



## **VAYIKRA**

**Emor/ Iyar 17**

To Rebuke or Not to Rebuke: Is There a Middle Path?

May 13, 2017

TO REBUKE OR NOT TO REBUKE  
IS THERE A MIDDLE PATH?

ABSTRACT

How should we respond when we see someone do something wrong? Should we give the wrongdoer a piece of our mind? Or should we mind our own business? Should we rebuke or ignore? Fight or accept? What is the best approach to dealing with a child that has misbehaved?

When witnessing a significant wrong, the first inclination of some may be to rebuke the perpetrator, while the first inclination of others may be just the opposite – to ignore the situation. Too much love can spoil someone; too much discipline can demoralize and break the spirit. Some are great at criticism; some never criticize. Which is better? And could there be another way?

Every word in Torah is rich with nuance and profound psychological insight, and in this week's Torah reading, a single expression in the opening verse provides the answer.

There are three types of rebukers: those that bite, those that overlook and those that heal.

A powerful teaching from the Baal Shem Tov about rebuke, the surprising change of attitude of Lag B'Omer's hero, the analogy of the *shvitz* and other anecdotes teach us a novel strategy to dealing with disturbing encounters, and a new -- and much needed -- approach to education and just plain communication.

## 1. Rebuke or Ignore?

Imagine that we witness someone doing something odious. I will not specify what that is – each one of us can easily picture a situation where a person in our presence is doing something seriously wrong.

Got it? See it in your mind's eye?

Now let me ask you: What are you going to do about it?

Are you going to give that person a piece of your mind? Or are you going to mind your own business? Are you going to rebuke or ignore? Fight or accept?

When witnessing a significant wrong, the first inclination of some may be to rebuke the perpetrator, while the first inclination of others may be just the opposite – to ignore the situation.

Too much love can spoil someone; too much discipline can demoralize and break the spirit. Some are great at criticism; some never criticize.

Which is better?

This question has plagued religion from its inception. How should faith approach sin? With wrath or with tolerance? How should it confront evil? By going to war or with passive opposition?

The same can be asked of the education system. How should teachers discipline a wayward and disobedient student? With severity or leniency? Should they be unyielding or accepting?

And finally – might there be a third alternative? Might there be a way to remedy the problem without resorting to negativity? Might there be a way to be kind without compromising strong values?

## 2. A Turkish Bath (Optional Story)

A chassid [Rabbi Sholom Ber Gordon] once asked his Rebbe [the Friediker Rebbe] this very question. And the Rebbe answered him thus:

“Since you traveled through Turkey, and everything offers us a lesson in serving G-d, learn how to rebuke from the Turkish Bath. A person first enters the hot, steamy room, which opens up his pores releasing the grime and dust. Once he has warmed up, relaxed, absorbed the heat and is perspiring freely, he climbs to a higher bench in the steam room, where it is even hotter due to the rising heat. After he has thoroughly been saturated with the heat, he leaves the room and asks an attendant to smack him with oak leaves...

“This is how we must speak with another, even one who may have gathered some “grime” and needs some rebuke: First warm him up, with kind and loving words. Then elevate him to a higher plane. And then... he will ask you to smack him...

The third Turkish Bath approach is described in this week’s Torah reading – Parshat Emor.

## 3. The Third Approach

[Indeed there is a third approach, and it is described in this week’s Torah reading – Parshat Emor.]

The Torah begins with the words – “Speak to the priests, the sons of Aharon and tell them”<sup>1</sup> – a command that the Talmudic Sages associate with the obligation to educate. The redundancy – “speak” and “tell them” – informs us, they say, “to caution” the adults how they educate the children.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 21:1.

<sup>2</sup> Talmud Yevamot 114a. Cited in Rashi’s opening commentary to this week’s portion

Now, the Hebrew word for “caution” – *libazhir* – shares the same root as the word *zohar*, meaning “radiance.” Also the word used here for “speak” is *emor* (rather than *dabeir*) is special – it means to speak softly, kindly.<sup>3</sup>

This conveys a fundamental lesson about education, especially religious education. We must speak softly and kindly to our children and students, educate them about life’s dangers, but do so in a way that radiates the beauties of life.

#### 4. The Importance of Discipline

Of course, discipline is a most necessary component in education. An unshaped and impressionable child needs direction and guidance to grow into a healthy and virtuous adult.

Yet, how often have we witnessed – and how many of us have been hurt if not damaged – by discipline devoid of love?

Especially in the religious world, how many of us have been affected by dogmatic, fear-driven discipline?!

We have witnessed the devastating psychological effects of many people growing up in homes and schools where they were indoctrinated with fear and guilt, and threatened with the wrath of G-d.

#### 5. Educating with Love

But the Torah clearly tells us – indeed, it actually commands us – to educate our children with radiance and love. Discipline is necessary, but alone it squelches the little seedling so that it grows up dwarfed and misshapen. However, when it is infused with radiance and love, it can nurture the most beautiful flowers.

See yourself as a gardener, the Torah is telling us. Within the earth lie flower seeds. Each person carries within him/herself divine beauty and light, by virtue of the fact that we have all been created in the Divine Image. Each of us is an indispensable flower in a grand, cosmic garden. As a gardener, the role of parent and educator is to clean the earth, discard the weeds, and create a nurturing environment so that the seedling inside each child can emerge intact, unencumbered and bloom.

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<sup>3</sup> Mechilta, Rashi Yisro 19:3.

## 6. The Baal Shem Tov's Way

This Emor method – speaking gently and kindly – was epitomized by the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, who adamantly challenged the preachers of his time who would harshly rebuke sinners. He taught:<sup>4</sup>

A person should give rebuke with love, as the verse says, “G-d chastises whom He loves.”<sup>5</sup> However, one who seeks to aggrandize himself by admonishing others, or who rebukes solely to make a living and tries to arouse the audience with a wailing voice, as alluded to in the verse, “My tears were my bread,”<sup>6</sup> arouses stringent judgment against the Jewish people.

He illustrated this with the following parable:

There was once a king who, angered by his son, banished him from the royal palace, sending him out into the streets to fend for himself. But he also sent two servants to keep an eye on him.

After a while, one of the servants returned and slandered the prince to his father, describing graphically the prince's misbehavior. The second servant also returned with a report of misbehavior, however, he spoke out of pain for the prince who was banished from his father's presence to the point where he had completely forgotten how to conduct himself in a royal fashion.<sup>7</sup>

Upon hearing the second servant's words, the king realized that he had contributed to the situation by throwing the prince into the streets to fend for himself. He had compassion on his son and sent to fetch him.

So, too, is it with us. When we chastise or criticize others harshly, we only remind G-d (the king) of how bad they (and the rest of us) are. But when we find a way to do so with love, we also arouse G-d's compassion – both on the wrongdoers and ourselves.

## 7. Lag B'Omer Connection

The Baal Shem Tov had a great teacher and role model – who set the tone of how to educate and speak to others with love, even those that needed healing and repair. But this lesson did not come easily...

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4 Toldos Yaakov Yosef Parshas Kedoshim. Keser Shem Tov sections 131. 262

5 Proverbs 3:12.

6 Psalms 42:4.

7 Implied in this second servant's report is that the king himself, by banishing his son among common folk, is responsible for his degeneration. This is stated explicitly in Ben Pores Yosef 68d.

This great master was none other than Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yochai (Rashbi) – whose *yahrzeit* we will celebrate tomorrow on Lag B'Omer. As the Rashbi himself requested, that his *yahrzeit* should become a day of great celebration.<sup>8</sup>

The Talmud tells us the following story:<sup>9</sup>

When the Roman rulers of the Holy Land placed a price on the heads of Rabbi Shimon and his son Rabbi Elazar, they hid in a cave for twelve years. During this time, they spent every minute of their day studying Torah. When they emerged from the cave, they were shocked to discover people plowing and sowing: How could people set aside the eternal life that is Torah and occupy their days with the transitory life of the material? So intense was their wrath at such folly that whatever met with their burning glance went up in flames. Proclaimed a voice from heaven: “Have you come out to destroy My world? Return to your cave!”

Rabbi Shimon's thirteenth year of study, while increasing his knowledge and appreciation of the eternal truth of Torah, also taught him the value of endeavors other than his own. Now, wherever he went, his look would heal rather than destroy.

Even the greatest of sages and mystics had to reach a higher state of spiritual maturity – a 13th Bar-Mitzvah year – not to burn up the world, but to heal it.

This became the basis and foundation of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings – the Chassidic method – to transform through warmth and elevation.

This is the third Emor *v'omarto/l'bazbir* approach – to educate and caution not through fear, but through illumination. Like in the Turkish Bath – to warm and elevate the person, and then he will invite you to challenge him.

## 8. Three Kinds of Rebukers

The Baal Shem Tov explains<sup>10</sup> that those who rebuke others can be divided into three categories: gold, silver, and bronze – those that bite, those that overlook and those that heal.

The Hebrew word for bronze is *nechosheth*, which is similar to the word *nachash*, meaning snake. Those whose harsh words arouse negativity are like biting snakes.

Then there is a category of gold, which, like this softest of metals, is total mercy and compassion.

<sup>8</sup> See Zohar III 287b. 291a. See Pri Etz Chaim Shaar Sefiras HaOmer ch. 7. Mishnas Chassidim Mesechta Iyar 1:6.

<sup>9</sup> Shabbat 33b.

<sup>10</sup> Keser Shem Tov section 262.

Silver is the third, in-between, approach. It represents a sincere rebuke but delivered softly, with words of love, which enter the heart of the listener.

This is the third middle *Emor* approach.

## 9. Speaking with Sensitivity (Optional Story)

This kind of sensitivity the Baal Shem Tov tried to instill in his disciples. He did so by many means. For example one day, the Baal Shem Tov instructed several of his disciples to embark on a journey. He did not tell them where to go, but assured them that the destination and purpose of their trip would be revealed in due time.

After traveling for several hours, they stopped at a wayside inn to eat and rest.

Now the Baal Shem Tov's disciples were pious Jews who insisted on the highest standards of *kashrut*. So when they learned that their host planned to serve them meat, they asked to see the *shochet* of the house, interrogated him as to his knowledge and piety and examined his knife for any possible blemishes. Their examination of the kashrut standard of the food continued throughout the meal. They inquired after the source of every ingredient in each dish set before them – ad nauseum.

As they spoke and ate, a voice emerged from behind the oven, where an old beggar was resting amidst his bundles. “Dear Jews,” it called out, “are you as careful with what comes out of your mouth as you are with what enters into it?”

The party of chassidim concluded their meal in silence, climbed onto their wagon and turned it back home. They now understood the purpose for which their master had dispatched them on their journey that morning.

## 10. Inspiring through Love

As we witness today the great destruction – psychological and physical – wreaked by fundamentalists who not only rebuke but also resort to violence in trying to impose their faith on others, we need to take the Torah lesson of Parshat Emor to heart.

Instead of harshness or passivity, Emor calls upon us to influence but through the soft approach of love, that reaches into the heart and helps motivate a person to mend his ways and grow.

Even if rebuke may work at times, it often ends up demoralizing and breaking a person, instead of motivating him.

So, in the final analysis, the most influential tool to change the world is gentleness. In this harsh world, let us take a gentle, but firm stand. [Amen.]

## 11. Counting the Omer (Optional Conclusion)

We are perfectly capable of it.

Being created in the Divine Image gives us abilities and resources far beyond the ones we can ever imagine.

The focus on this gentleness and love – even when faced with a situation that requires some rebuke – is in full glare during these days of the Counting of the Omer, when we honor and mourn the deaths of Rabbi Akiva’s students who died in an epidemic due to their disrespect for each other. It was their greatness that was their undoing: Unlike their colleague, Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yochai, who learned to repair instead of destroy, their intense light caused them to be intolerant of each other. Their uncompromising commitment to truth compromised their love.

Yet, the days of the Counting of the Omer are also days of healing and majesty – a time when we repair that which was broken, and celebrate the power of mortals to become something greater than their pre-destined natures. A time when we learn the lesson from Rashbi how to educate and inspire with warmth and love.

The Torah’s command to count the Omer is very precise in its wording:

*V’sefartem lochem* meaning “And you shall count for yourselves.”

*V’sefartem* tells us many things – much more than just merely counting.

Firstly, it is telling us *sefartem* which not only means to count, but to relate a story and to shine/illuminate (like a sapphire). [Similar to the word *libazbir* – which also means “radiance”].

The word *lochem*, which seems superfluous, emphasizes that the counting, the story and the illumination is to be directed “to yourselves,” to your material world and selfish involvements. For it is this world, and your selfish emotions, drives and desires which you must refine.

*V’sefartem lochem*, thus, means:

You shall tell a story to your selves, you shall illuminate to your selves – to your personalities – your ability to change ... to refine and transform your very characters. This is a time when you must rise to towering heights of character development and personality refinement. A period when you can and ought to change yourselves.

Even when you witness a negative situation, and you are tempted to criticize and “burn” up the pettiness and folly around you, we learn from Rabbi Shimeon Bar Yochai, that we must harness our passion toward healing and repairing.



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When you tell an illuminating story, you shine a light into a dark world, you demonstrate the power of the Divine – the power to take a raw human being and transform him or her into a beacon of compassion and love. Amen.

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