

Parashat Devarim

The Blessings of Rebuke

Rectified Rebuke

Most people don't like to be criticized. Perhaps I should even say, "No one likes to be criticized!" In my experience, the way and the tone of voice in which the criticism is given makes all the difference. It can be very painful, when someone who supposedly loves you criticizes you in a very unloving way – for example, your husband, your sister, or your best friend. Rather than being inspired to want to change, this kind of criticism makes you feel put down and hurt. I once heard, in the name of the last Rebbe of Lubavitz, that in preparation for giving an injection, the doctor or nurse must ensure a thorough cleaning and disinfection of the skin. This implies that when we need to give rebuke, we must first clean ourselves thoroughly of negative motivations, such as anger, irritation and defending our own ego. Only then, can we really focus on our love towards the person who will benefit from our reproach. If you scolded your friend or family member, without first going through this self-cleaning process, do not be surprised if your words will not be well received. Moreover, certainly do not add insult to injury by accusing the object of your rebuke of not accepting criticism. Actually, we cannot really expect anyone to accept criticism, unless it is constructive criticism. To be critical, is to be condescending. Yet, it is possible to give rectified rebuke in a loving way. Besides constructive, caring motives, the parameters for rectified rebuke, include to whom, how and when.

The 'Whom' of Rectified Rebuke

The last person in the world to rebuke is your mother-in-law. She is included in the mitzvah of honoring and fearing your parents, whom we are not even permitted to contradict (*Shulchan Aruch, Yore Deah, 240:2*). If we see our parents or in-laws act against the Torah, we may not rebuke them. We may only ask respectfully in a question, "Doesn't it say such and such in the Torah" (*Ibid. 11*). The same goes for our rabbis, mentors and teachers. "Any student who takes honoring his rabbi lightly, causes the *Shechina* to depart from Israel" (*Ibid 242:20*). If we notice our rabbi or mentor acting against the Torah, we may only ask, "Didn't our rabbi teach us such and such" (*Ibid 22*). The people we have the greatest responsibility to rebuke are our children and students. Although they have a mitzvah to respect us, we must also show them respect even as we reproach them.

The 'How' of Rectified Rebuke

In addition to pure motives of wanting to help the person you love, it is also important to wrap the bitter pill in a sweet coating. If you don't feel love for the person you want to rebuke, it is best to just let it go, as only words that come from the heart will enter the heart. Prior to rebuking, take a few moments to meditate and get in touch with the feelings of love that you have deep down in your heart for every Jew. When rebuked, we become very sensitive and will notice whether the words come from love or not. We express our love not only in the words of kindness and praise that we include before and after our words of reproach but also in the tone of our voice and our body language. The Talmud asks, "How do we know that if we see something unseemly in another, we are obliged to reprove him? Because it states, 'You shall surely rebuke' (*Vayikra 19:17*). If we

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rebuked him but he did not accept it, how do we know that we must rebuke him again? The text states, 'hoche'ach tochi'ach – rebuke, you shall rebuke' even though," (*Babylonian Talmud Arachin* 16b), "Even a hundred times" (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 31a). "We are not permitted, however to do so harshly and to put him to shame, as the Torah verse concludes, 'Do not suffer sin because of him'" (*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin* 16b; *Sifra* on this verse; *Midrash Tanchuma, Mishpatim* 7). "If you rebuke your brother and he does not listen, then it is you who is to blame. Words from the heart enter the heart" (*Words From the Heart (Based on letters and talks of the Rebbe, Rabbi M. M. Schneerson)*).

The 'When' of Rectified Rebuke

Proper timing is also vital for rectified rebuke. The worst time for reprimanding is when is either hungry, angry, depressed, exhausted or just simply tired. Whenever possible, wait until a bit of time has elapsed, so that your own irritation has abated and your friend is in a receptive mood. We do not perform operations unless the patient is in good enough health to endure the procedure. Since the *mussar* masters teach that it's harder to fix one *midah* (character trait) than to learn the entire Talmud and all the laws of the *Shulchan Aruch*, make sure that the object of your rebuke is in an emotionally healthy state and open to hearing your suggestions for change. The Torah has guidelines for the ultimate timing for rebuke. On his deathbed, Ya'acov imparted blessings to his children, which included important messages of rebuke. Right before people depart, whether for the next world – or even just for a temporary leave of absence – others are more receptive to learn from them. The same is true for the first time you see someone after having just returned from a trip. When you have been missed, your words will be absorbed to a greater extent.

Moshe's Allusive Admonitions

The Book of *Devarim* is Moshe's 36-day monologue before his passing. At this time, the Israelites were particularly inclined to listen to the words of their master. Moshe, our teacher, made the most out of this favorable time to impart words of gentle rebuke to the Children of Israel. Moshe's words of rebuke are a model for us on the 'when, 'whom' and 'how' of rectified rebuke.

**ספר דברים פרק א (א) אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל כל ישראל בעבר הירדן במדבר בערבה מול סוף
בין פארן ובין תפל ולבן וחצרות ודי זזהב:**

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the wilderness, on the plane facing the Reed Sea between Paran and Tofel, Lavan, Chatzerot and Di-zahav" (*Devarim* 1:1).

At first glance, this opening verse of Moshe's monologue and the Book of *Devarim* seems to be no more than an opening statement, without any apparent words of rebuke. Yet, when you scratch beneath the surface, as Rashi does, each place mentioned alludes to one of the many sins of the Israelites. "Because these are words of reproof, Moshe enumerated here all the places where the Israelites provoked G-d to anger. Yet, he suppresses all mention of the matters in which they sinned and refers to them only as a mere allusion contained in the names of these places out of regard for Israel (Rashi, *Devarim* 1:1). Moshe teaches us a very important principle for effective admonition. When giving rebuke, try by all means, to save the face of the person you are rebuking,

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by saying the minimum necessary, so that your friend will figure out the rest. People are more inclined to connect with messages that they themselves figure out, rather than when every detail of their faults are spelled out to the dot. When Natan the Prophet came to rebuke King David for taking Bat Sheva, he spoke in a parable and asked David regarding the law pertaining to a rich man who had many sheep and cattle but stole the only sheep of a poor man, who loved it dearly (II *Shemuel* 12:1-4). We can learn from Moshe and Natan to give our words of reproof in a subtle way which allows our friend to figure out for himself what we are hinting at. It was Moshe's pure motive of love for his people that prompted his refined and tender words of reproof. He – as their Rabbi and mentor – had the responsibility to set the people straight at this auspicious time before his demise. The Israelites understood then, as we do now, that Moshe's message reflected his genuine concern for Israel. Since Moshe's words sprung from his heart, they entered the hearts of his people.