

“A Healthy Dose of Criticism”

דבר תורה (sermon) for Rosh Hashanah Day I 5777/2016

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A rabbi’s confession: I am not the most perfect rabbi to ever have lived. And with that reality, I have gotten my share of criticism in life.

But I have another problem with taking criticism. And my problem is that I am a lawyer and a rabbi. And being a lawyer and a rabbi, I am never happier than when I am engaged in a debate with someone. And so, when a person tells me that I could have done something better, I often tend to explain why I did what I did and discuss whether maybe I was right about it. For all I know, maybe I am aware of something that my counterpart doesn’t know. In many ways, this is simply because I enjoy the intellectual exchange. The truth is (or at least I hope it is), that I am more than happy to admit that I did something wrong, but I also don’t want to simply accept the criticism without being certain that it is correct.

Now, while I always hope that the person I am speaking with understands that I am not necessarily disagreeing with him or her, but simply trying to explore ideas, sometimes I have gotten the reputation for not being good at taking criticism. This, of course, is entirely unfair and anyone who says that I am bad at taking criticism is JUST PLAIN WRONG! But this puts me in a bit of a jam because how can you say that someone is wrong about you being bad at taking criticism without proving the person’s point. I haven’t figured out the solution to that problem yet.

With this introduction, I want to speak to you today about the importance of criticism. Criticism, giving it and taking it, is a vitally important skill for moral development of an individual and for strengthening relationships. There are a variety of challenges to be met. How can we get our message across effectively? How do we maintain a friendship while we criticize the friend? How can we insure that we accept criticism and grow from it, rather than putting up walls of defensiveness?

The Torah teaches us that giving corrective criticism is an obligation:

Do not hate your fellow in your heart, reprove your fellow *לֹא תִשְׂנֵא אֶת אֶחִיךָ בְּלִבְךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת*
and do not bear iniquity on his account.¹ *עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא:*

The Talmud tells us that this verse is the basis on which we know that a person is supposed to criticize her friend about her friend’s shortcomings.² In fact, one opinion in the Talmud is that the failure of people to reprove each other was the cause of the destruction of Jerusalem.³

You might think that criticizing a friend or loved one is a dangerous thing to do, that it risks damaging the relationship. And while that’s true, there are some rabbinic insights that help us realize that when done right, sharing criticism strengthens a relationship. Of course, it is important to give criticism in a caring and compassionate way. The rabbis learn from the fact that the verse says “*and do not bear iniquity on his account*” that it is important that criticism be

¹ Leviticus 19:17.

² Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 19b, “מנין לרואה בחבירו דבר מגונה שחייב להוכיחו? שנאמר: +ויקרא י”ט+ הוכח תוכיח”.

³ Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 119b, “אמר רב עמרם בריה דרבי שמעון בר אבא אמר רבי שמעון בר אבא אמר רבי חנינא: לא חרבה “ירושלים אלא בשביל שלא הוכיחו זה את זה שנאת חנם *baseless hatred*, which is said to be a cause of the destruction of the second Holy Temple.” Cf. Ibn Ezra Lev. 19:17, stating that the failure to give reprove with חנם,

given in a way that does not embarrass the person.⁴ This is not only good moral advice, but good practical advice as well, because it avoids putting the person in a defensive posture that will make him far less likely to heed the advice.

Perhaps more importantly, the rabbis note that rather than protecting a relationship, holding back criticism is a sure-fire way to hurt a relationship in the long run. The verse says, “Do not hate your fellow in your heart, reprove your fellow and do not bear iniquity on his account.” Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam) explains that failing to reprove a person causes negative feelings to fester, and hence, the failure to reprove results in the iniquity of having hatred toward a person.⁵

Ironically, speaking to someone about his or her troubling behavior is the path to a good relationship, while accepting the wrongs that a person perpetrates is the way toward enmity. Social science has demonstrated this point. You might think that people get along best when they let things “roll off their shoulders” and only criticize the other about “the big things.” In a very interesting TED talk, mathematician Hannah Fry boiled down some information on spousal relationships gleaned from psychologist John Gottman and mathematician James Murray. She explained that “the most successful couples are the ones . . . that don't let anything go unnoticed and allow each other some room to complain. These are the couples that are continually trying to repair their own relationship, that have a much more positive outlook on their marriage. Couples that don't let things go and couples that don't let trivial things end up being a really big deal.”⁶ This raises an important point about what criticizing a loved ones really says. Too often we fear that our message is “I don't like you. I think you are a bad person because you did xyz.” But when handled correctly, the message of criticism is, “I love you, and I care about our relationship too much to allow our relationship to suffer.”

There is also another message that corrective criticism sends. Implicit in correcting a friend or loved one is the statement, “I think you are a good enough person to have the courage and character to listen to my criticism and to respond appropriately.” In the Talmud,⁷ Rabbi Yochanan ben Nuri tells us that the more he criticized Rabbi Akiva, the more Rabbi Akiva loved him, and that this was the fulfillment of the verse from Proverbs:

אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאהבך: ⁸
Do not reprove the scoffer lest he hate you, reprove the wise person and he will love you.⁸

⁴ Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 19b, “לא תשא עליו חטא” ת”ל: לא תשא עליו חטא, see also Rashi on Leviticus 19:17.

⁵ Rashbam ad. loc.

Do not hate your fellow in your heart – If he does you wrong, do not appear before him as if you like him “speaking peaceably with his fellow while lying in wait in his heart,”⁵ “this thing that you are doing is not good,”⁵ do not hate him in your heart, rather reprove him, and because of this there will be peace.

And do not bear iniquity on his account – [Do not bear iniquity] in your heart (by bearing hatred).

לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך - אם גמלך רעה לא תתראה לפניו כאוהב [בפיו שלום את רעהו ידבר] ובקרבו ישים ארבו, לא טוב [הדבר אשר אתה עושה], אל תשנאהו בלבך אלא הוכיח תוכיחהו על מה שעשה ומתוך כך יהיה שלום: ולא תשא עליו חטא - בלבבך:

⁶ Hannah Fry Ted Talk April 2014 · 17:02 “The Mathematics of Love” https://www.ted.com/talks/hannah_fry_the_mathematics_of_love?language=en.

⁷ Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 16b, “שהייתי קובל עליו לפני רבן” מעיד אני עלי שמים וארץ שהרבה פעמים לקה עקיבא על ידי, שהייתי קובל עליו לפני רבן (שמעון ברבי) + מסורת הש”ס: [גמליאל] + וכל שכן שהוספתי בו אהבה, לקיים מה שנאמר: +משלי ט’+ אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם (ויאהבך).

⁸ Proverbs 9:8.

During the High Holiday season, a number of our biblical readings present shining examples of people giving and receiving criticism. In this morning’s Torah portion we were told about Avimelekh approaching Abraham and asking for Abraham to enter a treaty. The sequence of events that follows is very instructive:

And Abraham said, “I will [so] swear.” And Abraham reproved Avimelekh regarding the matter of the well of water which Avimelekh’s servants had stolen. And Avimelekh said, “I have no knowledge of who did this, nor had you told me about it; I had not even heard [of it] until today.” And Abraham took sheep and cattle and gave them to Avimelekh and the two solemnized a treaty.⁹

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָהָם אֲנֹכִי אֶשְׁבַּע: וְהוֹכַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ עַל אֲדוּת בְּאֵר הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר גָּזְלוּ עַבְדֵי אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ: וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְיִמֶלֶךְ לֹא יָדַעְתִּי מִי עָשָׂה אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְגַם אַתָּה לֹא הִגַּדְתָּ לִּי וְגַם אֲנֹכִי לֹא שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּלַמְּתֵי הַיּוֹם: וַיִּקַּח אַבְרָהָם צֹאן וּבְקָרָה וַיִּתֵּן לְאַבְיִמֶלֶךְ וַיִּכְרְתוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם בְּרִית: ⁹

There is so much to take note of here and from which to learn. When Avimelekh approaches Abraham with the treaty proposal, it seems that Abraham has a bone to pick with Avimelekh. But Abraham doesn’t lead with that. The first thing Abraham says is אֲנֹכִי אֶשְׁבַּע, “I will [so] swear,” and then he raises the potential matter of contention. In other words, Abraham first assures Avimelekh, “I think you are a good person. I want to keep you as a friend. But I also know that you have the character to listen to my criticism and to respond appropriately, and I know that our long-term relationship will be better for it.” In turn, Avimelekh gives an excellent response. He is not offended by Abraham’s words, but he frankly responds with the facts of the situation as he knows them. Sometimes, the greatest advantage to raising an issue with a friend is that you find out that you have misunderstood. I suspect that this would turn out to be the case more often than we imagine if we consistently asked people about the things they have done to upset us. With the air cleared, Abraham and Avimelekh could enter their treaty wholeheartedly.

Another excellent episode involving תוכחה, *reproving*, is found in today’s Haftorah, where the High Priest Eli confronts Channah because he thinks she is drunk, although in fact she is simply praying fervently.¹⁰ As Rav Hamnuna says in the Talmud, “*how many great halakhot can be learned from the verses regarding Channah.*”¹¹ From the fact that Eli approaches Channah with his criticism, Rabbi Eliezer learns that, “*one who sees something unseemly in his fellow must reprove him.*”¹² From the fact that Channah corrects Eli’s misunderstanding, Rabbi Eliezer learns that, “*one who is suspected incorrectly must correct the suspicious person.*”¹³ From the fact that Eli eventually blesses Channah, Rabbi Eliezer learns, “*one who suspects his fellow of something incorrectly must seek forgiveness, and moreover must bless his fellow.*”¹⁴ Taken together, we learn that if you have a problem with someone, speak out. If you are criticized, take it in stride and respond in a dignified manner. If you are wrong, admit it. If you are not, stand up for yourself. If you have a problem with what someone else did, consider the possibility that you are the one that is wrong. What defines people of good character is not so much their immunity from mistakes but rather their ability to handle those mistakes well.

⁹ Genesis 21:24-27.

¹⁰ I Samuel 1:13-14.

¹¹ Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 31a, “כמה הלכתא גברותא איכא למשמע מהני קראי דחנה”.

¹² *Id.* 31a-31b, “וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ עַלֵּי עַד מַתִּי תִשְׁתַּכְרִין וְגוֹי - אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֵעָזָר: מֵכָאן, לְרֹאשׁוֹ בַחֲבֵרוֹ דְּבַר שְׁאִינוּ הִגּוֹן צָרִיךְ לְהוֹכִיחֻהּ”.

¹³ *Id.* 31b, “אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֵעָזָר: מֵכָאן, לְנַחֲשֵׁד בְּדַבַּר שְׁאִין בּוֹ שְׁצָרִיךְ לְהוֹדִיעֵהוּ”.

¹⁴ *Id.*, “וַיַּעַן עֲלֵי וַיֹּאמֶר לְכִי לְשָׁלוֹם - אָמַר רַבִּי אֱלֵעָזָר: מֵכָאן, לְחוֹשֵׁד אֶת חֲבֵרוֹ בְּדַבַּר שְׁאִין בּוֹ שְׁצָרִיךְ לְפִיִּסּוֹ; וְלֹא עוֹד, אֲלֵא שְׁצָרִיךְ לְבַרְכּוֹ, “”שְׁנֵי אֱמָר: וְאֵלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יִתֵּן אֶת שְׁלַתְךָ”.

I would be remiss if in this discussion I left out the last scriptural reading of the High Holiday season, the finest example of a reaction to reproof. The city of Ninveh heard but five words from the Prophet Jonah, “עוד ארבעים יום ונִינְוָה נִהְפָּקֶת,” *another forty days and Ninveh will be overthrown*.¹⁵ The people of Ninveh knew they were guilty, they heard the criticism and corrected their ways, and in so doing they hewed for themselves a new righteous and moral path.

As we embark on this season of repentance, let us embrace the model of constructive criticism. Let us learn to hear reproof with humility and to give it with love and compassion. If there are things that others have done to upset you, find the right way to bring it up, and in so doing hopefully rebuild your relationship and possibly help that person in his or her path toward repentance. Do it with love. Make sure the person understands that you are coming to him or her because you respect him or her, because you want to clear the air if you have misinterpreted something, and because you want to help him or her improve if there is room for improvement. Ask your friends and loved ones to help you identify where you have room for improvement and perhaps to help you achieve that goal. Try to find out how you might be a better husband or wife, a better mother or father, a better son or daughter, or a better friend. Become a model of self-improvement by asking others to help you in your personal efforts. Establish with your friends and family that they should feel comfortable raising concerns with you, so that your relationships won't, God forbid, spiral out of control because of unspoken slights or tragic misunderstandings. Tell your friends and family that you believe in them and their potential, that you believe in your own potential, and that you want to be their partner in constant striving for repentance and improvement.

In the book of Ezekiel, in words later reflected in the *Unetane Tokef* and the *Neilah* service on Yom Kippur, God says:

Say to them, “As I live, declares the LORD God, I do not desire the death of the wicked, but rather the repentance of the wicked from his path to live. Return! Return from your evil ways and why should you die, Oh House of Israel.”¹⁶

אָמַר אֱלֹהִים חַי אֲנִי נְאֻם אֲ-דְנִי ה' אֵם אֶחָפֵץ בְּמוֹת הַרְשָׁע כִּי אֵם בְּשׁוּב רְשָׁע מִדְרָכּוֹ וְחָיָה שׁוּבוּ שׁוּבוּ מִדְרָכֵיכֶם הַרְעִים וְלִמָּה תָמוּתוּ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל:¹⁶

When done properly, reproof is not a matter of punishing the wrongdoer, venting anger, or seeking recompense, but about seeking improvement in ourselves and others and hence in improvement in the world in which we live. A midrash¹⁷ teaches about the following conversation about the proper punishment for sin:

¹⁵ Jonah 3:4.

¹⁶ Ezekiel 33:11.

¹⁷ Yalkut Shimoni Ezekiel 358

They asked wisdom, “One who sins, what is his punishment?” Wisdom responded, “Trouble pursues the sinner.”¹⁸ They asked prophecy, “One who sins, what is his punishment?” Prophecy responded, “The soul that sins shall perish.”¹⁹ They asked Torah, “One who sins, what is his punishment?” Torah responded, “Let him bring a sin offering and it will atone for him. They asked the Holy One, Blessed is He, “One who sins, what is his punishment?” God responded, “let him repent and be forgiven.”

שאלו לחכמה חוטא מהו ענשו א"ל חטאים תרדף רעה¹⁸, שאלו לנבואה חוטא מהו ענשו, א"ל הנפש החוטאת היא תמות,¹⁹ שאלו לתורה חוטא מהו ענשו א"ל יביא אשם ויתכפר לו, שאלו להקב"ה חוטא מהו ענשו א"ל יעשה תשובה ויתכפר.

If divine punishment is the ultimate form of reproof, they by working together, by sharing constructive criticism, by lovingly giving it to others and humbly receiving it as well, perhaps we can merit during this high holiday season to receive the exact punishment for our sins that God wants for us, יעשה תשובה ויתכפר, may we successfully repent, and earn forgiveness.

¹⁸ Proverbs 13:21.

¹⁹ Ezekiel 18:4.