains his free will. No matter how strong we pull with cords of love in the right direction, our friend may always turn her back and run away. However, we have done our part and shown love. This elevates our soul and hers, and draws the Infinite Light upon all the community of Israel and the entire world (learned from Tzvi Freeman based on chapter 32 of Tanya).

Seven Practical Guides for Rebuking

Since it is so difficult to truly give reproach that will enter the heart of our friend, we need to take this mitzvah seriously and prepare for it properly. Rabbi Yisroel Cotlar writes these clear guidelines based on the on the teachings of the Chabad-Lubavitch rebbes for how to purify ourselves before rebuking anyone. These are seven questions to ask ourselves before approaching our friend:

- Have I already tried to judge the person favorably?
Could there perhaps be some circumstance I am unaware of?
- Is my desire to rebuke coming from the right place?
Is it only about fixing a problem, or do I have any personal agenda?
- Am I saying these words simply to “to get my point across” and fill my need to protest, or might my words actually be effective?
- Am I motivated to speak out of love and true concern?
Will the other person look at it this way?
- What words will have the greatest chance of achieving my aim? If I imagine myself in the other person’s situation. What words would speak to me? Often it isn’t sources or preaching that speak to a person, but rather the respectful manner that we explained our concern.
- Am I the best person to bring up the issue, or is there someone else who could say the same thing and likely accomplish more?
- Is now the time to rebuke, or is there another time and place where this has a better chance of working?

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach teaches that people are often aware when they do wrong, they just don’t have the strength not to do it. When you tell people they are doing wrong in a good way, it gives them strength not to do it again. The Mittler Rebbe says it suddenly becomes like two souls against one evil. If I’m too weak to overcome my evil, the minute someone tells me it is like two fires against one darkness. But it is hard to know how to tell people in a good way.

How is Ya’acov’s Harsh Words of Criticism Considered a Blessing?

On his deathbed, Ya’acov gathered his sons together one last time to impart in them his spiritual legacy and blessing. However, it seems as though Ya’acov’s final words to Reuven, Shimon and Levi were more like words of rebuke than of blessing. Thus the Torah attests that Ya’acov bequeathed to all of his sons his personal blessing (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:28).

ספר בראשית פרק מט (כח)

כָּל אֵלֶּה שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שָׁנִים עָשָׂר וְזֹאת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם אָבִיהֶם וַיְבָרֶךְ אוֹתָם אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר כִּבְרַכְתּוֹ בְּרַךְ אֹתָם:
 “All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is it that their father spoke unto them and blessed them; he blessed everyone according to his blessing (*Bereishit* 49:28).

Life Lessons from Rebbetzin's Heart

How can Ya'acov's harsh words of criticism be considered a blessing? Harav Uri Weissblum answers that we must redefine our understanding of a blessing. A doctor who diagnoses the sickness and clarifies its treatment is offering him a tremendous gift of blessing. Similarly, if our friend has a large vessel with a hole in the middle, giving him gifts to put in the container will only fall out and leave him with nothing. It would be a greater blessing to direct his attention to the hole so that he may mend it and retain his future acquisitions. Therefore, the greatest blessing is to point out the characteristics, which needed improvement. Ya'acov thus blessed Reuven by describing his impetuosity, while he called Shimon and Levi's anger and impulsiveness to their attention. This would allow them to "fix the holes," become whole, and be ready for future blessings. Everybody has his own personal 'holes' which need fixing. Rav Yisrael Salanter explains that every person has within himself one bad *middah*, which constitutes the root of his personal struggles. The *yetzer hara* attempts to disguise this trait in order to prevent its identification and cure. By calling their personal weak spots to their attention, Ya'acov was indeed giving his sons a tremendous blessing (Rabbi Ozer Alport, *HaModia the Daily Newspaper of Torah Jewry*).

May we merit getting in touch with pure love of others through which we can help each other fix our 'holes,' become whole and ready for infinite blessings!