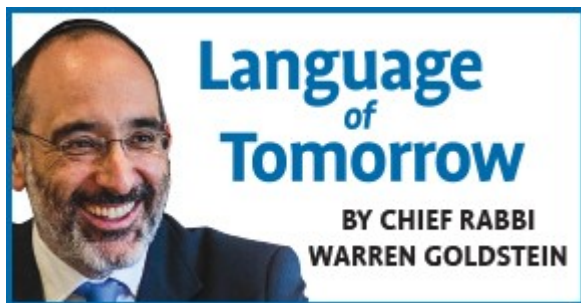


In This Issue:

- **"Language of Tomorrow"** by Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein
- **"Family Parsha"** by Nesanel Yoel Safran
- **"Shraga's Weekly"** by Rabbi Shraga Simmons
- **"The New Old Path"** by Rabbi Benji Levy



How To React To Criticism

Winston Churchill once wrote: "Criticism may not be agreeable, but it is necessary. It fulfils the same function as pain in the human body. It calls attention to an unhealthy state of things."

In a recent behavioural study, titled: "Behavioral Obligation and Information Avoidance", a group of students watched a fake documentary about a serious disease called "TAA Deficiency". The students weren't informed that TAA Deficiency was fictional; instead, they were given the option of providing a cheek swab to assess their risk of developing the disease. Half the students were told that if they ever developed TAA Deficiency, then the treatment would involve a two-week course of pills. Of this group, 52% agreed to provide the diagnostic cheek swab. The other half of the students were told the treatment would require taking the pills for the rest of their lives. Just 21% of this group agreed to the swab.

The implication of the study is clear - people are resistant to feedback that may oblige them to do something difficult or unwelcome.

Criticism and words of rebuke are particularly difficult to deal with. Implicit in these is the message that we need to change our ways, to modify the way we act. And nobody likes to be told they're doing the wrong thing. We'll do anything rather than admit that. Rather than hear the raw truth, we'll curate perfect online identities, seeking affirmation from friends who often aren't even acquaintances - that we are accomplished, beautiful, morally upstanding, that our lives our perfect.

The problem is, our minds are wired to reject or deflect negative feedback. If there's something wrong with us, something that - if we were aware of it - could push us to improve ourselves or address the problem directly, we'd rather not know about it.

This is unfortunate, because if it comes from the right place - if it's constructive, and done in the right way, at the right time - criticism can be enormously powerful in driving positive personal change and advancing human achievement.

At the moment, we are immersed in the 'Three Weeks' of national mourning. It is the time when we remember the destruction of the two Temples and the exile of our people. This period climaxes on the 9th day of Av - Tisha b'Av - when we undertake the only 25-hour fast of the year besides Yom Kippur. Fasting is not normally associated with mourning. On the contrary, a person who is sitting shiva is not supposed to fast - so why do we fast on this day?

The Rambam (Laws of Fasts 5:1) says we fast on days of national mourning "in order to awaken the hearts [of people], to open the paths of repentance and to be a remembrance of our misdeeds and those of our fathers, which are like ours now ..." From the Rambam it is clear that the purpose of fasting is to catalyse the process of reflection, introspection and repentance. Interestingly, fasting is not only the culmination of the Three Weeks - we also kick off this period with a fast day, the Fast of Tammuz. We see that repentance, the process of mending our destructive habits, returning to a state of moral and spiritual purity, is an instrumental part of the Three Weeks.

Viewed in this light, Tisha b'Av and the Three Weeks are a time of national reawakening. And, crucially, it's a national reawakening sparked by national rebuke and criticism. The Torah portion we read this week is Devarim, in which Moshe delivers his final address to the nation before passing. He begins this speech not with words of encouragement or affirmation, but, surprisingly, with words of reproof. We continue in this vein by reading Chapter 1 of Isaiah, in which the criticism and rebuke comes on even stronger. The Prophet Isaiah, who lived during the time when the First Temple stood, delivers a stinging critique of the people of his generation, calling on them to repent and return to God.

It's no coincidence that these are the Torah passages we read before Tisha b'Av every year, because they are a reminder that this is a period not just of mourning, but of national rebuke - the Three Weeks are a call to action in which we are reminded where we have strayed as a nation, and shaken from our complacency. In particular,

we reflect on, and try to correct, the sin which caused the destruction of the Second Temple and the ensuing exile - divisiveness and baseless hatred between Jews.

Being able to hear criticism is crucial to the repentance process. The Rambam lists 24 traits which impede teshuva, and among them is hatred of rebuke. When we bring ourselves low through poor decisions and negative patterns of behaviour, rebuke and criticism can be decisive in arresting the slide and getting our lives back on an upward trajectory. This was the role the prophets performed throughout the ages; this was Moshe's focus during his last days; and as the Rambam points out, this is an important task of any spiritual leader to this day - to be the voice of conscience, the voice guiding us back to the good.

But, what lies at the heart of the idea of rebuke and reproof? What lies at the heart of the process of teshuva - of repentance? Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz says it is all about guiding us back to the truth. In life, we can make moral mistakes, and those mistakes can permeate our actions, and indeed our entire way of life. The process of going through the experience of reproof and then repentance is a process of returning to the truth. Reproof - and again, it needs to come from the right place, from a place of care and concern - can help us snap back to reality. It can begin breaking the bonds between our misdeeds and our pure, essential selves, and guide us back to truth.

Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz brings a fascinating Midrash demonstrating that rebuke is about guiding a person back to the truth, back to reality. The Midrash says when Joseph revealed

himself to his brothers, he rebuked them for the way they had treated him all those years before, and the brothers were in turmoil and unable to respond. The problem is, nowhere in the text did Joseph directly rebuke his brothers for what they did to him. He merely said: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

Rav Shmuelewitz explains the rebuke is contained in the simple words: "I am Joseph." Rebuke is about reconnecting us to the truth. He was pointing out to them that their lives had been based on a terrible mistake. When Joseph had related his dreams to them many years before about how they would one day bow down before him, the brothers felt threatened. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, their concern was that Joseph would oppress them and lord over them, and they therefore perceived him as a threat to the family. To protect the family, they sold him into slavery in Egypt, separating him from his father, and causing untold grief. But, when Joseph says: "I am Joseph", he demonstrates to them that their fears were unfounded, because now indeed he does have power over them, and rather than using that power in a destructive fashion, he is in fact using it to help them - to rescue them from famine, to save the family. The rebuke reconnects the brothers to the truth. It is delivered quietly and subtly, but not any less powerfully. And the brothers' stunned silence confirms that, as they reflect on the weight of their actions.

The Three Weeks and Tisha b'Av are likewise a time to quietly and humbly reflect on our mistakes - on where we have fallen short of our potential as individuals and as a nation - and to

use that as a springboard for turning things around. It is particularly a time to reflect on how we, as a nation, can find each other in love, respect and unity. This Shabbat - the Shabbat right before Tisha b'Av - is called Shabbat Chazon, "The Shabbat of Vision". The name comes from the opening words of the passage we read from the Book of Prophets this Shabbat: "Isaiah's Vision". Rav Hirsch says the word for vision, chazon, is derived from three other words, meaning "to divide", "to penetrate", and "chest". He explains that if you combine all three of these words, chazon signifies penetrating into the heart of a person - examining what lies beneath the surface, undertaking deep introspection so we can figure out where we are going wrong, and how we can improve.

This is the work of Tisha b'Av and the Three Weeks. We don't just go through the motions of fasting, we don't just undertake a series of empty rituals. We ponder the meaning of our existence, we ponder the shape of our lives, and we specifically ponder the spiritual causes of the destruction of the Temple and ensuing exile. And we do so not alone, but together, as a nation. This is a time of national repentance, when we draw on the energy of being part of the Jewish people, and of our shared national destiny. It's a time to reflect on where we have come from as a nation and what we can do to move forward together. Absorbing criticism is never easy for anyone. But, when we read those strong words of Moses and Isaiah this Shabbat, let's remember the power of rebuke to kickstart that journey.



The Family Parsha

By Nesanel Yoel Safran
Lessons, stories and discussion questions for parents and kids

Constructive Criticism

From this week's Torah Portion

There are times when we should speak up and tell others that they are doing something wrong. But there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. In this week's portion, Moses has to remind the Jewish people to behave better, and not repeat some of the mistakes they had made before. But instead of angrily bawling them out, Moses gently hints to the people what they had done wrong, and encourages them to do better in the future. We learn a big lesson from here, that if we criticize others, we should do it gently and sensitively, and get much better results.

Story

In our story, we meet a special boy who understands the secret of how to speak to others.

"PEACE AND QUIET"

It had been a great hiking trip. The boys had given it all they had, and used every drop of energy climbing up and down Bear Mountain. Now they were happy to have finally made it back to the bus, where they could rest up during the long ride back to camp.

The guys had just gotten cozy, and were melting into their seats, when all of the

sudden ... DOOM CHA-KA DOOM, DOOM CHA-KA DOOM-DOOM ... blaring loud music started pumping from the back of the bus that shocked the boys wide awake.

"What on earth...?" They turned around and saw to their dismay that a group of rowdy, older kids had gathered back there, and between the music and their loud and raucous laughter, it looked like no one was going to sleep a wink on this bus ride.

"What should we do?" asked Larry, desperately.

Rick, the biggest and toughest kid in their crowd, was quick to answer. "I'll tell you what we're gonna do. I'm going right back there and telling those inconsiderate jerks to pipe down!"

With that, the husky boy got up and stormed to the back of the bus. But when he got there, things didn't work out exactly as the guys had hoped. Not only didn't the boys in the back pay any attention to Rick's angry complaint, but they just laughed at him, and turned up the music even louder!

Defeated, Rick returned to his seat. It seemed like all hopes of having a quiet, restful bus ride had gone up in smoke. The boys tried to make the best of it, and rest anyway, but it was going to be really hard.

A few minutes later Harold, the youngest kid in their group, stood up.

"Hey, what are you doing?" asked Larry, his seatmate. "We're not back yet, there's a long way to go."

The short, skinny kid answered matter-of-factly, "I'm going to ask those guys in the back if they could be more quiet."

"What?!" exclaimed his friend, "Big Rick already tried, and got nowhere, and now *you're* going to face them? That's suicide! They'll eat a little kid like you for breakfast!"

But Harold just smiled, and went about his plan. Meanwhile the rest of the guys had caught on to what was happening, and turned around to watch their brave but foolish friend walk into the lion's den. They all knew he didn't stand a chance.

As Harold stepped closer to the kids in the back, his friends held their breath. It wasn't going to be pretty.

Then the impossible happened. As Harold spoke to them, the big, rowdy guys seemed to actually calm down. They turned down their music, and started smiling and chatting with Harold as if he were their long lost friend!

"What in the world...?" uttered an amazed Rick.

After a couple of minutes, the little kid headed back to his seat and calmly sat down among his astonished friends.

"Well don't just leave us in suspense," begged Larry. "How did you ever tame those guys?"

"It was really no big deal." Harold said. "I just told them that they looked like nice guys to me, and even though their music was really great, some of us up front were just a little too tired to appreciate it. And you know what? They really

were nice guys. They volunteered to turn the music down, and even invited me to sit next to them."

"But I still don't get it!" said Rick. "Those same guys nearly threw me out the window! How did you get them to just melt like butter in the palm of your little hand?"

Harold shrugged. "What can I say? My mom always taught me that if you speak to people nicely, they'll usually listen to you. And that's all I did."

The boys enjoyed the rest of the ride home in peace and thought about the big lesson they all learned from their little friend: that a gentle word can sometimes be stronger than an angry shout.

Discussion Questions

Ages 3-5

- Q. How did the loud kids in the back of the bus feel when Rick yelled at them to be quiet?
 A. They felt like they wanted to fight against him, and not stop making noise.
- Q. How did they feel when Harold spoke to them nicely?
 A. They felt much more like trying to cooperate since when people ask in a nice way, others are more willing to listen.

Ages 6-9

- Q. Why did his friends feel that Harold's attempt was doomed to failure?
 A. They saw the situation as a power struggle. Whoever was stronger was going to get his way. Once Rick, the biggest and strongest among them, wasn't able to force the kids to quiet down,

they figured there was no way that a little kid like Harold could do it.

Q. Why do you think Harold succeeded where Rick failed?

A. When Rick approached the boys, he criticized them sharply with anger. The natural reaction is get defensive and fight back, which is just what the kids did by turning up the music. Harold's approach was different. He didn't see it as a power struggle, so he didn't feel like he had to fight against the other kids. He didn't criticize openly, and even made the boys feel good about themselves. This allowed them to let down their defenses, and respond to his reasonable request.

Ages 10 and Up

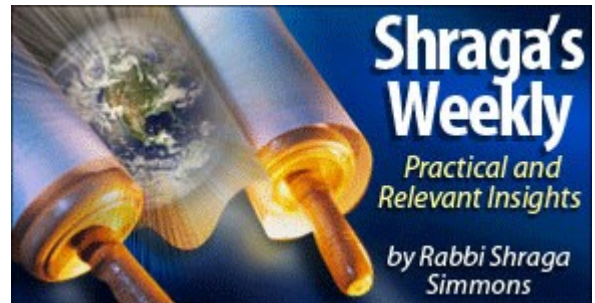
Q. When we are struggling against others, what should be our primary goal?

A. Our first reaction might be to say that the main goal is to win the battle and get our way. But if we can find a way to let both sides win, and somehow feel like they got what they need, this is even better. It may take some creative thinking but, more often than not, a solution to disputes can be found where no one comes out a loser.

Q. Our sages teach that just as a pool of water reflects that which approaches it, so too do two hearts reflect one another. What does this mean to you?

A. The sages have revealed a great and powerful secret to living. God has made human nature such that people automatically tend to feel about us the way we feel toward them. If we're loving, they will be too. If we feel hostile, we are likely to get the same reaction. There

were great sages who saved themselves from dangerous people by working up such love for them in their hearts that the other just couldn't hurt them. This was what Harold accomplished, that by treating the noisy kids with respect and friendliness he was able to bring the same out of them.



Constructive Criticism

It's been 40 long, hot years in the desert. The era is drawing to a close with the Book of Deuteronomy — Moses' swan song, his final appeal to the Jewish people.

Much of this week's Parsha consists of Moses rebuking the people for a variety of mistakes, including the Golden Calf, Korach's rebellion, the complaints about meat and water, and more.

Why did Moses choose now — the final days before his death — to deliver 40 years worth of pent-up rebuke?

The Torah tells us:

"You shall rebuke your neighbor, but not do a sin in the process." (Leviticus 19:17)

Rebuke is fine, but not if the effect will be negative. If the other person will get defensive, angry, or not accept the criticism, then it is better left unsaid.

Moses evaluated that because he was in his final days, his criticism would be accepted by the people, because:

- a. He wouldn't have to keep repeating the rebuke — i.e. "nagging."
- b. He saved the people the embarrassment of having to face him in the future.
- c. The people wouldn't feel a need to get defensive and rebel — e.g. "Oh, I'll show him!"
- d. The people would pay close attention, knowing that Moses' dying words are his most selective and important to hear.

If a person feels you have your own self-interest at heart — and not his — he won't listen to what you're saying.

Rebuke must clearly be for the benefit of the other person. He has to know that you care about him, are on his side, and want what's best for him.

That is why Moses specifically delivers the rebuke after defeating Sichon and Og in battle (see Deut. 1:4). He had just reaffirmed his dedication to the people. So they knew that if Moses had criticism, it was only coming from a place of love.

Proof is in the Pudding

A look at the original Hebrew clarifies this concept. The Torah says: "You should give *toch'acha* to your neighbor." *Toch'acha* is from the same word as *hoch'acha*, meaning "proof."

The Torah is telling us that the way to get our neighbor to change is not through harsh rebuke, argumentation, or clever persuasion. The only way to convince anyone of anything is by way of

a clear and obvious proof. As the Talmud (Brachot 7a) says: "It is better for a person to realize the truth for himself, than to have it beaten into him with 100 lashes."

Remember the story of Joseph and his brothers? After being sold into slavery, and then rising to the position of prime minister, Joseph again meets up with his brothers when they come to Egypt searching for food. (The brothers don't recognize Joseph because he's aged and grown a beard.) Joseph gives them a hard time and threatens to take Benjamin hostage. Judah protests vehemently, saying that their father Jacob will be unable to survive the loss of a son.

At this point, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers by saying, "I am Joseph; is my father still alive?" (Genesis 45:3) This was Joseph's *toch'acha*: "You say that our father won't survive the loss of a son — but did you consider that when you tore me away from our father 22 years ago?!"

Nobody like to be told what to do. Therefore it is the act of self-realization which eliminates the defensive reaction... and produces effective *toch'acha*. Joseph got the brothers to realize the internal contradiction of their own argument. Moses, too, only hinted at the people's sins indirectly — e.g. referring to the incident of the Golden Calf by referring to the city Di Zahav ("enough gold").

Toch'acha is not harsh. Rather, *toch'acha* is the beauty of reality staring us squarely in the face.

Gone Fishing

The Midrash (Tanna d'Bei Eliyahu) tells the story of Elijah the Prophet meeting up with a

fisherman. "Do you study Torah?" Elijah asks. "No," replied the fisherman, "I'm just a simple man, not endowed with any measure of talent or intelligence."

"Tell me," said Elijah, "how do you prepare your fishing net?"

"Well," said the man, "It's actually quite complicated. First I have to select the proper gauge rope, and then I weave the net in a particular pattern to ensure the proper balance of strength and flexibility."

"How do you go about actually catching the fish?" inquired Elijah.

"Oh," said the man, "that involves many complex factors like water depth, temperature, speed of the current, season of the year, time of day, type of fish and location. I've spent years mastering these techniques, and I'm able to earn a good living from fishing."

"When you get to heaven," said Elijah, "you said you plan to testify that you didn't study Torah study because you're just a simple man, not endowed with any talent or intelligence. But your expertise as a fisherman refutes your very own claim!"

Did you ever hear someone say he doesn't have time to study wisdom, visit his mother, or do volunteer work? Yet what about all the hours of TV he watched?

This is *toch'acha* — incontrovertible proof.

Love Rebuke

Of course, nobody likes to be on the receiving end.

But do you think you're perfect? Of course not! If you want to reach your potential, look for constructive criticism. Go ask for help to get rid of your mistakes. When a person is committed to reaching a goal, he'll accept incredible doses of nagging, harrassments and insults. Think of what an Olympic athlete willingly endures from coaches!

One of my favorite all-time stories is told about the Sfas Emes, a famous Torah commentator (19th century Poland). One time when he was about 12 years old, he had stayed awake all night learning Torah with a friend. When dawn broke, they prayed the morning service at the earliest time, and went to bed. A few hours later, the boys awoke and returned to the Yeshiva, where they encountered the grandfather of the Sfas Emes, the revered Rabbi Yitzhak Meir (known as the "Chiddushe HaRim"). Rabbi Yitzhak Meir did not know that his grandson had stayed awake all night studying, and proceeded to rebuke him for not having attended the regular morning service. The rebuke lasted a few minutes, throughout which the Sfas Emes stood and listened attentively, not uttering a word.

When the grandfather had left, the boy's friend expressed disbelief: "Why didn't you defend yourself against this unwarranted rebuke?!" "Because," replied the Sfas Emes, "it's not every day that I get such personalized feedback from my revered grandfather. And I wasn't about to miss such an opportunity!"

No doubt this is what King Solomon meant when he said, "Give *toch'acha* to a wise person - and he'll love you!" (Proverbs 9:8)

Caring Enough

One final point: Giving *toch'acha* is everyone's obligation. We mustn't ignore another person in need. That is why it is juxtaposed with the verse: "Don't stand by your brother's blood" (Leviticus 19:16).

If you really love someone, you can't stand to see him living a misguided life. Who gives you the most criticism? Those who love you the most - your parents. It's because they love you that they can't simply ignore you by saying, "He's wasting time but I don't care." Similarly, humanity is one. If one person hurts, we all feel it.

We must reach out and find a way to help. The Talmud (Shabbat 119) says that Jerusalem was destroyed because people didn't correct each other. Today, the Jewish people are hemorrhaging from assimilation. We have to make a pro-active effort to bring Jews closer to Torah. How?

By being better role models.

Giving *toch'acha* does not mean criticizing, throwing stones, or shouting louder than the next guy. Real *toch'acha* is demonstrating through action and deed. If secular Israelis do not appreciate the warmth and sanctity of Shabbat, it is because observant Jews are not keeping Shabbat in the right way. If Jews were truly projecting the beauty of Torah, then the truth would be obvious to all. No arguments, no conflicts. Indeed, the Talmud says that Moses was able to instruct the people only because he exemplified what he preached.

The Sages ask: When the Messiah arrives, how will we know it's really him? The answer: It will be obvious. Of course, there are some technical qualifications, but his basic identity as the Messiah will be self-evident. He will speak words of Torah so sweet and clear, that no one will need to question his identity. It will be a pure outpouring of positive energy that overwhelms everything in its path. That is the beauty of true *toch'acha*.



Yitro, the Anonymous Messenger

In the final five weeks of his life, Moses attempts to remind his beloved people of the Torah's teachings, and counsel and inspire them towards a successful future. While essentially reviewing the Torah (Many infer this perspective of the book of Deuteronomy from its other title, *Mishneh Torah* – mentioned in *Deut.* 17:18 – which literally translates as the repetition of Torah). Moses chooses to omit certain incidents and highlight others in his recounting of the events. Reading between the lines of his review can therefore sometimes be as enlightening and valuable as the lines themselves.

Moses begins by reminiscing over his inability to carry the burden of leadership alone and lays out the innovative idea of delegating responsibility to other worthy individuals (*Deut.* 1:9-13). This strategic approach was actually

first floated by Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, who saw the burden under which Moses was operating (*Ex. 18:17-18*), however, in his review of events, Moses fails to mention his father-in-law.

On a basic personal level, Yitro is Moses' family and therefore one would assume that the right thing to do would be to mention the fact that this plan was originally his initiative. On a broader level, since one of the Torah portions is named after Yitro and grants significance to his presence in the chronicle of the Jewish people, one would assume that Moses would have at least mentioned his name here and given him credit for the idea. Furthermore, the Talmud states: 'whoever says something in someone else's name brings redemption to the world' (BT, Tractate *Chullin* 104b). It is clear that the Talmud lends great importance to giving credit to the originator of ideas. In that case, why was Moses not sensitive to this value?

One may suggest that Moses simply forgot to mention his name, but a deep appreciation of who Moses was precludes entertaining such a notion.

Through his omission, Moses is implicitly showing that the idea of delegation is not actually a revolutionary idea at all. By not making a big deal of the original suggestion from Yitro, and by not emphasizing the radical nature of such a strategy, Moses is showing that the idea of delegation is more evolutionary than revolutionary. Moses should not have needed Yitro to suggest it. It is the kind of idea that he was capable of coming up with himself.

We all are familiar with ideas, strategies and plans that we simply should not need someone else to notice on our behalf, and yet for one reason or another we are unable to tap into our inner resources and think of them for ourselves. Of course, having a sounding board is useful; often it helps to have someone hold up a metaphorical mirror for us to look into, and sometimes it is simply easier to hear other people's suggestions than to think of our own. However, this does not mean that the ideas that others suggest are so revolutionary that we could not have thought of them ourselves. This is most notable when our friends, family or colleagues turn to us for advice. More often than not, the advice we offer is strikingly similar to advice they may have given us in the past. If we genuinely dig deep within ourselves, we are likely to find that the solutions are all there, just waiting to be revealed.

Yitro represents one who notices the words that are not said. He hears beyond the sound and sees beyond the sight. We too must learn to listen to our intuitions, to tune into our enormous potential and to follow our instincts. Moses does not mention Yitro's name when talking of his system of delegation, for the idea was one he should have thought of alone. If we are able to tune out the general noise of life and tune into our own individual strengths, insights and wisdom, then we will be better able to acutely analyze our decisions, effectively assess our actions and problem-solve successfully and independently.