

“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Yisrael.” (1:1)

Rebuke is far from simple. It is difficult for the one who renders the admonishment and difficult for he who is being reproached. In his commentary to *Sefer Mishlei* 9:8, the *Gaon M'Vilna* writes that *tochachah*, rebuke, is like a mirror that presents an individual with a clear picture of his real self. He can either look at the image and accept what it shows, or he can ignore the image and go about his business as usual. The *Sefas Emes* says that the word *tochachah* has its root in the word *toch*, which means inside. The purpose of rebuke is for the words to enter into the person's psyche and be internalized, so that it can have the greatest effect on him.

There is much to be derived from Moshe *Rabbeinu's* method of reprimand. He spoke only in allusion, so that he would not embarrass the people – in order to maintain their self-esteem. He spoke shortly before his death for many reasons. He sought no dialogue. He said what had to be said and hoped it would be accepted in the manner that it was rendered – with love and sensitivity.

In deference to *Klal Yisrael*, we must add that while not everyone can dole out criticism correctly, it is equally hard to accept. Yet, *Klal Yisrael* listened and accepted the critique, because they knew it was sincere.

Shlomo Ha'melech says in *Mishlei* 9:8, “Do not rebuke a scoffer.” The *Shelah Hakadosh* explains this to mean that one should not merely focus on the person's shortcomings and indiscretions, for if we emphasize the fact that he is a “*letz*,” then he will only hate you. We should focus instead on his wisdom, build him up, praise him, and then offer our critique. When criticism is couched with praise, the reproval will be accepted, catalyzing the desired effect.

The *Chafetz Chaim, z.l.*, would travel from village to village selling his *seforim*. He was once in Vilna where he noticed a man enter a restaurant and in a gruff, insolent voice demand a piece of roast duck and a glass of whiskey. When the waitress served him, he quickly grabbed the portion. Without reciting a *berachah*, he gulped down his food and washed it down with his glass of whiskey. No thank you, no *berachah*, no *menchlichkeit* – whatsoever. The *Chafetz Chaim* was shocked at this display of uncouth, beastly behavior.

The innkeeper, seeing the *Chafetz Chaim's* shock, dissuaded him from saying anything to the man, claiming that he was a veteran of Czar Nikolai's Army. He had been taken from his home as a child and conscripted to Siberia and other miserable outposts for forty years. It was no wonder that he acted like such an untamed animal. He had not been in a civilized environment for most of his life. He never saw a Jew, let alone a *tzaddik*, such as the *Chafetz Chaim*. “Please *Rebbe*,” the innkeeper begged, “ignore him. It is not befitting the *Rebbe's* dignity to speak to him. He will only act with disrespect and impudence towards the *Rebbe*.”

“Do not worry about me,” the *Chafetz Chaim* smiled. “I know how to speak to such a Jew. Trust me, good will yet emerge from our encounter.”

The *Chafetz Chaim* approached the soldier, stuck out his hand and – in a friendly voice – said, “*Shalom Aleichem*. Is it true what I just heard about you, that as a young boy you were forcibly taken from your home and sent together with other youngsters to Siberia? You were raised among the gentiles, who often sought to estrange you from your religion. You never had the opportunity to study one word of Torah. You underwent many painful trials and tribulations. You were forced to eat non-kosher food. Indeed, you suffered the vicissitudes of *Gehinom*, Purgatory, in this world. Yet, you did not renege your religion. Despite all of your sufferings, you still remained a Jew. You are indeed fortunate. If I could only be worthy of your portion in *Olam Haba*, the World to Come. Your *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, for Judaism is unparalleled. To have suffered for almost forty years and to still identify with the religion of your ancestors is nothing short of incredible.”

The *Chafetz Chaim* finished speaking. He looked into the eyes of the soldier who was shedding bitter tears – tears that emanated from a pure heart. When he was informed who it was that was speaking to him, he grabbed hold of the saintly *Chafetz Chaim* and kissed him, as he wailed bitterly for forgiveness for a life that was empty of religion, ethics and morals.

The *Chafetz Chaim* turned to him and said, “Someone such as you, who has sustained so much and remained a Jew – if you would only accept upon yourself from here on to observe the *Torah* and *mitzvos*, your eternal reward would be boundless.”

Needless to say, the *Chafetz Chaim*’s unique approach to rebuke proved effective and the soldier became an observant Jew, fully committed to the *Torah* way of life.