

“These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Yisrael...in the wilderness, in the plain, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan, and Chatzeiros, and Di Zahav.” (1:1)

In this pasuk, Moshe Rabbeinu bids farewell to his flock. His leadership of the nascent nation is coming to an end, as he is about to leave this world. His predecessor, Yaakov Avinu, blessed his sons before he left this world. His blessing took on the form of rebuke, since rebuke represents true blessing. To guide someone out of love, to point out his shortcomings constructively with the hope that it will steer him onto the correct path of life is a blessing of the highest order. Indeed, when we see another person doing something wrong, we are obligated to call his errant behavior to his attention.

The act of rebuke must be sincere. It must be administered with love and sensitivity, with consideration and respect for the individual one is rebuking. Not everyone can cope with rebuke. At times, the rebuke can be stressful to the relationship. Moshe Rabbeinu took great care in choosing the correct words of rebuke. He only alluded to Klal Yisrael's sins by mentioning places whose names referred to their sins. Moshe was concerned that a direct rebuke might be counterproductive.

It is essential that the individual who is being rebuked be acutely aware that the one who is reproving him cares deeply for him. Otherwise, the reproof can have a negative effect. At times, one may choose not to rebuke, feeling that since it would probably not be accepted, it might be better to say nothing and simply leave the door open. One day, the individual who has strayed might realize the folly of his lifestyle and return “back home.” If we close the door, if we turn our back on him, he may leave permanently, as illustrated by the following letter written by an individual who was lucky enough to see the way back – and found that he still had a place to go:

“Until a few years ago, I didn't take anything very seriously. I had graduated from a yeshiva high school and, unlike most of my class, I didn't feel I had what it took to be a learner. I didn't want to go to college right away, and I thought I would get a job and have a good time before I would settle down. My parents were not very pleased with this decision, but at that point in my life what my parents wanted was not terribly important to me.

“Regrettably, during this time I fell in with a group of friends who were not observant. At first, I told myself that I would not be influenced by them, but this turned out to be very far from the truth. In a very short period of time, I became exactly like them, and maybe worse, as I should have known better. Shabbos meant nothing — Kashrus meant nothing, and I lived my life in a haze, which even today I have trouble remembering.

“My parents were devastated. Maybe they didn’t expect me to be the best of the best, but they certainly didn’t expect this. As well as having destroyed my own life, I was on my way to destroying my family. Because of the bad influence I was having on my younger brothers, my father asked me to leave the house. When I moved out, I said some really cruel and spiteful things to my father. I can remember him standing silently at the door, with my mother crying at his side.

“I realize now that what I had seen in them as a weakness was actually enormous strength. I had no contact with anyone in my family for almost a year. Deep inside, I missed them very much, but I foolishly thought that I would be viewed as weak if I contacted them.

“One morning, I was shocked to find my father waiting for me outside of the apartment building I lived in. He looked at me with tired, worn eyes and asked if we could talk. Stubborn to the core, I only nodded, and we walked to a corner coffee shop where we sat down. He told me how much everyone missed me and how I had been in their minds and hearts every second that I had been gone. He told me how my mother agonized over what had happened, blaming herself for not having been there for me. While he was talking, tears began pouring from his eyes.

“He told me that he wasn’t here to lecture me. He just had one request. He wanted me to drive with him that afternoon to Monsey, NY, and say one chapter of Tehillim at the grave of a certain tzaddik. As far removed as I was from Yiddishkeit, I was still moved by his request.

“I told him that I couldn’t go that day, but that I would go with him another time. In truth, I had plans to go with some friends to Atlantic City that evening, and I didn’t want to cancel them. When I told him that I couldn’t go that day, but that I would go with him another day, he reached across the table and took my hand in his and just looked at me with his tear-streaked sad face. I felt my own eyes begin to water and, rather than have him see me cry, I just agreed to meet him later that day.

“I made the necessary apologies to my friends, and later that day I met my father. We didn’t talk much during the trip up. I remember getting out of the car with him and walking over to one of the graves. He put some rocks on top of the grave and gave me a Tehillim. We must have looked quite strange. My father in his long coat, a black hat perched on his head, and me with my leather bomber jacket and jeans. We didn’t stay long. Ten minutes after we had arrived, we were on our way back. The return trip was as quiet as the trip there. My father let me off in front of my apartment building. I still recall the words he said to me as I got out of the car. He told me that no matter what may have happened between us and no matter what may happen in the future, I was always going to be his son and that he would always love me. I was emotionally moved by his words, but I was not experiencing the spiritual inspiration for which he may have been hoping. I shook my head at his words, and we parted company.

“The next morning, I woke up to some shocking news. On the way back from Atlantic City, my friends were involved in a head-on collision with a tractor trailer. There were no survivors.

“As I write this letter, I am overcome with emotion. I made a Bris today for my first child. My father was sandek and, as he held my son on his lap, his eyes met mine and we smiled. It was as if we had finally reached the end of a long journey.

“We have never talked to each other about that trip to Monsey, nor have I ever told him about the death of my friends. I just walked into their home that evening and was taken back with open arms and no questions asked.

“I don’t think I will ever understand what happened that day. I just know that sitting here late at night with my son in my arms, I will try and be the father to him that my father was to me.”

This poignant letter, a testimonial to the power of teshuvah, repentance, and the overwhelming love of a father for his son, conveys many messages. In truth, each of us will derive his own personal message. Some will learn that one never closes the door on a child. One must always retain hope that something will inspire his return. Others will observe that, regardless of how far a child strays, the innate love and filial bond that a child has for a parent endures. A child’s negative behavior is usually his way of crying out for attention and love – not a rebellion against his parents. Last and most important, we now begin to have an idea of Hashem’s love for us – His children. If a father of flesh and blood can forgive his child due to his undying love for him, how much more so does the Almighty, our Father in Heaven, wait patiently for our return.