

Midrashim on Debarim Perek 1:
Giving and Taking Criticism

דברים רבה (וילנא) פרשה א

ד ד"א אלה הדברים, א"ר אחא ב"ר חנינא ראויות היו התוכחות לומר מפי בלעם והברכות מפי משה אלא אילו הוכיחם בלעם היו ישראל אומרים שונא מוכיחנו ואילו ברכם משה היו אומות העולם אומרים אוהבן ברכן אמר הקב"ה יוכיחן משה שאוהבן ויברכן בלעם ששונאן כדי שיתבררו הברכות והתוכחות ביד ישראל.

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ט ד"א אלה הדברים רבנין אמרין אמר לו הקב"ה למשה הואיל וקיבלו עליהן תוכחותיך צריך אתה לברכן, מיד חזר וברכן מנין שנאמר ה' אלהיכם הרבה וגו', ומנין שכל המקבל תוכחה זוכה לברכה שכן שלמה מפרש (משלי כד) ולמוכיחים ינעם ועליהם תבא ברכת טוב.

Shabbat-Table Talks: Devarim

Value: Speaking with sensitivity, especially when being critical. As speech is such an important aspect of life, it is worthwhile to discuss several aspects of speech and its proper use. Our sensitivity is often conveyed in the way we speak. When we are critical of another because of his behavior, we must be very careful to express this criticism with sensitivity. If our goal is to change people for the better with our words, we must be very careful about the way we say them. Speaking with sensitivity demands an awareness of the ways our words might be misconstrued by our audience. We can prevent much misunderstanding by thinking of how our listeners might misunderstand our words.

Background: The book of Devarim is essentially Moshe Rabbenu's final speech to Bne Yisrael. This speech will contain sections that are highly critical of Bne Yisrael. Right from the outset of this speech, Moshe is careful to praise Israel and let them know that they are special. Doing this sets up a context of positive attitude in which the criticism can be given with Moshe's true intention—improving Bne Yisrael.

Context: Devarim begins with a list of places where Moshe's spoke (below we will explore the Rabbinic understanding of these place-names). Moshe's began his speech at the point following the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, when Hashem commanded him to travel with Bne Yisrael towards the Promised Land. Moshe immediately realizes a problem; he cannot handle the difficult task of leading the people without help. Part of the difficulty of leading the people has to do with their quarrels. Although Moshe must mention this aspect of the people in order to explain why he chose judges, he prefaces his remarks with a blessing of the people that makes it clear that he values them, despite the difficulty.

Text: Deuteronomy 1:6-14

Hashem our God spoke to us at Horev, saying: Enough for you, staying at this mountain! Face about, march on and come to the ...land of the Canaanite

Now I said to you at that time, saying: I am not able, I alone, to carry you;

Hashem your God has made you many and here you are today, like the stars in the heavens for multitude! Hashem, the God of your fathers, may He add to you as you are a thousand times, and bless you, as he promised you!

How can I carry, I alone, your load, your burden, your quarreling? Provide yourselves (with) men, wise, understanding and knowledgeable, for your tribes and I will set them as heads over you. And you answered me, you said: Good is the word that you have proposed to do!

Analysis: Notice that Moshe, after beginning his contention that the people are numerous, interrupts it with a blessing before continuing to mention the people's "load, burden and quarrelling." Moshe had to mention the reasons for his decision to enlist other people to help him lead Israel. However, before doing so he blesses Israel with a beautiful blessing. Moshe was aware that his words might be misconstrued as wishing that there were not so many of Israel. He immediately speaks to banish this thought from the minds of his audience (those who heard him speak and all those who read the Torah ever since). This "extra" verse shows Moshe's sensitivity in addressing Israel. Use this idea to discuss the value of speaking with sensitivity.

Method: A very effective way to teach is to allow the students to discover the points by themselves. These verses contain a discontinuity that will be picked up quickly, especially when your listeners are alerted to it.

After giving an introduction of the context, tell your listeners that you would like to read them some sentences from the Torah. Tell them that one of the sentences seems out of place. Ask them to listen carefully and try to explain what the sentences mean, which sentence is out of place and why they think Moshe said it.

The basic principle is that criticism should be given with sensitivity. When those receiving the criticism know that the critic has only their best interest in mind, the criticism is seen as an honest appraisal of the situation in order to improve it, and not as an attack. They are more likely to accept the appraisal and take steps to improve. Moshe set up a positive context by blessing the people that there should be a thousand times more people "like them." Moshe sincerity in saying these words was apparent.

Secondly, Moshe, in describing the situation, along with Israel's "load, burden, and quarreling" points to his inability to lead the people alone. The problem is with Moshe. Due to Moshe's sensitivity, his proposal for rectifying the problem was immediately accepted.

Applications: Living in a family often requires that certain difficult situations be rectified. A discussion about the problem might be understood by a member of the family to be a criticism. Constructing our family's atmosphere such that the good things about our family are also discussed and elaborated upon allows for criticism that is understood as constructive.

Additional Discussion:

Text: Deuteronomy 1:1-2

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel in the country across the Jordan in the wilderness, in the plains near Suf, between Paran and Tofel, Lavan, Hazerot, and Di-Zahav...

Rashi comments that because these places were really rebukes, Moshe hinted at the rebukes instead of speaking fully about them here, for the sake of Israel's honor. Even though Moshe eventually speaks about each of these rebukes at length, since he mentioned several incidents in this first verse, he did not want to mention them explicitly. Rather he sufficed with a hint.

At times, a hint of the rebuke is sufficient. One should not criticize about too many things at one time. Be sensitive to the honor of the one who is receiving the criticism.