

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

Moshe *Rabbeinu* opens *Sefer Devarim* with words of rebuke. For forty years, he had been their leader, but it was now, shortly before he was to leave this world, that he chose rebuke as his parting words. We derive from here that rebuke should be well-thought out and delivered at a time when the rebuker feels it will be accepted. We do not reproach out of anger, but out of love and caring. We neither waste words, nor do we mince words. We say what must be said, even if being brutally honest may have backlash. Moshe chose his last days on earth as the venue for administering his *divrei tochahah*, words of reproach. When a person is about to die, he harbors no vested interests. Thus, the subject of his rebuke could not counter that Moshe had an agenda. The only agenda one has prior to death is acting with integrity – being honest with himself and others. Time is short; his speech could end suddenly – without warning. His interactions must be pure, characterized by love, feeling and caring.

Furthermore, *Chazal* note that Moshe did not outright mention the actual sin, but he alluded to their indiscretion. He was duty-bound to rebuke, and he wanted his critique to be accepted. He chose, however, to wrap his words in a mantle of love and respect. Had he simply castigated them, his words might have bruised their dignity, which is a surefire approach to a failed rebuke. A heart that is shamed often closes itself up to correction. He hinted at their errors, thus providing them with an opportunity for inward reflection without suffering the pain of public humiliation.

*Kavod habrios*, honoring the dignity of every Jew, not only trumps *tochachah* – it enhances it and makes it more palatable. Our quintessential leader's final words to the nation were words of love – words that corrected without denigrating, that rebuked without condemning. His leadership was strong -- yet heartfelt and sensitive.

The *Alter, zl*, m'Slabodka, *Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel*, succeeded in laying the foundation for Torah *chinuch* in the *Yeshivah* world. *Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl*, commented that the efforts of the Alter saved the Lithuanian Torah world from the scourge of the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment. When asked what was the key to his success, the recipe for building people, emphasizing *gadlus ha'adam*, the greatness of man, his *talmid*, *Horav Meir Chodosh, zl*, replied, "Love! He rebuked with love! This is how he raised them." True mentorship requires admonishment, but only rebuke that is couched in love. Correction that flows from anger wounds the soul. A mentor who seeks to build his student, to elevate him to a higher spiritual and moral plane, must be guided, not merely by truth, but by compassion. "Brutally honest" can destroy a person. Only when a heart feels cherished will it be open to change.

*Horav Yechiel Michel Stern, Shlita* (Rav of Ezras Torah), related the following story, which demonstrates how a seasoned *mechanech*, educator, a *Rosh Yeshivah* known for the love he showed his *talmidim*, rendered rebuke. *Horav Yaakov Neiman, zl*, stood at the helm of Yeshivas Ohr Yisrael in Petach Tikva – a *yeshivah* that produced many dynamic Torah leaders, as well as laymen for whom Torah study was their primary vocation. Rav Stern had a roommate who was also

his *chavrusa*, study partner. He was a *frum*, observant, boy who liked to have a good time. Suffice it to say that he danced to his own beat, which often did not align with the *yeshivah's* rules.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* would take a daily walk, accompanied by one of his students. It was a time for learning and an opportunity to point out areas in which the student could grow spiritually. In short, it was an unprecedented opportunity for a *ben Torah* to receive guidance and *chizuk* from a premier *Rosh Yeshivah* and *mechanech*. That day, *Rav Yechiel Michel* was selected to walk with *Rav Neiman*. Everything was going smoothly until *Rav Yechiel Michel* saw his friend walking towards them. "This cannot be good," he thought to himself. His friend met them. The *Rosh Yeshivah* asked him, "Where are you going?" With a defiance born of pure *chutzpah*, the *bochur* replied, "To see a film at the theater." When *Rav Yechiel Michel* heard this, he was certain the *Rosh Yeshivah* would administer a resounding slap to the face of his friend. He did not; rather, he said, "It is cool outside, and it is a bit of a distance to the theater. I suggest that you return to the dorm and put on a sweater."

This was too much for the young future *Rav* of *Ezras Torah* to contain. When he returned to the *yeshivah*, he went up to the *Rosh Yeshivah* and asked for an explanation. A student had openly flaunted a behavior unacceptable in a *yeshivah* milieu. Furthermore, he had spoken to the *Rosh Yeshivah* with a smug attitude that bordered on *chutzpah*. The *Rosh Yeshivah* countered, "How many years have you been a *Torah mechanech* that you feel secure in making such a judgment call? I have been a *Rosh Yeshivah* for over half-a-century. Leave the decisions to me."

That night, the *bochur* was very agitated. He could not understand why the *Rosh Yeshivah* had not excoriated him for his behavior. He was certain that the next morning he would be sent home. The following morning, the *Rosh Yeshivah* was deep in conversation with the *Mashgiach*, under whose purview daily discipline of the *talmidim* fell. The *bochur* was certain he would be called over by the *Mashgiach* and asked to leave. He knew that he had acted inappropriately and was prepared to face the music. Nothing happened. Another day passed, and he could no longer tolerate the anxiety. He had done wrong, and he expected to be punished. What was taking so long? That night, he was climbing out of his skin. He asked to see the *Rosh Yeshivah*. He walked into his office and broke down in copious weeping. "I acted inappropriately. I went where I was not supposed to go, and I spoke to the *Rosh Yeshivah* with *chutzpah*. I beg forgiveness, and I am ready to accept whatever punishment the *Rosh Yeshivah* decides is best for me."

*Rav Neiman* took the *bochur's* hand in his and soothed it, "Your father works for the city – does he not? He probably just barely ekes out a living to support his family. Yet, he values a *Torah* education so much that he is prepared to deprive himself in order that his children should study *Torah*. You are the oldest of your siblings. They all look up to you, to the point that the decisions you make concerning your future will greatly impact the path they, too, will choose. Why would you act in an unbecoming manner for a *ben yeshivah*? Does your father not deserve a 'return' on his investment? Do you want to be the catalyst for your brother's leaving *yeshivah* and following a way of life not aligned with your *Torah* potential?"

The *bochur* heard the message clearly. *Rav* Neiman's patience in addressing his innocent behavior saved, not only him, but his entire family. The *bochur* returned to the *gemorah* and became an outstanding *masmid*, diligent student of Torah. Years passed; he sought no position, just learning. When he was ready to get married, he was accepted into one of the most illustrious Torah families. It was at the *chupah* that *Rav* Neiman called over to *Rav* Yechiel Michel and said, "Nu! What do you think: Should I have slapped him or pinched his cheek?"

Perfect students are rare, but so are perfect mentors. When addressing a student's misbehavior, restraint is not only advantageous, it is essential. While a harsh punishment may correct an action, it can leave a lasting damage on the heart. [I may add that the mentor should first introspect to make sure that he is not acting to assuage his own bruised ego.] A small affectionate gesture, such as a pinch on the cheek, conveys disappointment, while affirming unconditional love and support. It teaches the student that growth is expected, but never at the expense of respect and connection.