



From the desk of
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Office of the Rabbinate of Elad, Rosh HaAyin and Herzelia

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TORAT

Parashat Devarim

HAMELECH

Hidden Reprimand

"These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel in Transjordan, in the desert, in the plains, opposite the reeds, between Paran and Tofel, and Lavan and Hatserot and De Zahav." (Devarim 1:1)

On the surface, these seem to be place names. But our Sages reveal to us that Moshe was hinting words of reprimand, referring to various sins performed by the people of that generation. Between Rashi and the Targum, there are some varying explanations. Moshe was reprimanding them for their complaints at the *Yam Suf* and regarding the *Mann*. He slipped in a hint about the Golden Calf and about their demand for meat. There was also something about the Spies and the Korach rebellion, and of course, *Baal Peor* and *Benot Midyan*.

Say it Straight

Some people think that if you have something to say, say it straight. Don't beat around the bush. But the Torah teaches us to think before we talk. And if the words we plan to utter may incur pain, think again. Choose your words wisely. Only say what has to be said and say it in a way that is as pain-free as possible.

A Question of Timing

There is also the issue of *when* to say. Yaakov Avinu had strong words of reprimand for his three oldest sons. Yet, he held his tongue until he was on his deathbed. He was scared that if he told

Reuven off, Reuven would head off and join Eisav's ranks. Did you hear that?! Reuven, one of the twelve tribes, had he heard harsh words of reprimand, he might just jump ship, leave the fold, and become a gangster?! Yet, Yaakov Avinu had that concern, and held his tongue. We really have to think twice and more before putting our children "in their place". We have to think a step ahead before yelling at a student. What may result? Will my words really generate improvement or might they sow the seeds of rebellion, Heaven forbid?

Yaakov Avinu was not paranoid. He was not scared for no reason. If he had fears, they were not unjustified. He chose to wait for the opportune moment. And it was not after just a few hours, days or weeks. He waited until the last possible moment.

He did not want to have to say it twice. Sometimes a parent or teacher offers words of reprimand and the child or student immediately takes it to heart and decides to change his ways. But then the mentor makes a fatal mistake. Unsure if his words made their impact, he continues to pour it on, going deeper and longer, dwelling upon the gravity of the misdeed. At this, the child or student could feel abused and deprived of their self dignity and self-esteem and reverse their previous decision. They could think, "Enough already, why does he have to keep going on and on," and decide to ignore everything that was said.



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Avoid Embarrassment

Another reason to delay reprimand is to spare the recipient of embarrassment. How so? If the recipient is someone with whom you were in contact frequently, then every contact subsequent to the reprimand can trigger off feelings of humiliation.

This is yet another reason for Yaakov Avinu's patience. Yaakov Avinu figured, "If I reprimand Reuven right away, then whenever he sees me, he will feel embarrassed and inadequate. I would not want to make him feel that way. So I will wait until just before my passing. That way, he will not have to meet up with me again."

Putting up a Defense

Most people who are told that they did something wrong, wish to defend themselves, whether rightfully or not.

In Tehillim (50:18) the verse speaks words of reprimand, "Im ra'ita ganav vateiretz imo." Literally, "if see you a thief and run (in cahoots) with him." Allegorically, we can interpret the verse as follows, "If you see a thief, he has a *teretz* (excuse) with him." I.e. everyone has a reason for what he does. The thief justifies his wrongdoing, thinking that the owner does not need that item anymore. Or at least, I need it more than him. Or, if he really cared about it, he would not have left it so accessible, etc.

So you really must know with whom you are dealing. If your listener will really listen, go ahead. If the repercussions do not justify the investments, just skip it.

Let the Waves Settle

Here is another important rule of rebuke: Only rebuke if you are calm. Rebuke plus anger is a recipe for catastrophe. In our *parashah*, Moshe Rabbeinu only offered his rebuke after smiting Sihon and Og. Now they were ready to enter the Holy Land. So long as those battles with those towering ogres will still be in front of them, no one had presence of mind to deliver nor receive rebuke. Once outside pressures are alleviated, there is a chance for rebuke to produce positive results. (Based upon Hidushei HaRim)

Say it to Levi

Here is another tip: Instead of telling Shimon straight what he did wrong, tell Levi, within Shimon's earshot, how a person is meant to behave in a given situation. Hopefully Shimon will figure out on his own how to make amends.

Thus, in our *parashah*, Moshe spoke to *all* of Israel, sinners and righteous. Speaking directly to sinners about their sins is confrontational. Speaking to a group in a general manner is less abusive. (Based upon Maharam Shiff)

Short then Long

Now, in Sefer Devarim, such as *Parshiot Devarim*, *Vaetchanan* and *Eikev*, Moshe really spells out some of their sins in full detail. What happened to the "hint" approach?

Explains the Imrei Elimelech: "Hints" are good for starters, to feel out your company, if they are defensive or receptive. Once you start with hints and understand that you have interested listeners,



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you can speak things out and clarify exactly what needs *teshuva* and improvement.

Along these lines, Kedushat HaLevi explains that *Chag HaSukkot* is called the First Day of the Listing of Sins." Why? Didn't we just finish with Repentance and Atonement and now we are to move on to gladness and joy?!

Explains Kedushat HaLevi: during *Aseret Yemei Teshuva* we were tense and repented out of fear, we may have been quick to confess and get it over with. Now that *Sukkot* has arrived and we are pleased with ourselves and our relationship with Hashem, we are now ready to rehash our sins and revisit them, now repenting from a place of admiration – *teshuvah mei'ahavah*. This can be a new meaning of *Rishon L'Cheshbon Avonot*.

Sensitivity even to Wrongdoers

After the Korah rebellion, Hashem instructs Moshe to tell Elazar the Kohein to lift up the firepans of Korach's congregation.

Why was Aharon not given that job? Explains Ohr HaChayim HaKadosh: Since Aharon was chosen and not them, it would be too strong of a motion to have Aharon himself pick up the adversary's firepans. It would be too insulting. So Elazar was told to do it instead.

We also find that Bilaam's donkey was put to death after it spoke out against Bilaam. This was done, in part, to protect Bilaam's dignity. Now Bilaam was a terrible sinner and enemy of Hashem and the Jewish People. Nonetheless, Hashem saw fit to spare him this additional disgrace of people bumping into the donkey and

saying, "Oh, that is the donkey who put Bilaam in his place." (Rashi Bamidbar 22:30)

Here is an additional example. Rabban Gamliel had a disagreement with Rabbi Yehoshua and thereafter Rabban Gamliel was demoted from his position as Nasi. The Sages were trying to figure out whom to appoint in his stead. Rabbi Yehoshua was not a candidate because that would be too painful for Rabban Gamliel. (Brachot 27b)

Out with the *Shochet*

The Brisker Rav once had to take care of the problem of certain uncertified *shochtim* (meat slaughterers). He called for a meeting, and one of those uncertified people came uninvited. The meeting could really not take place in his presence. He was asked to step out, but he said that he would not leave unless the Rav himself tells him to.

So people asked the Rav to order him to leave, but the Rav said nothing. Eventually, someone somehow convinced the man to step out.

The Rav explained that they had gathered for the sake of tending to the problem at hand. Had he demanded that the man leave, that would have embarrassed him and as such, the meeting would not be successful. The end does not justify the means.

A Widow's Tears

The Rav of a certain shul in Yerushalayim passed away. Came Yom Kippur and the *gabbaim* asked Rabbi Shmuel Aharon Yudelevitz to deliver words



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of inspiration. This was a tremendous opportunity to arouse people to *teshuvah*. Nevertheless, Rav Shmuel Aharon refused to speak. The *gabbaim* asked him, afterwards, to explain himself. After all, he was known for his inspiring *drashot*.

He said, "I know that I could have made everyone cry. And that is exactly why I did not speak. Because in the *ezrat nashim* is the widow of the Rav and had she heard someone deliver a *drashah* other than her husband, she would be reminded of her loss. Those tears I do not want to be held responsible for.

"What is my source? Hashem told Moshe to take the Jewish People out of Mitzrayim. At first, Moshe shied away. Why? How could he leave them there suffering? Because he feared that Aharon would be insulted that his younger brother was chosen for the job.

"From here we see," concluded Rav Yudelevitz, "this it is not worth doing a great mitzvah for a large number of people at the price of hurting one person's feelings."

How To Bring 'em Back

Let us bring an example of well-done rebuke.

The Chofetz Chaim entered an inn and saw a Jew eating without saying a Bracha. The Chofetz Chaim looked at him and tried to think what to say to be *mekarev* him. The innkeeper saw what was happening and came over told the Chofetz Chaim, "Don't bother with him. He was taken from his parents as a young boy and forced into the Russian army. Leave him alone."

At that, the Chofetz Chaim arose and approached the young man. He said to him, "Oy! I heard you were kidnapped and taken away from your parents at such a young age! And still you remained a Jew! Wow! They must have tried to baptize you, yet you withstood all temptation and endured suffering in order to maintain your Jewish identity! How I envy your Olam Haba!"

Tears welled up in the soldier's eyes and the Chofetz Chaim returned to his table.

As the innkeeper made his rounds from table to table, tending to customers' needs, the soldier inquired as to the identity of the Rabbi who had spoken to him. When he heard that it was none other than the famed Chofetz Chaim, he ran over and kissed the Rabbi's hand.

The Chofetz Chaim put a hand on his shoulder and began consoling him, "You are not at fault for all of the non-kosher food you ate until now. There was nothing you could have done better. But from now on, a Jew like you who went through so much, if you would accept upon yourself to live the rest of your life as an observant Jew, you will be such a happy and satisfied person. You will feel so fulfilled."

His words which came from such a caring heart found their way into the soldier's heart and he returned to his roots.

Share a Mitzvah

Here is a personal one. I once davened with Maran Harav Ovadiah Yosef. After davening, the Rav called me over and told me the following story.



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Askanim once came to the Noda Bihudah (Rav Yechezkel Landau) and requested a letter of recommendation in order to raise funds for *pidyon shevuyim*.

"How much money is needed?" asked the Rav.

"Ten thousand rubles," was the answer.

The Noda Bihudah went into a different room and returned shortly with 9,900 rubles.

The *askanim* said, "We did not ask for a donation, just for a letter!"

The Rav replied, "I am also obligated in the mitzvah!"

They boldly asked, "If so, teach us, our Master, if you are already giving so much, why not give the full sum?"

He replied, "To leave room for others to also participate in the mitzvah, as it says in Avot, the most praiseworthy level of giving tzedakah is to give and also encourage others to give."

Rabbi Ovadiah then turned to me and said, "Rav Malka, some people complain to me that you do everything for the community in Elad and do not leave room for others. You have to let others do *mitzvot*, too."

I took the message to heart and learned an additional lesson on how to give rebuke pleasantly, such as with a story or parable.

Slip of the Tongue

In Sheva Berachot, we say "Kol Chatan v'kol Kallah." What exactly is this voice?

Let us give an example. An engaged couple, these days, we called "chatan" and "kallah". Also shortly after the wedding.

Let us say that a young couple is taking a walk together and the woman slips and falls. Her chatan is all concerned. "How are you? Are you ok? Do you need help? Oy! I should call the municipality and have them fix this crack in the sidewalk!"

The same couple, a few months later, you could see them walking and the wife slips and falls. This time, the "experienced" husband says, "You're so clumsy! Always falling! We should get your head examined! Can't you look where you're going!"

As we see, an engaged couple or newlyweds usually treat each other with the utmost respect. Unfortunately, it tends to wear off too quickly. So we bless them that this "kol chatan" and "kol kallah" should escort them throughout their marriage, that this "ve'eirastem li" – feeling of specialness, newness, fondness, should last forever – "le'olam."

Stars and Sand

Moshe Rabbeinu pointed out some of Klal Yisroel's shortcomings. Then he said, "Hashem has made you great as the stars in the Heavens. May He increase you a thousand times and bless you as He has said to you. How can I handle alone your bothersomeness, your burden and your strife?"

What is the meaning of this juxtaposition?

Afikei Yehuda points out that *Klal Yisroel* are compared to stars and also to sand and dirt. On



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the one hand, there is a certain obvious greatness in being compared to stars. (See Megilla 16a) On the other hand, there is a certain downside. Each star is so far away from its fellow star, whereas each grain of sand is tightly packed together with so many others.

Regarding this aspect, the comparison to stars is when each Jew wishes to stand on his own, apart from others, focusing on his own strengths. Yisroel as sand represents *achdut*-unity and togetherness, working as one with a common goal.

That is why Moshe said, "You are many, but like stars, each with his own interests and agenda. Therefore it is so difficult to be your leader and bear your burden."

Sinat Chinam

Here we are, once again, in the saddest part of the Jewish Calendar: the Three Weeks, the Nine Days. The *Beit Hamikdash* was destroyed due to baseless hatred, lack of unity.

Baseless? Anyone who hates another will give you a whole list of reasons for his attitude. Why is it called baseless? Because none of those reasons are valid according to the Torah's standards. He, as an individual, and we, as a nation, have much more to lose from the hatred and discord than anyone has to gain.

Even if someone thinks that he has a right to hate another, you always have to weigh gains against losses. If the overall result leaves you in the negative, it is just not worth it. It is "*chinam*" at

best, but usually very much less. It leaves us deep in minus.

People have done so many terrible things because they allowed themselves to get riled up over trivialities. Someone took your parking spot and then what? A true story, very very sad, but it happened. Someone took a parking spot and the other fellow who had wanted it did something very rash. It costed him lifetime imprisonment. We sure hope he realized that it certainly was not worth it. Why could he not have realized it in the first place?

Unfortunately, people do horrible things to others because of insignificant annoyances and mistaken presumptions. Their *yetzer horah* tells them that it is something worth getting upset about. But in reality it is *chinam*. It's just not worth it.

Today's Lessons

What did we learn here today? Quite a number of things: a) It is not always worthwhile saying things as they are, if someone could get hurt by the words. b) Even when a situation calls for rebuke, think before you talk. Figure out your true goal and plan your course of action. Do not allow words to escape your lips which will only be counterproductive. c) Treat everyone with respect, even sinners. d) Ends do not justify means. e) Pay special attention to eradicating baseless hatred and promoting *ahavat Yisroel*.

May we soon see the rebuilding of the *Beit Hamikdash* speedily, in our days.

**Fondly,
Mordechai Malka**