

RABBI SHIMON GRUEN

TORAH LESSONS for the HOME

{ SHEMOS 5780 }

ADMINISTERING CRITICISM

MOSHE IS AFRAID

In this week's *parsha* we read about how Moshe rebuked the two quarrelling Israelites. When one of them raised his arm to strike his fellow, Moshe reprimanded him: "Wicked one! Why do you strike your fellow?"

The response was quick in coming: "Who gave you the authority to judge us? Will you take matters into your hands again, and kill us just as you murdered that Egyptian?!" When Moshe heard this, "Moshe was afraid, and he said 'Behold, the matter is known!'" (2:14)

When we read this we have no difficulty explaining Moshe's fear and his subsequent statement of dread "the matter is known". It is obvious to us that Moshe was afraid that these individuals would report him to the government and Pharaoh would have him tried and sentenced as a murderer. That's enough of a reason to be afraid and to desire concealing the matter.

ACCEPTING REBUKE

But Rashi explains it differently "When Moshe saw their response he grew afraid *for the future of the Israelites and their chances of redemption*. He said 'Behold! *The matter of their long exile is now understood*'"

Evidently Rashi didn't think that we can attribute ordinary fear to a great man like Moshe. If rebuke was the proper thing to do, Moshe would do it, regardless of the consequences. Moshe was afraid of something else here, Moshe was afraid of their impudence.

"If the Israelites have sunk to the level that they can no longer accept rebuke", Moshe said, "I'm afraid that they are not worthy of being saved". How will someone improve if he is incapable of hearing about his failures?

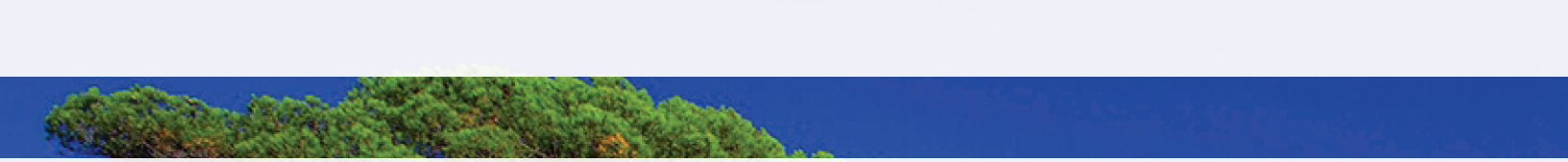
THE LARGE SPLINTER

In Eirechin (16) the *gemara* teaches us: "In this lowly generation there is no person willing to accept rebuke" and the

gemara continues - "If you tell someone to remove a splinter from his brow, he tells you that there's a large beam protruding from your forehead." If someone cannot accept rebuke, he doesn't merely brush it off. He hastens to reprimand the rebuker, accusing him of far greater faults!

Instead of telling Moshe "You're not authorized to be ordering us around", they added that "Your sin is far greater than striking someone in the heat of an argument. You're a murderer!"

The takeaway is clear. Don't give criticism or even advice that won't be heeded. It will accomplish nothing and will actually explode in your face and be counterproductive. Chazal said it in a very telling manner *k'sheim shemitzvah lomar davar hanishma, kach mitzvah shelo lomar davar she'eino nishma* - "Just as it is a *mitzvah* to say words that will be heeded; it is a *mitzvah* to refrain from saying words that will be ignored!" It's not a 'good idea'



to refrain from being ignored; it's a *mitzvah*! If your words will not be heeded they will likely be counterproductive as well.

WHAT DOES HE HEAR?

Chana* was not happy with the state of her husband's car. Chesky* commuted to work and his car often served as his cafeteria, office and conference room. All of Chana's pleas for him to clean out his car went unanswered. He did agree however to get it cleaned out in time for the family's summer vacation. When the family was ready to get into the car, Chana saw a mass of coffee cups, gas receipts, crumbs and papers littering the interior of the car. She exploded, "Why didn't you take care of cleaning out the car like you said you would?!"

Let's leave the story for a moment and analyze the situation. Chana is of course one hundred percent right. Chesky had promised to get the car cleaned out and he hadn't kept his word. The car was not at all clean. And that is what Chana is trying to express. But what does Chesky hear? Chesky doesn't hear "why didn't you keep your word?" he hears "You're such a failure, I can't rely on you for anything, and you don't keep your word either!"

Perhaps Chesky needs to work on himself to learn how to accept rebuke. But in fact, most people do not know how to accept rebuke, as the *gemara* already stated millennia ago!

HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS

Chesky knew very well that he was supposed to clean out the car. Perhaps if Chana had remained quiet he might have even offered an apology for his failure to do so, but what did she accomplish now? She complained, but because he can't accept criticism he doesn't even hear the complaint. He hears that he is being attacked, so he launches a counter attack, and the issue of the car, not to mention the cozy family vacation, is entirely forgotten.

Generally, people want to stick to their commitments. Chesky feels bad that he couldn't measure up to Chana's expectations. But as soon as he gets reprimanded, he begins to get defensive. Then he starts rationalizing. And while at the outset he may have agreed that he was guilty of neglecting his duties, by the time he's done rationalizing, he has built a mountain of defenses. He now has endless reasons for why he shouldn't have cleaned the car, and he has proofs that Chana is overly demanding, bossy, and manipulative.

WORDS UNHEARD

Before you open your mouth to criticize, ask yourself, "What will I accomplish?" It is a *mitzvah*, not to say things that will not be heeded. The literal translation of *davar she'eino nishma* is "words that will not be heard". Did you ever tune in to a Russian station on the radio? Did you hear

words, or a stream of gibberish? When you criticize someone the wrong way, and sometimes, even if you do it in the right way - the two of you are speaking different languages. You're saying one thing and he's hearing another.

By the way, sometimes, he can't hear the criticism because it's unfounded. Batsheva* is of a very fastidious nature. Her husband, Uri*, is more of a dreamer - floating through life, and occasionally bumping into things and knocking them over. When Batsheva discovered that Uri had left the baby gate near the stairs open again, she let him know how unhappy she was. She was very embarrassed to learn that it was in fact their daughter who had left it open this time.

So, obviously, think before you speak and especially when speaking words of criticism. But even when you have every reason to be critical you must remember that 'justice' and 'logic' don't always work. The purpose of criticism is to improve someone else. Are you being constructive?

EVEN A MITZVAH IS A MITZVAH

It's important to add a little clarity here. Some people think that this discussion applies to things like keeping your car clean. But when it comes to a *mitzvah*, when it comes to *yiddishkeit*, certainly you have to speak up for Hashem!

But it's not true, *chazal* tell us: "It is a *mitzvah* to remain silent when your words will not

be heeded!" *Chazal* are referring to mitzvos, they are speaking of *yiddishkeit*. So if you're going to give criticism it must be effective.

Criticism is like medicine. You can't take a look at someone, decide that he is ill, and administer something from the pharmacy at random. You go to a qualified physician and get a prescription. And even with a prescription, you don't fill it yourself; you go to a qualified pharmacist. So I'm not advocating remaining silent when your wife is being *mechallel Shabbos* every week. However, you must remember that thought must be invested,

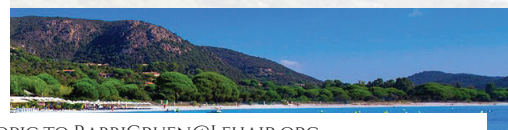
and care must be taken before criticizing, so that it can be effective.

CHINUCH: DON'T ATTACK A CHILD

All of this applies equally when dealing with our children. You can't just tell your child what you don't like about her behavior. You have to be certain that she understands what you're saying, that she speaks your language. No one criticizes a newborn baby for not allowing his parents to sleep through the night. Similarly, older children should not be criticized if the criticism will just go over their heads.

A child must receive a lot of love before he is capable of accepting criticism. You have to build him up with warm words before you can cut him down to size with sharp ones. A child who feels loved will more readily accept criticism regarding his behaviors.

And most importantly; if it's not working, drop it. The goal of your criticism is to improve your child. And to carry the medicinal metaphor a bit further; if there is no improvement then a different course of treatment must be pursued. Don't give drugs that aren't accomplishing; they may have side effects.



PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SEND ANY QUESTIONS, ON THIS TOPIC OR ANY TOPIC TO RABBIGRUEN@LEHAIR.ORG

QUESTION:

In a recent talk you spoke about the power of apology and how one must apologize even when innocent of any wrongdoing. But then I spoke with you privately about a situation I was having with my wife, you told me that I made a mistake in apologizing to her?!

ANSWER:

Let me clarify what I said about apologies:

1. When you do something wrong, you must own up to it and apologize.
2. When you do nothing 'wrong', but still hurt someone inadvertently, you should apologize for the hurt you caused. You shouldn't say that you were 'wrong', you weren't! But you should apologize for causing pain.
3. When someone keeps blaming you for something that you never did, you are feeding into their manipulation by apologizing.

You are not a punching bag and you don't have to take the blame every time someone is feeling pain or upset. It may not be easy to say this to your spouse, especially when she's in pain. But to take the blame is not healthy for yourself, it's not healthy for your wife, and it's not healthy for the relationship. You can be sensitive and say it in a caring manner, but it has to be said, for the benefit of both of you.

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