

You shall reprove your fellow. (19:17)

The redundancy of the words, *ho'cheach tochiach*, gives us something to ponder. Clearly, the Torah is placing emphasis on the *mitzvah* of *tochachah*, rebuke, but is it necessary to repeat the words to prove a point – or, is the Torah conveying another message? In his *Drushim*, the **Ben Ish Chai** explains this idea with an incident that occurred concerning a clever thief. A fellow was caught stealing in a country in which there was a zero tolerance law regarding theft. Anyone who was caught stealing was sentenced to death. There was no reprieve, no commutation. The form of punishment served, for the most part, as a powerful deterrent. This thief either thought he could beat the system or was in such dire need that he was willing to chance it.

When the sentence was passed by the king, the thief made a special request: Since he was a first-time offender, he was wondering if, perhaps, the king would grant him an audience for a few moments. The king was basically a decent human being who just had a low tolerance level for theft. He granted the thief his request. He would meet privately with him.

“What is it that you want?” the King asked the thief. “I have been blessed with a unique ability. I can prepare a potion that has incredible powers. It would be a sin to die and take this secret with me to my grave. I will be happy to share this exceptional wisdom with the king.”

The king acquiesced to the doomed man's request. The prisoner asked for a number of ingredients which he mixed together. After his potion was completed, the prisoner asked the king for a package of seeds. Regardless of their type, if they were to be soaked in his preparation, he guaranteed that the very same day that these seeds were planted in the ground, they would sprout fruit! This was an astonishing claim, and, if true, it would be one of mankind's greatest discoveries. The king brought the seeds and waited with baited breath for the planting to begin. Then the prisoner threw a fast one at the king.

“In order for this potion to work, one vital criterion must still be filled: the individual who plants the seeds in the ground must be one of impeccable integrity. Anyone who even misappropriated something which was not his cannot plant the seeds. The technique works only for a person who has never stolen a thing in his life. Now, we all know that I am ineligible to perform this process, so, therefore, I humbly ask the prime minister to plant the seeds.”

The prime minister suddenly became “unavailable.” He begged off from participating in this process. He just happened to remember that as a child he had stolen some money from his father's wallet. “Well, that excludes the Prime Minister,” he said. “Let us ask the Treasury Minister. Surely, someone who is in charge of the country's finances must have a spotless record.” The Treasury Minister demurred, claiming that when one works with so much money he might err in his accounting. Apparently, the prisoner was not surprised to hear this. He relentlessly kept on trying to locate that one elusive person who was worthy of planting the seeds. Alas, there was no one. Even the self-righteous King conceded that, as a youth, he had purloined a valuable

wristwatch from his younger brother.

At that moment, the prisoner fell on the ground before the King and began to cry bitterly. “My lord, behold what I have demonstrated before your very own eyes. There is absolutely no one in this country – not even his royal highness, who is not in some way tainted by the scourge of theft. Why is it that among all the thieves of this country, I was unfortunate enough to get caught? Furthermore, I stole to feed my family. Others have stolen to satisfy their illicit desires.”

Listening to this clever thief, the king, who was no fool, realized that the special potion was nothing more than a ploy devised to arouse his attention to a verity which he had ignored. Indeed, the thief had a legitimate claim: Was he any different than anyone else? After being warned that he would not be so fortunate the “next time,” the thief was released.

The episode teaches us a powerful lesson concerning our interpersonal relationships. No one is perfect. When our anger is aroused at someone whom we feel has harmed us – physically, financially, or emotionally – we should immediately question ourselves: Are we any better? Are we all that perfect? Do we feel all that self-righteous that we can find guilt in others and nothing but innocence concerning ourselves? Additionally, how often do we anger Hashem, and He simply ignores our impudence? We criticize others, yet, we expect Hashem to overlook our faults.

Hocheach Tochiach – before we confront others, let us first examine ourselves. Let us undergo some serious self-rebuke before we take it upon ourselves to find fault in others. Rebuke is repeated because the rebuke should be offered twice: once to himself; followed by the rebuke he intended to give to the other fellow.