

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Devarim

### How Can We Give Rebuke in a Way that Will be Appreciated?

#### The Obstacles Preventing Us from Feeling Gratitude for Rebuke

Over the years through my interactions with numerous people and students of various ages and backgrounds, I have seen one clear distinguishing point between those who truly want to grow and those who don't. It boils down to whether we sincerely appreciate constructive criticism or whether we choose instead to place the blame on others. The temptation to tread the latter path originates from the reaction to the first-ever rebuke in the Garden of Eden. Hashem asked Adam: "Where are you?" (*Bereishit* 3:9). This short question instills a strong message that we must always question ourselves where we are in relation to Hashem, and whether we are on the path of moving closer or – G-d forbid – farther away from Him. The Divine question also entails where we are on all levels: spiritually, emotionally, and physically. Adam had just descended several spiritual worlds yet instead of taking responsibility and admitting that he was spiralling down, he chose to exonerate himself by saying, "The woman whom You gave [to be] with me she gave me of the tree; so I ate" (*Ibid.* 12). Since then, ingrained within us all is the tendency of blaming others rather than taking responsibility and looking for opportunities for growth. Undoubtedly, it is uncomfortable to receive criticism. It can make us feel inadequate and unworthy, and that hurts! So, the natural tendency is to repress this pain by dismissing the rebuke, and living in the illusion that we are doing nothing wrong. In addition, it is common to block our own shortcomings by finding faults with others. People who are insecure in themselves are more prone to this attitude of avoiding facing their faults. Their lack of self-confidence makes them disbelieve their ability to mend their ways. It is much easier to point fingers at others than admit being wrong and express a sincere apology. Yet, the initial pain can be transformed into growing pangs when we appreciate the chance to work on ourselves and evolve. If we can get ourselves to that place, we will truly be thankful whenever someone makes an effort to reprimand us, even when the rebuke isn't given in the very best way. In hindsight, don't we all agree that we have learned the most from our so-called failures?

#### Do We Know How to Give Rebuke in Our Time?

Although some people say that no one knows how to rebuke today, I have experienced that it is possible to successfully rebuke even the kind of person who is less likely to accept reproach, if we come from a truly loving place of seeing the good in the other. Actually, there doesn't seem to be a proper Torah source for this statement. On the contrary, the Torah teaches the importance of giving rebuke (*Vayikra* 19:17). Possible, the said statement may be taking Talmudic discussion out of context: "Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says: I would be surprised if anyone in this generation knows how to rebuke" (*Babylonian Talmud, Arachin* 16b). Yet, the same Talmudic discussion continues and its purpose is to decide how far the obligation of rebuke extends, and at what point a person may be exempted from giving rebuke. This is either when the reprimanded person curses the one who gives him rebuke or when he hits him. Today even the person least receptive to rebuke will rarely commit any of these harms, and thus it is still our sacred duty to try our best to help others straighten their ways, whenever there is even a small chance they will listen. Although giving rebuke is one of the least favorable parts of my vocation as an educator, I do it when absolutely necessary. While I'm not always successful, I've learned some helpful principles about how to rebuke. To be successful in anything we must always turn to Hashem. Especially, whenever we are going to perform a difficult task, the first thing is praying

to Hashem. Only then can we plan how to proceed. In interacting with others, we accomplish nothing when the other part becomes defensive. So, we must ensure that our reproach doesn't come off in a way that can be misunderstood as an attack. Starting the rebuke with positive words of admiration for the good we see in the other, including showing compassion for their difficult situation, has a good chance of yielding success. Then it may work well to express surprise about the negative action in question, and how it seems out of character with the rest of the person's positive qualities. To avoid the person becoming defensive, it is recommended to voice the reproof as a question such as "Why did you act x, y, or z?" This also shows that we are open to hearing his side and believe that he may have good reasons to do what he did. Once we have gained the confidence of the person, we want to rebuke that we aren't out to get him, but sincerely want to help him, he will let down his guard. The best thing that could happen then is that he will ask for advice, on how he could improve his ways, and then the rest is straightforward. When we have reproofed someone and even if it went well, we cannot expect the person to make a 180-degree turnabout on the spot. Remember, the founder of the Musar Movement, (concerned with enhancing moral and ethical conduct), Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, states that repairing one bad trait is harder than learning the entire Talmud. So perhaps in another seven years, you may notice the person's improvement!

### Rebuke Must be Without Personal Vendetta

We always read *Parashat Devarim* the Shabbat before Tisha b'Av the main fast day commemorating the destruction of our Temple. This Parasha opens with Moshe's wise rebuke of the Jewish people. It is told about Rabbi Ya'acov Yitzchak of Peshicha that every day he read several verses from this parsha as he believed that these words of Moshe have the power to enter the heart and lead one to repent.

**סֵפֶר דְּבָרִים פָּרָק אַ פְּסוּק אַ אֱלֹהֵי הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בַּמִּדְבָּר בְּעַרְבָה מִזֶּה סוּף בֵּין פְּאָרְן וּבֵין תְּפֵל וְלִבְּן וְחִצְרֵת וְדִי זָהָב:**

"These are the words [of subtle rebuke] which Moshe spoke to all the Jewish people in [the Plains of Mo'av, on the east] bank of the Jordan. In the wilderness, [in the plains of Mo'av], at the Sea of Reeds, [in the wilderness] of Paran, between Tofel and Lavan, at Chatzerot and Di-Zahav"

(*Devarim* 1:1).

These are words of rebuke, since all the places where they angered G-d are listed here. But, out of respect for the Jewish people, Moshe was vague with his words, and he only hinted [at their sins, by mentioning the places where the sins occurred, and not the sins themselves]: (Rashi *ibid.*). Rashi was troubled by why the verse states, "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all the Jewish people..." without mentioning the content of Moshe's words. Rashi concludes that our verse must contain the actual words that Moshe said to the Jewish people. Thus, the list of locations at the end of the verse is not, as it first appears, a description of where Moshe said his words, but rather, they are Moshe's words themselves. Each place on the list of the Israelites' locations alludes to a specific sin. Moshe thus gave a subtle rebuke, indirectly admonishing the Jewish people for their numerous past rebellions. This kind of rebuke is a compassionate technique that prevents the offender from becoming defensive, as he is discovering the reproach by himself. With the phrase, When listing "All the places where they angered G-d," Moshe did not mention Marah, since Marah was a rebellion against Moshe's own leadership, and not directly against G-d. So, while Moshe felt it appropriate to admonish the Jewish people for their sins against G-d, Moshe did not seek to defend his own honor by rebuking the people for rebelling against him (Based on Rabbi Menachem Mendel Shneerson, *Sichas Shabbos Parshas Devarim* 5725).

**Constructive Criticism: Building Up Those We Rebuke**

Rashi explains “Di-Zahav” (lit., enough gold) as - He rebuked them for the calf they had made because of their abundance of gold. Yet, the Talmud (Brachot 32a) interprets the allusion of Di Zahav as Moshe said to Hashem: The riches you gave to B’nei Yisrael until they said 'ד/דai – ‘enough’ is what caused them to erect the **הַזָּהָב עִגְלָה** – ‘golden calf.’ According to the Talmud, it seems as if Moshe blames Hashem for the sin of the golden calf, whereas Rashi teaches us that this verse is Moshe’s rebuke of the people for their sins! How do we understand this seeming contradiction whether it was the nation’s fault, or G-d’s fault (so to speak)? Rabbi Rosner explains, “After hundreds of years of slavery, He took the Israelites out of Egypt with great miracles and gave them vast riches. What can be expected of someone who becomes a millionaire overnight? It is hard to deal with so much good fortune so quickly. It is Your fault, Hashem, for having spoiled them! According to Rav Asher Weiss, on the one hand, Moshe was giving the Israelites rebuke but at the same time, he was defending us. It’s as if he was saying – Hashem, what did You expect of them? Having been deprived of riches for hundreds of years, they simply could not properly handle the great wealth you gave them with the Exodus. This teaches us a very important lesson. Whenever we are trying to improve someone else, while our rebuke may make them feel as if we are putting them down, we must raise them up. At the same time that we reprove them for wrongdoing, we must excuse them for their negative behavior. We must always display love for those we reproach and attempt in some way to defend their behavior or see another angle of their transgression, even when rebuke is in order (Based on Shalom Rav, v.II, p.348-349). When we balance rebuking and defending those we rebuke by carefully building up those we rebuke, then they will likely appreciate and feel gratitude for our constructive criticism!

**Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Devarim –****Some Tips for Showing Gratitude while Giving and Receiving Rebuke**

*Parashat Devarim* is read on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B’Av – the date on which both Holy Temples were destroyed. The Talmud states the reason for the destruction of the Temple was that people failed to rebuke one another (*Shabbat* 119b). Rambam explains that the driving force for criticizing others should be our love for them and our desire that they don’t hurt themselves (Rambam, *Hilchot De’ot* 6:7). Most of us only criticize the behavior of others when it bothers us, not when it’s harmful to them. We may ignore the actions of family and friends that are clearly detrimental to them, but we’ll rush into action if they do or say something that is disruptive to us. The Talmud reminds us that we didn’t care enough to prevent others from harming themselves. Such behavior epitomizes baseless hatred, which the Talmud lists as the reason why the Second Temple was destroyed (*Yoma* 9b); (Based on Katia Bolotin, *14 Tips For Giving and Receiving Constructive Criticism*.)

**Tips for Giving Constructive Criticism**

- **“Reprove not a scorner lest he hates you; reprove a wise man and he will love you” (Mishlei 9:8)**  
– Make yourself into King Solomon’s wise person who recognizes the value of criticism. Then share your wisdom with others, by offering criticism in a loving, positive, and sensitive way.
- **Start by Complimenting or Acknowledging** – something positive that the person has done so that s/he’ll be more receptive to your suggestion for change
- **Don’t Overdo it** – Don’t repeat your rebuke needlessly. That is like Rubbing Salt in the Wound. Like Moshe, give subtle rebuke and speak briefly to the point.
- **Don’t Focus on the Wrongdoing** – Rather than focusing on what another is doing wrong, tell the

person what he or she should do differently, and give concrete examples.

- **Be Mindful of Your Emotions and Timing** – Only speak if you are motivated by genuine concern and care. Moshe waited until the end of his life. Bide your time and speak when you and the recipient are both ready.
- **Look for the Good Points of the Other Person** – Focus on building up the other person and respecting his or her dignity.
- **End with an Encouraging Statement** – sandwiching your criticism between praises.

#### Tips for Receiving Criticism

- **Even if it May Hurt, Always Look for What You Can Learn from the Message** – Take time to process and consider how the criticism can be used for your personal growth.
- **Avoid a Defensive Reaction** – especially if the admonishment is coming from someone who cares about you.
- **Express Appreciation, Such As** – “Thanks for pointing this out to me. I value your feedback. I’ll work on it.” This is the best response to criticism. Such a response creates an atmosphere of cooperation and prevents confrontation.