

## Reuven, you are my firstborn... water-like impetuosity – you cannot be foremost. (49:3,4)

The *Midrash (Yalkut Shemoni Mishlei 15, remez 953)* teaches, “Because Reuven, Shimon and Levi accepted the rebuke of their father, Yaakov *Avinu*, they merited to have their lineage enumerated together with that of Moshe and Aharon” (*Shemos 6:14*). The first three sons of Yaakov achieved an enviable pinnacle of spiritual merit by accepting their father’s rebuke. The fact that Hashem rewarded them indicates that accepting rebuke is a challenging feat, a battle which they won, and one that apparently from which others not as strong as they might not have successfully emerged.

There is no question that no one looks forward (but should) to being rebuked, to being told that he has done something wrong, but is it this acceptance worthy of reward? *Horav A. Henach Leibowitz, zl*, vividly presents the scenario that must have taken place as the *Shevatim*, Tribes/brothers, stood around their father’s deathbed. Certainly, the Torah giants (as they looked lovingly at Yaakov *Avinu*) thought about the Torah that he had taught them, his love and devotion to them, his infusing them with the *middos tovos*, refined character traits, in order to bring them to the point where they became the *Shivtei Kah*. They certainly wanted to continue learning, to derive more and greater Torah lessons. As he was about to depart this world, his final words would be based upon his observations of them, constructive words of criticism that would make them even better leaders. Is there any question concerning their attitude at this unique time? Would there be any possibility of resentment on their part that would somehow impede their acceptance of rebuke? Yet, *Chazal* imply that Reuven, Shimon and Levi had to overcome the challenge of listening to Yaakov’s critique. Why?

Apparently (explains the *Rosh Yeshivah*), accepting criticism properly is a difficult task – even for such spiritual giants. Despite their unparalleled love for Yaakov and the reciprocal love which they were certain he had for them, and despite the awe and reverence in which they viewed him, they would still maintain a tinge – a small vestige – of resistance to his *mussar*, words of rebuke. This resistance would have impeded their acceptance of the final message of Yaakov *Avinu*. To their credit, explain *Chazal*, they triumphed over the hurdle, overcame their resistance, by accepting his rebuke wholeheartedly. For this, they were justly rewarded.

What is the key to accepting criticism? The *Rosh Yeshivah* cites the *Midrash Socher Tov (Tehillim 53)*, which relates that David *Hamelech* had difficulty accepting rebuke from Avigayil. She contended that it was wrong to spill Naval’s blood. She concluded, “Do not say ‘I am the king,’ so that no one may rebuke me. *Hocheach atah atzmecha*, Rebuke yourself!” From the fact that she summed up her rebuke with these closing words, we may glean that she suspected in her heart that David would not accept her rebuke. As king, he could come up with a number of excuses to permit his actions – even if it involved shedding blood. The mere fact that she felt compelled to say what she did teaches us that even *kedoshei elyon*, the spiritually high, the sanctified leaders, find it

difficult to accept rebuke. What should we say?

Nonetheless, we derive a powerful lesson and guide for accepting rebuke from Avigayil's rebuke. "Rebuke yourself!" When we hear rebuke from someone, be it a friend or otherwise, it is good to introspect and think cogently, asking oneself: Is it possible that what he says is true? Could I be guilty of this infraction? Between "myself and the lamppost" is an ideal venue for self-scrutinization and soul-searching. Are we prepared to admit to ourselves what we shy away from conceding to others?

What is the usual reaction to rebuke? "Who are you to criticize me?" "What makes you so perfect?" When we are criticized, the reaction will invariably be to call to mind our critic's flaws. This is our way of defraying the pressure from us. All of the while, we lose out on the benefits of rebuke. The finest writers are those who seek out good editors. They do not fear critique. On the contrary, it improves their work.

Furthermore, we all know that *ohav es ha'tochachos*, love criticism, is one of the forty-eight paths to wisdom. Sadly, most people view criticism as a personal attack, which triggers all sorts of defense mechanisms. Indeed, the smaller the individual or the greater his guilt, the louder and less subtle are his defenses. Anyone who wants to achieve true distinction will appreciate and actually love criticism, because having his errors pointed out to him prevents him from repeating them.

*Horav Noach Weinberg, zl*, explains that one of the reasons that we have difficulty accepting criticism is that it comes at times when we are not emotionally prepared. We are caught off guard. On the other hand, if one is a person who invites criticism, who does not hide from it, but actually welcomes constructive criticism, he is in a position to deal with it calmly, sensibly and seriously. Indeed, such a person does not wait for a crisis to erupt before he seeks advice. He wants to preempt and prevent a crisis.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* points out that people think that the word criticism is painful and negative. They feel that a critique means that they are "no good." Absolutely not. Criticism means "you are good, but I believe that you can be even better." Veritably, it is painful to discover our mistakes, but going through life repeating them is even more painful.

*Rav Weinberg* underscores the value of giving others (our friends and those about whom we really care) criticism. Someone who is suffering spiritually or emotionally is in as dire need of help as one who is suffering physically. We resist giving criticism because we want to be loved, and we think that people will resent us for criticizing them. The greater our love for someone, the greater should be our feelings of obligation to help by pointing out his error. If we were to see someone driving the wrong way on a highway, we would surely scream, "Stop!" Why do we allow our friends to drive the wrong way in life?

*Rav Weinberg* advises to "criticize wisely." If the critique will create animosity and discord, apply

common sense and say nothing. It is better not to speak than create disharmony. Always ask yourself, “How would I react if I were on the receiving end? How would I want to be told of my problem?” For every one criticism, couch it with ten portions of love. Reassuring the person that you are on their side, that you really care and that everything you say emanates from a heart filled with love and care – goes a long way in restoring the person’s confidence and mitigating whatever ill feelings he might develop in response.

Last, the most effective rebuke is demonstrating – through action and deed – how one should act. Children who do not appreciate the beauty and value of honesty probably come from homes in which parents do not place a premium upon their own sense of integrity to one

another. Otherwise, the truth would be obvious to everyone. There would be no conflicts or discord at home. Moshe *Rabbeinu* was able to instruct *Klal Yisrael* because he represented the perfect person, one whose character was exemplary and whose Torah scholarship and *mitzvah* observance were exemplary.

The Hebrew word for rebuke is *tochachah*, a derivative of the word *hocheach*, which means to show or to prove. The *mochiach*, one who rebukes, must himself be a paragon of good. He must show that he is not personally deficient in whatever area he is rebuking the person about. Second, he must prove to the person whom he is rebuking that he has a problem. He cannot simply tell him; he must show and prove to him that a problem exists.

In conclusion, I add the words of Shlomo *Hamelech*, *Hochach l’chacham v’yeehavecha*, “Reprove a wise man – and he will love you” (*Mishlei* 9:8). Rebuke a person who possesses wisdom and common sense. Such a person will appreciate your concern and thank you for it. One who is deficient in the areas of wisdom and common sense will be suspicious of your motives and never forgive you. It is best to stay away and bite your tongue.