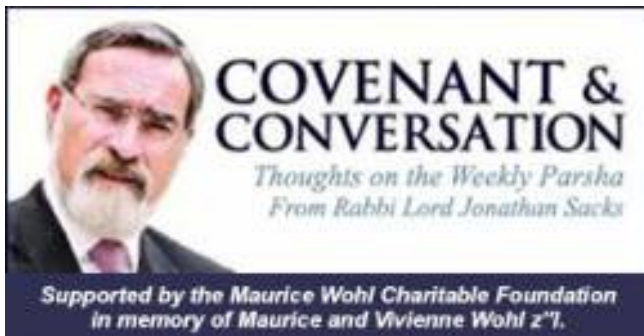


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Sprints and Marathons

It was a unique, unrepeatabe moment of leadership at its highest height. For forty days Moses had been communing with God, receiving from Him the Law written on tablets of stone. Then God informed him that the people had just made a Golden Calf. He would have to destroy them. It was the worst crisis of the wilderness years, and it called for every one of Moses' gifts as a leader.

First, he prayed to God not to destroy the people. God agreed. Then he went down the mountain and saw the people cavorting around the Calf.

Immediately, he smashed the tablets. He burned the Calf, mixed its ashes with water and made the people drink. Then he called for people to join him. The Levites heeded the call and carried out a bloody punishment in which three thousand people died. Then Moses went back up the mountain and prayed for forty days and nights. Then for a further forty days he stayed with God while a new set of tablets was engraved. Finally, he came down the mountain on the tenth of Tishri, carrying the new tablets with him as a visible sign that God's covenant with Israel remained.

This was an extraordinary show of leadership, at times bold and decisive, at others slow and persistent. Moses had to contend with both sides, inducing the Israelites to do *teshuvah* and God to exercise forgiveness. At that moment he was the greatest ever embodiment of the name Israel, meaning one who wrestles with God and with people and prevails.

The good news is: there once was a Moses. Because of him, the people survived. The bad news is: what happens when there is no Moses? The Torah itself says: "No other Prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut. 34:10). What do you do in the absence of heroic leadership? That is the problem faced by every nation, corporation, community and family. It is easy to think, "What would Moses do?" But Moses did what he did because he was what he was. We are not Moses. That is why every human group that was once touched by greatness faces a problem of continuity. How does it avoid a slow decline?

The answer is given in this week's parsha. The day Moses descended the mountain with the second tablets was to be immortalised when its anniversary became the holiest of days, Yom Kippur. On this day, the drama of *teshuvah* and *kapparah*, repentance and atonement, was to be repeated annually. This time, though, the key figure would not be Moses but Aaron, not the Prophet but the High Priest.

That is how you perpetuate a transformative event: by turning it into a ritual. Max Weber called this the routinisation of charisma.¹ A once-and-never-again moment becomes a once-and-ever-again ceremony. As James MacGregor Burns puts it in his classic work, *Leadership*: "The most lasting tangible act of leadership is the creation of an institution – a nation, a social movement, a political party, a bureaucracy – that continues to exert moral leadership and foster needed social change long after the creative leaders are gone."²

There is a remarkable Midrash in which various Sages put forward their idea of *klal gadol ba-Torah*, "the great principle of the Torah." Ben Azzai says it is the verse, "This is the book of the chronicles of man: On the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God" (Gen. 5:1). Ben Zoma says that there is a more embracing principle, "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Ben Nannas says there is a yet more embracing principle: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Ben Pazzi says we find a more embracing principle still: "The first sheep shall be offered in the morning, and the second sheep in the afternoon" (Exodus 29:39) – or, as we might say today, Shacharit, Mincha and

Maariv. In a word: "routine". The passage concludes: The law follows Ben Pazzi.³

The meaning of Ben Pazzi's statement is clear: all the high ideals in the world – the human person as God's image, belief in God's unity, and the love of neighbours – count for little until they are turned into habits of action that become habits of the heart. We can all recall moments of insight or epiphany when we suddenly understood what life is about, what greatness is, and how we would like to live. A day, a week, or at most a year later the inspiration fades and becomes a distant memory and we are left as we were before, unchanged.

Judaism's greatness is that it gave space to both Prophet and Priest, to inspirational figures on the one hand, and on the other, daily routines – the *halachah* – that take exalted visions and turn them into patterns of behaviour that reconfigure the brain and change how we feel and who we are.

One of the most unusual passages I have ever read about Judaism written by a non-Jew occurs in William Rees-Mogg's book on macro-economics, *The Reigning Error*.⁴ Rees-Mogg (1928-2012) was a financial journalist who became editor of *The Times*, chairman of the Arts Council and vice-chairman of the BBC. Religiously he was a committed Catholic.

He begins the book with a completely unexpected paean of praise for halachic Judaism. He explains his reason for doing so. Inflation, he says, is a disease of inordinacy, a failure of discipline, in this case in relation to money. What makes Judaism unique, he continues, is its legal system.

This has been wrongly criticised by Christians as drily legalistic. In fact, Jewish law was essential for Jewish survival because it “provided a standard by which action could be tested, a law for the regulation of conduct, a focus for loyalty and a boundary for the energy of human nature.”

All sources of energy, most notably nuclear energy, need some form of containment. Without this, they become dangerous. Jewish law has always acted as a container for the spiritual and intellectual energy of the Jewish people. That energy “has not merely exploded or been dispersed; it has been harnessed as a continuous power.” What Jews have, he argues, modern economies lack: a system of self-control that allows economies to flourish without booms and crashes, inflation and recession.

The same applies to leadership. In *Good to Great*, management theorist Jim Collins argues that what the great companies have in common is a *culture of discipline*. In *Great By Choice*, he uses the phrase “the 20-Mile March” meaning that outstanding organisations plan for the marathon, not the sprint. Confidence, he says, “comes not from motivational speeches, charismatic inspiration, wild pep rallies, unfounded optimism, or blind hope.”⁵ It comes from doing the deed, day after day, year after year. Great companies use disciplines that are specific, methodical and consistent. They encourage their people to be self-disciplined and responsible. They do not over-react to change, be it for good or bad. They keep their eye on the far horizon. Above all, they do not depend on heroic, charismatic leaders who at best lift the company for a while but do not

provide it with the strength-in-depth they need to flourish in the long run.

The classic instance of the principles articulated by Burns, Rees-Mogg and Collins is the transformation that occurred between Ki Tissa and Acharei Mot, between the first Yom Kippur and the second, between Moses’ heroic leadership and the quiet, understated priestly discipline of an annual day of repentance and atonement.

Turning ideals into codes of action that shape habits of the heart is what Judaism and leadership are about. Never lose the inspiration of the Prophets, but never lose, either, the routines that turn ideals into acts and dreams into achieved reality.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How is Jewish Law a container for the spiritual and intellectual energy of the Jewish people?
2. Are you surprised that Ben Pazzi’s principle is viewed as the greatest in the Torah, or does it make sense to you?
3. How can you find inspiration in consistent, daily ritual and routine?

NOTES

1. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 1978), 246ff.
2. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper, 1978), 454.
3. The passage is cited in the Introduction to the commentary HaKotev to *Ein Yaakov*, the collected aggadic passages of the Talmud. It is also quoted by Maharal in *Netivot Olam, Ahavat Re’a* 1.
4. William Rees-Mogg, *The Reigning Error: The Crisis of World Inflation* (London: Hamilton, 1974), 9–13.
5. Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001); *Great by Choice* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 55.



Creating Holiness

As Parashat Kedoshim begins, Moshe is instructed to assemble the entire community for a public reading of a specific set of laws. The stated purpose of this assembly is to achieve holiness. This exercise should be considered in light of a statement found in the previous parasha which serves as the backdrop or background for what will follow: In order for the enterprise we call "Judaism" to be sustained in the Promised Land, a different standard of decency will be required. Israel is a holy land, and it will not tolerate certain behaviors; its delicate constitution will literally "vomit out" indecency.

The specific laws that are to be read at this public gathering bear a striking similarity to the set of laws which were transmitted publicly, to the entire nation, at the foot of Mount Sinai - laws that came to be known as the Ten Commandments. Traditionally, the Ten Commandments, as a legal corpus, are considered the framework of Judaism's religious, social and moral system. Far more than ten utterances of specific legislation, they are principles of law - principles that are expanded upon and applied in various ways in Parashat Kedoshim.

And yet, as important as the Ten Commandments are in defining Jewish mores and practice, there is another set of laws, introduced at the very dawn of creation, known as the Seven Noahide Laws. The existence of this universal corpus explains the seemingly odd fact that Judaism is not, nor has it ever been, a proselytizing religion. The Seven Noahide laws were given to all of mankind as a means to perfect humanity, while the more demanding and arduous strictures and limitations called for by Jewish law were never seen as obligatory for all of mankind.

Careful consideration of the Seven Noahide Laws reveals a fairly obvious correlation to the Ten Commandments. The Noahide Laws include creating a just legal system with a functioning judiciary, and the prohibition of idolatry, murder, theft, sexual immorality, blasphemy and eating the limb of a live animal. With the exception of latter, the "overlap" with the Ten Commandments is unmistakable. What is most striking, though, is what is **not** included in the Noahide laws: Honoring one's parents and Shabbat observance.

Although *shemirat Shabbat* (Sabbath observance) has become a benchmark for the Jewish religious experience, had non-Jews been ordered to commemorate the seventh day, and thus acknowledge God as the Creator of the universe, we would not have been surprised. Similarly, had the commandment to honor one's parents been bestowed upon all "Noahides," we would have no trouble grasping the universal importance of this law. Nonetheless, Noah and his descendants were not required to observe the Sabbath or to honor their parents.

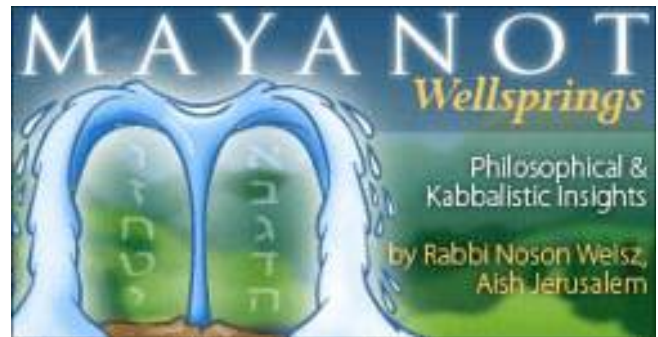
Keeping this anomaly in mind, it is surely no coincidence that the very first laws that are to be read publicly at the assembly designed to create holiness in the Jewish polis, the laws that immediately follow the commandment to "be holy," are precisely the elements of the Ten Commandments that do not bind the Noahide: "Man shall have reverence for his mother and father, and guard my Sabbaths; I am God."

The context makes it clear: It is these particulars that are the core of holiness. Considered together, we may say that they reflect a perspective that is unique to Judaism: While all the other laws deal with the present, only these elements deal with the past - Shabbat as a testimony to the creation of the universe, and reverence for parents who brought us into the world.

The Torah demands decency of the non-Jew; refraining from not taking another's life, spouse or physical possessions is basic decency. However, the Torah does not require that the common man cultivate historical consciousness, a sense of where we came from or why we are here, who created us, who brought us into the world and who nurtured us. The laws that are unique to the Ten Commandments require us to keep a constant eye on the past, and this is a uniquely Jewish requirement that creates a uniquely Jewish perspective and experience.

Modern man, so full of hubris and an exaggerated sense of importance, looks at the past as being quaint, naive, and barely relevant. Perhaps this is collateral damage of belief in an evolutionary process in which one's ancestors were primates. In contrast, the elements of the Ten Commandments

that are uniquely Jewish requirements teach us to look to the past as we move forward. Thus, no matter how sophisticated we become, the Sabbath remains relevant - perhaps even more than ever in a world of constant digital access and stimulation. The Torah teaches us that no matter how smart and important we think we have become, we must respect and cherish the previous generation, especially those who nurtured us, cared for us, gave us their unconditional love - and made our progress possible. The result of this perspective is a life steeped in holiness.



The Holy Connection

God spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to the entire assembly of the Children of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy." (Leviticus 19:1)

A very inspiring commandment. But what does it mean?

Does it have any independent content, or is it no more than a general injunction to observe the other commandments? Is it a statement of the overall purpose of observance rather than an injunction to do something? What does it mean to

be holy, anyway? Suppose I was to wake up one morning freshly imbued with the desire to attain holiness, how would I go about it?

Nachmanides approaches the commandment as having a dual aspect – as a statement of purpose, but one with independent content.

Just prior to this commandment, the Torah gives us a list of prohibited forms of intercourse. In this injunction to holiness, the Torah declares that to connect with God, the observance of those commandments is not sufficient, however stringent such observance may be. To connect to God you have to attempt to attain holiness.

The lesson of the commandment to be holy is that we can be fully observant without necessarily being very different than the rest of the world in terms of pursuing materialism or leading a life devoted to consumption. We can open restaurants that are up to cordon blue standards and yet are strictly kosher. We can dress our wives and daughters in the latest fashions without violating the letter of the laws of modesty. We can aspire to live in mansions and drive fancy cars and spend our vacations in romantic far away places without violating any of the strictures of the Torah in the slightest degree. In short, observance does not foreclose the possibility of leading a materialistic life.

In fact, there is even a downside to observance in this regard. Whereas the non-observant person who engages in such a lifestyle has no illusions that he is leading a spiritual life, the strictly observant person who engages in the same life with minor variations might easily conclude that because he is observing the Torah commandments

to the letter, he is immersed in spirituality even as he drowns in materialism. It is to forestall this attitude that the Torah urges us to holiness.

HOLINESS VS. MATERIALISM

Holiness is separation from the passion for materialism. It is a turning away from this physical, material world, and turning towards God. The focus of observance is not technical compliance with a set of injunctions. The focus is to connect with God. Whoever adopts this quest as his goal cannot possibly fall into the error of mistaking mere observance for holiness. He is bound to understand that unity with God cannot be reached through materialistic consumption. So says Nachmanides.

Thus according to this opinion, which is also the opinion of Rashi in his explanation of this verse, the injunction to holiness is primarily linked to the end of Parshat Acharei Mot (where the prohibited forms of intercourse are listed) as well as to the end of Parshat Kedoshim (which also enumerates prohibited physical relationships).

Maimonides in the "Eight Chapters," his introductory work to *Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers"), seems to maintain a different opinion, which also serves to highlight the Torah concept of human holiness. In Chapter 6 of this work, Maimonides studies an apparent contradiction among Torah authorities regarding the definition of the attributes of the superior human being.

He presents us with two individuals. One is naturally drawn towards the performance of good deeds, and carries them out with genuine enthusiasm and the true pleasure of self-

expression, while the other is only able to perform his good deeds after a difficult inner struggle with an inherently evil nature. For this person the performance of good deeds is accompanied by the anguish of self-denial and conflict. Both of the individuals lead a life of virtue and good works. Which of them is superior?

TWO VIEWS OF THE EVIL INCLINATION

Maimonides presents the opinion of the philosophers that a desire for evil is a spiritual blemish; therefore the righteous individual who performs his good deeds only as a result of victory over his evil impulse cannot be compared to the person who has no trace of evil in his makeup. Maimonides finds support for this view in the book of Proverbs, where King Solomon writes, *The evil soul desires evil ... performance of justice is a joy to the righteous* (21:10,15). On the other hand, Maimonides finds support in the oral tradition for the contrary view. "Whoever is greater than his friend has a greater inclination towards evil" (Sucah 52a); "the reward is always commensurate to the effort" (Avot 5:23).

Maimonides proposes that there is no contradiction.

Maimonides then proposes that there is no contradiction. Man has two sorts of negative drives. He has a drive towards physical pleasure and materialism for its own sake, and he has a venal side, a drive towards savagery - he can harm others through murder, theft, slander etc. when it means a personal profit. And when it comes to the drive towards materialism, the greater the inner struggle, the better.

According to Maimonides, following the injunction to holiness necessitates a battle on two different fronts:

1. In terms of his attraction to physical pleasures, the righteous person is enjoined to struggle against forbidden forms of behavior, rather than simply separating from the desire toward such behavior.
2. In terms of his pursuit of holiness, the righteous person must embrace the uprooting of the very desire toward the commission of all venal acts.

An attempt at tracing the rationale for this view leads to the following:

Where the forbidden activity is inherently pleasure stimulating, the desire towards it does not interfere with our ability to connect to God. Such desires originate in the body rather than the soul, and the body was fashioned by God to find pleasure in various forms of stimulation. To destroy the body's ability to find stimulation in inherently pleasurable sensations is to destroy God's work in the attempt to render the fulfillment of His commandments easier to execute, and there is no merit in such destruction.

The desire for the commission of forbidden acts where there is no *physical* pleasure to be had in the act itself, such as in the case of murder or theft or slander, obviously originates in the intelligence, or the soul. The body is only drawn towards acts that are inherently pleasurable. It does not even plot in anticipation of future pleasures, but merely satisfies present desires. All matters involving planning necessarily originate in the intelligence or the soul. When the soul is



deformed, a person's inherent Godliness is affected. Morality is a soul function. The body is amoral.

DIAMETRIC OPPOSITES

Our notions of holiness, and the Torah's approach, are close to being diametric opposites. We perceive holiness as akin to asceticism, immersion in a life of contemplation and physical self-denial, while the Torah finds no contradiction between the attraction to physicality and holiness. It is only excessive indulgence that inflicts spiritual damage.

The Book of Numbers deals with the problem presented by the *nazir*, a person who chooses to abstain from certain bodily pleasures (such as wine, for example). In certain circumstances the *nazir* has to bring a sin-offering to the Temple. The Talmud asks:

Toward what person did this Nazarite sin? [He sinned against himself.] He denied himself the pleasure of wine. From this we can extrapolate; if the *nazir*, who only denied himself the single pleasure of drinking wine is considered a sinner, how much more is this true about a person who denies himself pleasure in general and engages in a life of asceticism?
(Talmud, Nazir 19a)

In the area of physicality, holiness consists of reigning in the raging life force to follow God's commands. The more power in the life force that is placed under restraint, the greater the sanctification of God's name. But a reduction of

the life force itself is a sin, as it necessarily *curtails* the possibility of sanctifying God's name.

Thus our common perception of holiness diverges from the Torah's in the area of physicality.

HOLINESS AS PUBLIC FUNCTION

There is another aspect to holiness as understood by the Torah, to which the modern mind finds great difficulty in relating. For holiness cannot be attained in isolation. Holiness is a public function. The verse commands us to be holy "for I, the Lord your God, am holy."

The commentators all ask, "How can God present His own holiness as a reason for human holiness?" By definition Divine holiness is unattainable for human beings. One cannot be holy "exactly" like God. The commentators explain that God is referring to the possibility of connection.

Because both God and Israel desire a close human-Divine relationship, God commands Jews to be holy. He cannot connect to the Jewish people when they are in an unholy state. The commandment is addressed to the Assembly of Israel not to the Children of Israel as is customary.

Nachmanides explains that this portion was read to the public during *Hakhel*, the once in seven year gathering of the entire Jewish nation when the reigning monarch would go over the most important commandments with the populace.

When the consequences of non-observance are referred to at the end of Parshat Kedoshim, they clearly have a public aspect.

You shall observe all my decrees and all My ordinances and perform them; then the land to which I will bring you to dwell will not disgorge you. Do not follow the traditions of the nation that I expel from before you ... I am the Lord your God who has separated you from the nations. (Leviticus 20:22-24)

God connects with the individual in the context of the Jewish people. For example it is well known that the reciting of *Kedusha*, the prayer to sanctify God's name requires a quorum of ten Jews. Only a slice of the Jewish public can aspire to bring down the *Shechina*, God's Presence, on their camp.

It is this fact that poses the greatest problem to the modern mind, committed to tolerance and the allowance of civil liberties at all costs. For the modern person, holiness is a private matter only. As far as the public domain is concerned, the promotion and pursuit of moral values is at the very least distasteful if not downright illegal. The way someone else dresses, the way he talks, the way he raises his family, his moral values and his philosophy of life are absolutely none of society's business. A person's practices in the privacy of his own bedroom are not a proper subject of interest for society.

Yet according to the teaching of the Torah, this point of view is incorrect. My neighbor's pursuit of these "private" activities will result in the land disgorging the entire Jewish nation. Thus everyone will suffer the consequences of my neighbor's moral misdeeds. Under these

circumstances, no one can say that they are none of my business.

But isn't this too great a price to pay? Wouldn't a public interest in morality necessarily reverse all the progress toward civil liberties we have made as a society since medieval times?

The answer to this question depends on how we view public safety. The reason that we have relegated morality to the private sphere is because in our perception, we cannot cause harm to each other by making private moral choices regarding sexual behavior and the like. As long as this continues to be our perception of the world, our view of civil liberties is unlikely to change.

But the lesson the Torah is attempting to teach is that our physical security very much depends on our moral choices. The security of Israel depends on the strength of its connection to God, and this in turn depends on the state of holiness of the Jewish people. But according to the Torah, this holiness depends as much on what we consider private behavior as on those laws directed at the curtailment of mendacity which we all understand to come under the public domain.

The price of maintaining a holy versus a secular society must be paid in some curtailment of civil liberties. Just as secular society recognizes the disturbance of the peace as a social offence, a holy society recognizes a social offence called the disturbance of holiness.

In the Torah view of the Jewish nation, the only aspect of the Jewish people that renders it unique and entitled to a homeland of its own, is its

commitment to establish a connection with God by maintaining a holy society.

Such a connection reverberates to the benefit of all humanity. When God connects with the Jewish people, the entire planet acquires a Divine connection. When the connection to God is torn asunder by a retreat from holiness on part of the Jewish people, not only does the land of Israel disgorge its Jews, but the entire planet loses its claim to Divine attention.

The public atmosphere of holiness is extremely delicate and can be easily shattered. In the modern secular world most of the behaviors that would shatter it are protected civil liberties. To buy into the lessons of Kedoshim we have to equate spiritual injury with physical damage. To the Torah, the connection to God is not a matter of private conscience but a phenomenon that is very much a part of the real world. Causing spiritual harm is at the very least equal to causing physical damage. It cannot be protected behavior.

The focus on civil liberties is a focus on the negative. We must not oppress, we must not discriminate, we must not violate anyone's rights. But the fact that poverty and ignorance is endemic in our inner cities, the fact that in many neighborhoods in America people are justly afraid of stepping outside their houses after dark, leaves us undisturbed. It is not our business to improve people. We have neither the right nor the resources.

The Torah aims for more. The Torah aims for a holy society, where the very atmosphere makes certain forms of behavior toward one's fellow unthinkable. Maimonides points to two sorts of

holiness. But in the end they must come together. The holiness of the soul, the freedom from the very tendency toward venal desires, is consistent with a desire toward physical pleasure, but is not consistent with overindulgence. Israel can only be a "light unto the nations" when it is connected to God - the Jewish people need to be holy.



Effective Rebuke

You shall surely rebuke your fellow man, and you shall not bear a sin over him. (19:17)

All Jews are responsible for each other. Therefore, if a Jew sees another committing a sin, he must rebuke him and set him straight. But how does one rebuke another Jew? This is a very difficult thing to do. In fact, it is one of the most difficult *mitzvos* to perform properly.

The final words of the commandment are “*velo sisa alav cheit*, and you shall not bear a sin over him.” What exactly does this mean? Rashi explains that if you embarrass the person you are rebuking, you are committing a sin. This is an important guideline for the *mitzvah* of giving rebuke. It must be done carefully, discreetly and

oh so gently. Otherwise, you will embarrass him. Then you will not only have failed in your rebuke, but you will also have committed a very grave sin.

Rav Gedaliah Schorr suggests a further interpretation based on a variant translation of the words *velo sisa alav cheit*. They can be read as “do not raise up the sin over him.” Do not magnify the sin and minimize the person.

If you see someone doing a sin, do not place the emphasis on the magnitude of the sin. Do not say, “How could you do such a terrible thing?” You are raising up the sin over him, dwarfing him by the magnitude of what he has done. You are making the person feel about two inches tall. This is not the way to offer rebuke. It is offensive, and it is also almost guaranteed to be ineffective. Better to place the emphasis on the person and say, “How could a person such as you do such a thing?” Better to raise him up over the sin, to show him that to do such a thing is beneath him, that he is too great to do such a thing. This is the way to rebuke with genuine kindness and lasting effect.

A rabbi was once asked to be guest speaker in a neighboring town, and he chose rebuke as his topic. After speaking about the importance of giving rebuke properly, he told a story.

“I do not know this story firsthand,” he began. “But I’ve heard many times, and I believe it is true. The Chafetz Chaim had a *yeshivah* in the Polish town of Radin. In those days, during the early part of the 20th century, there were many pressures on *yeshivah* boys. Some of their peers were leaving their faith and seeking greener

pastures in socialism, secular Zionism or just plain secularism. I suppose it was inevitable that some of the boys in the *yeshivos* would also be affected, that a tiny number of them would do things no *yeshivah* boy would do today.

“One of the boys in the Chafetz Chaim’s *yeshivah* was caught smoking on Shabbos. The Chafetz Chaim was told about it, and he summoned the boy to his room. The boy stayed in the Chafetz Chaim’s room for about two minutes, and afterward, he kept Shabbos scrupulously.

“Can you imagine what the Chafetz Chaim’s rebuke must have been like? Ah, if only we could have an inkling of what went on in that room for those two minutes! What did the Chafetz Chaim say to this boy? It would be like a beacon of light for us. I’m sure all of us would love to know what he said. But we don’t. And so we just have to try and do the best we can.”

After the rabbi finished speaking, a man came over to him. His face was tear stained. “Rabbi, I can tell you what the Chafetz Chaim said to that boy,” he declared. “You see, I was that boy.”

The rabbi was stunned. “Please tell me,” he whispered.

“When I was called to the Chafetz Chaim’s room,” he said, “I was terrified. What could I say to the great *tzaddik*? How could I justify smoking on Shabbos? And right in his *yeshivah*! I couldn’t even justify it to myself. It was one of those rash and foolish things young people often do without thinking. I walked into his room, and there, he was, his holy face distorted in a grimace of pain. He walked over to me, his head barely reaching to

my chest, and he took my hand in his. ‘Shabbos,’ he said softly, and he began to weep. After a minute, he looked up at me and said it again, ‘Shabbos.’ His hot tears dripped onto my hands, and the sound of his weeping penetrated my heart. That was all it took. Two minutes of the Chafetz Chaim’s pain.”

The Chafetz Chaim did not put this boy down. He did not berate him or belittle him. He gently but powerfully impressed on him the sacred nature of Shabbos. That was the most effective rebuke he could have given him.

Rabbi Akiva’s Principle

One of Rabbi Akiva's most famous sayings is, “*Ve’ahavta lereicha kamocha*. Love your neighbor as you do yourself. This is a fundamental principle of the Torah.” This *mitzvah* is one of the pillars of the entire Torah. We find a similar thought expressed by Hillel. The Talmud relates (*Shabbos* 31a) that a prospective gentile convert to Judaism asked Hillel to teach him the entire Torah “while standing on one foot.” Hillel replied, “Do not do to others that which is hateful to you. This is the essence of Torah. All the rest is explanation.”

It seems to me that Rabbi Akiva was most suited to speak about the importance and centrality of this *mitzvah*. Rabbi Akiva was a great *rosh yeshivah* with many thousands of students, and he experienced a shattering tragedy. All of his twenty-four thousand students died during the Omer period between Pesach and Shavuot. It is an incredible number, a number that fails to penetrate the consciousness even in our day of huge *yeshivos*.

How would one of us have dealt with such a blow? What would we have done if all twenty-four thousand $\frac{3}{4}$ twenty-four thousand! $\frac{3}{4}$ of our students had died in one fell swoop due to some character flaw, a catastrophe that inevitably must have reflected somewhat negatively on their *rosh yeshivah*? First, we would, of course, have to deal with a serious bout of depression and despondency. And if we managed to get over that, we would probably retire with a broken heart.

What did Rabbi Akiva do? The Talmud tells us (*Yevamos* 62b), “When Rabbi Akiva’s students died and the world was desolate, he went to the south of Eretz Yisrael and started over again!”

Rabbi Akiva clearly had unbelievable resilience. No matter how great a disaster he suffered, he would find a silver lining in the darkest cloud. He would discover something positive, something to give him new hope, and this would give him the strength and the confidence to start all over again. “All is not lost!” he would exult when he had lost just about everything.

Rabbi Akiva lived through the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*. The Talmud relates (*Makkos* 24a) that several Sages were walking past the ruined *Beis Hamikdash* and saw a fox emerging from the site of the Holy of Holies. They all burst into tears, except for Rabbi Akiva, who began to laugh. “Why do you laugh?” they asked him. He replied, “Because if the prophecy of destruction has come true so literally, then the prophecy of redemption will also come true literally.”

This ability to find the glimmer of light in the deepest darkness, to find the positive, the spark of hope, in the worst of times, made Rabbi Akiva



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singularly attuned to the *mitzvah* of loving others. He – more than anyone else – was able to see the worth in all people and love them for it.

The Baal Shem Tov give us an additional insight into the concept of loving your neighbor “as you do yourself.” When a person gets up in the morning and takes stock of himself, he thinks, “I am basically a good person. I have my faults and foibles; I am not perfect. But I am more good than bad.” This, the Baal Shem Tov says, is how we must evaluate our neighbor. He is basically good. I can overlook his faults.

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