

### **Tochecha: How to Rebuke Lovingly**

We are living through unprecedented times. Our country is divided down the middle with a chasm that is only growing wider by the day. We are quick to judgment when we read something in the news. And we shred apart any tweet or Facebook post without taking time to understand the context in which it was written or the intent of the writer. Everyone knows what is best for this country and anyone who disagrees is a deranged fool. A diversity of options is not welcome in many places, including homes, universities and faith institutions.

Often times when I'm driving to work I'll listen to a popular radio host whom I disagree with on almost every issue, and all I hear is criticism of those who probably don't tune in. They're all buffoons. I guess I'm a sucker for rebuke.

We are simply not being compassionate, loving and accepting of one another. Instead we are quick to judge and criticize. It feels like this is an epidemic we have no cure for. This is not the kind of world I want my children to experience.

Offering criticism is not entirely bad or destructive, however. We're just not criticizing the way we should be criticizing. That's the problem.

Judaism has a lot to teach us about how to rebuke others. In fact, we read about the concept of *tochecha*, in our Torah this afternoon. In parashat Kedoshim we are presented with what is referred to as the Holiness Code, a set of ethical mitzvot, that according to Rashi, "most of the body of the Torah depends on."<sup>1</sup> The text reads, "You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. *Reprove your kin* but incur no guilt on their account."<sup>2</sup> There is a lot to unpack and if you come to Torah study next May, we'll get to all of it, such as who is defined as "kin?" The word used in the Torah is *achicha*, "your brother." But perhaps it means fellow human.

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 19:2

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:17

Our Torah is trying to tell us something. Maybe it instructs us to reprove others because we don't do it well. I am certainly guilty of shying away from confrontation and trying to avoid all it together. In Sifra Kedoshim<sup>3</sup> we read:

*Rabbi Tarfon said, "I swear that there is none in our generation who is qualified to rebuke his fellow." Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah said, "I swear that there is none in our generation who is able to accept rebuke! If one says, 'Take the splinter out of your teeth,' the other responds, 'Take the beam out of your eyes!'" Rabbi Akiva said, "I swear that there is none in our generation who knows how to rebuke his neighbor."*

I guess times haven't changed that much after all, except for how we insult one another.

Even though we don't know how to offer or accept criticism well, Judaism does not let us off the hook. In fact, the rabbis doubled down on the importance of giving *tochecha*.

The midrash teaches, "Love unaccompanied by criticism is not love... Peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace."<sup>4</sup> If Judaism places this much emphasis on criticizing others, then how do we do it properly?

Our sacred texts provide us with plenty of models. Sometimes, however, we learn the most from those who miss the mark completely.

Korach is the perfect example of how not to criticize someone. Korach stages a rebellion against Moses, claiming that others are just as holy as Moses and they should be able to perform religious rituals too. He claims Moses has gone too far. It appears that Korach is the one who craves power, not Moses, and he is only interested in inflating his own prominence. He says he cares about the people, but serving others is not his goal. His method of rebuke fails because it is harsh and done in public. God is not

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<sup>3</sup> Halakhic midrash to Leviticus

<sup>4</sup> Bereshit Rabbah 54:3

impressed and has the earth swallow him and his faction up in the blink of an eye.

In another instance of rebuke gone wrong, Moses' own siblings, Aaron and Miriam, take a more passive-aggressive approach. Perhaps feeling a bit jealous of their brother and his special relationship with God, they first belittle his non-Israelite wife. And then they say to one another, "Has God spoken only through Moses? Has God not spoken through us as well?"<sup>5</sup> Once again, God is not pleased with their tactless criticism of Moses, and Miriam is stricken with a skin disease.

On the other hand, we can also find praiseworthy examples of how best to offer criticism. Near the end of the book of Numbers we read about the daughters of Zelophehad. These five sisters challenge the Torah's laws of inheritance when their father dies without a son. Not wanting to see their father's property go to the nearest male relative, but stay with his own children, they approach Moses respectfully. They present their case with humility and speak of their father and not so much about their self interests. Showing deference to their leader, the sisters ask for a change to the law. Moses brings their case to God and God amends her own law. They speak with respect and suggest a way forward. They criticize a law without insulting the lawgiver.

Finally, we read about the prophet Nathan's rebuke of King David. The story goes that David spied on a beautiful woman, Batsheva, sunbathing on her roof and desired her. He sent messengers to bring her to the palace and when word came back months later that she was pregnant, David came up with a plan to send Batsheva's husband, Uriah, to the front lines in battle where he died. After his death, David sent for Batsheva and married her. The prophet Nathan approached the king privately and shared a parable presented as a legal case aimed at getting David to pass verdict on himself unwittingly. When David realizes the story is about him, he admits guilt and repents. Had Nathan accused David of being an adulterer and

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<sup>5</sup> Numbers 12:2

murderer, the king very likely would have reacted defensively as most of us do when caught doing wrong.

Hopefully none of us will ever have to rebuke someone as immoral as King David, but we will be faced with many opportunities to offer criticism to our friends, loved ones and fellow citizens.

How do we criticize lovingly and most importantly, effectively?

Rabbi Joseph Tekushkin, author of *Words That Hurt, Words That Heal*, teaches that we must ask ourselves three questions before approaching someone with the intent of changing their ways.

First: “How do I feel about offering this criticism? Does it give me pleasure or pain?”<sup>6</sup> If it’s the former, the listener will probably react defensively. But if it’s the latter, then hopefully the listener will sense the emotions behind the comments and accept the advice. If we are looking forward to it, then maybe we should take pause and reevaluate our motives.

Second: “Does my criticism offer specific ways to change?”<sup>7</sup> To criticize just to criticize will fall on deaf ears. The daughters of Zelophehad had suggestions for a new way forward. Think to yourself before sending that critical email whether you do too.

Finally: “Are my words nonthreatening and reassuring?”<sup>8</sup> Telushkin advises against using blanket statements that might demoralize the listener such as saying one “always” or “never” does this or that especially since those extreme accusations are probably untrue. To call someone anti-Israel because he expresses concern for a specific policy quickly loses all credibility.

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<sup>6</sup> Telushkin, Joseph. *Words The Hurt, Words That Heal: How to Choose Words Wisely and Well*. Harper, New York. 1996. p. 96

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

Telushkin tells the story of Rabbi Israel Salanter who would announce during a lecture in which he offered a criticism, “Don’t think that I am innocent of all the offenses I am enumerating. I too have committed some of them. All that I am doing, therefore, is speaking aloud to myself, and if anything you might overhear applies to you all, well and good.”<sup>9</sup> Giving critique should be done strategically and with humility. Speaking from a place of familiarity with the critique also gives the rebuker some moral authority. They might just know what they are talking about.

The Baal Shem Tov<sup>10</sup> taught that if we observe someone doing something unpleasant, we should first meditate on that same unpleasantness in ourselves. He says, “if you saw someone desecrating Shabbat, or desecrating God’s name some other way, you should examine your own deeds and you will certainly find among them desecration of Shabbat and cursing God’s name.” Another word for this is projection, a psychological term conceptualized by Freud but also found in the Talmud where the rabbis warn against the human tendency to critique others about those unwanted characteristics we find in ourselves: “Do not taunt your neighbor with the blemish you yourself have.”<sup>11</sup>

For a people who love offering unsolicited advice we sure have a wealth of material on how to criticize properly. In Maimonides’ Mishneh Torah, we get a brief checklist of how to rebuke. This person should:

*Administer the rebuke in private.*

*Speak to the offender gently and tenderly.*

*And point out that he is only speaking for the wrongdoer’s own good.*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 98

<sup>10</sup> c.1698-1760

<sup>11</sup> BT Bava Metzia 59b; Kiddushin 70a

<sup>12</sup> Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De-ot 6:7

In addition, our rabbis teach that it is only a mitzvah to offer criticism when we actually think the recipient will listen. If we think they will ignore us, then we should keep it to ourselves and wait for a more opportune time.

As many of you know, I often like to look at science, medicine and psychology when attempting to understand a Jewish topic. There is no shortage of scholarly articles on the proper ways to offer criticism. The one, however, that I found most compelling comes from Dr. John Gottman. In his research he discovered four negative behaviors, or “The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse,” that spell disaster for any relationship. The first of the Four Horsemen and the most common is, you guessed it, criticism.

The problem with criticism is that it has the tendency to become pervasive, paving the way for the other horsemen to follow: contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. If not delivered with care, it has the potential to make the victim feel assaulted and hurt. The solution, according to Gottman is to “complain without blame.”<sup>13</sup> I refer to this in my pre-marital counseling sessions when I have couples do an exercise in which they talk about their feelings using only “I” statements, avoiding saying, “you.” The goal is to offer advice, not attack a character trait.

I have also found in my own experience that people respond to emotional tone and not necessarily to the intention behind the rebuke. If we are angry or resentful when we offer criticism, it will most surely not be heard. According to Estelle Frankel, a psychotherapist, author and Jewish educator, we increase our likelihood that our words will be heard by paying attention to our tone. Giving *tochecha* without consideration for the way we deliver the message will undermine the message entirely.

This summer I coached my son’s little league baseball team. Some of these 9-year-old players had no concept of the rules, strategy or the fundamentals of the game. I would offer constructive criticism during practice but only if I had also applauded them for doing something else. People are

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<sup>13</sup> [www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)

much more likely to listen to a critique if the person giving it offers praise just as often.

Unlike animals, we have the capacity to change, mature and grow. Sometimes other people suggest how we can become the best versions of ourselves. Our mistake is when we assume they don't have any idea what they're talking about. The Jewish tradition urges us to regard someone who points out our flaws in a sensitive way with gratitude. Perhaps they are no different than Nathan, a prophet sent by God to steer King David in the right direction.

*Tochecha* can be spiritual practice so long as it follows our sages' advice and is given and received in love. Sometimes we want to point out a truth that someone is missing. Sometimes another will point out a fixable flaw in our own lives. When *tochecha* is accompanied with genuine concern as opposed to anger, it has the potential to heal a relationship or get a person back on the path towards wholeness. Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson teaches, "a rebuke, if properly intended and given, becomes an act of affirmation and love, an affirmation that the person is worth the effort in the first place, and a faith that he or she remains capable of improvement. Offered with love and a sense of humility, a rebuke is a gift and a challenge."

As we look to the year ahead, let us be mindful of our relationship with *tochecha*. May we practice this sacred mitzvah with intentionality and a sensitivity to the other. May we listen to critique when it comes from a genuine place. And most importantly, may our words spring forth from a place of love.