



תוכחה טהורה

Rebuke, Pure and Clean

■ Introduction to D'varim

The fifth and last book of the Torah, D'varim, opens with this verse:

... אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל

These are the things that Moshe spoke to all of Israel... (1,1)

The opening phrase “*these are the words*” sounds very emphatic: “These are the true words! These are the genuine words – these and nothing else!”

This categorical understanding jibes with the opinion of R. Avahu, who comments on the opening verse of Parashat Noach:

These are the generations of Noach (B'reshit 6,9) – R. Avahu said: Whenever it says *Eleh, These are*, it means to disqualify that which came before. And when it says *V'eleh, And these are*, it merely adds to that which came before. In this case, where the Torah introduces the genealogy of Noach with the word *Eleh*, it comes to disqualify that which came before [namely, the Generation of the Flood]. (Medrash B'reshit Rabba 30,3)

R. Avahu teaches that the Torah means to tell us that the desirable generations begin with Noach; all that came before were less so. Only after the Flood, from Noach and onward, did something new begin – something that would justify the creation of man in G-d's image.

Let us now see how this *Eleh-V'eleh* principle operates in D'varim. The verse begins with the word *Eleh, These are*, meaning that it cancels out



what was said before. Can this be true? Is the entire Torah, other than D'varim, null and void, Heaven forbid? Why should Moshe's long parting speech "disqualify" or take precedence over the four books of the Torah that preceded it?

This question, with an answer, is found in the very first sentence of the Medrash Sifri on D'varim:

What is meant by "*These are the words that Moshe spoke*"? Did not Moshe prophesy other things? After all, he wrote the entire Torah, as we read: "*Moshe wrote this Torah.*" (D'varim 31,9)

Rather, it means that Moshe spoke here words of rebuke.

The Medrash says that what is special about Moshe's speech is its aspects of *mussar* and admonishment. But is this a complete answer? Does rebuke cancel out everything written in the Torah beforehand? Perhaps the teaching of the mitzvot is more important than rebuke?

The key to this enigma can be found when we study the specific type of rebuke found in the Book of D'varim.

Moshe Rabbeinu, in his final, parting speech before the entry into the Promised Land, takes the Children of Israel backwards in time. He reviews with them the events of the past forty years – events that they experienced and with which they are familiar, but not from the perspective that he is about to show them.

By showing them their mistakes from the perspective of *now*, not *then*, Moshe negates whatever they might have thought beforehand about their sins. They can now be expected to look backwards, reenact the events, and ask a simple question: "How were we able to behave so badly?!"

Just the very fact alone of mentioning the events and the sins from the vantage point of *now* grants them a totally different dimension by which to experience them.

This is what the Medrash means when saying that *These are the words* comes to disqualify that which preceded them. The "earlier things," the Torah and its mitzvot, were certainly very important – but when they actually occurred, they did not have an absolute, long-lasting effect on the Nation. This is because it is hard for events to have a genuine influence in real-time; only afterwards can we learn from our mistakes.



Actually, every review or summary of one's experiences includes a form of "rebuke" and learning our lessons – because that's when the difficult questions are asked: "Could this not have been done differently? What did I miss? Where did I go wrong?"

■ "You Shall Surely Rebuke Your Colleague"

The mitzvah of giving rebuke (Vayikra 19,17) is one of the more difficult and complex commandments in the Torah. When one reproves his friend, neighbor or family member without proper preparation and training, the consequences are liable to turn out the opposite of what was intended.

The main obstacle is that the rebuker can easily begin to feel "holier than thou," raised above the one to whom he is speaking. The latter then feels the need to ward off the "attack" by enwrapping himself in a coat of defensive armor and blocking off all constructive advice. He might even begin to take the offensive, searching out faults in the one giving the rebuke so that he can "return the favor."

The great difficulty in admonishing others is expressed by the Medrash Sifra on the above verse in the following tripartite exchange:

R. Tarfon said: I swear by the Holy Service of the Temple that there is no one in this generation who *may rebuke*.

R. Elazar ben Azariah said: I swear by the Holy Service of the Temple that there is no one in this generation who *can accept rebuke*.

R. Akiva said: I swear by the Holy Service of the Temple that there is no one in this generation who *knows how to give rebuke*.

Each of the three Sages expressed a different angle of this triangle of reproach, concentrating on a different aspect and its conditions:

1. The one who admonishes must be perfect in his actions,
2. the one who is being rebuked must have an open heart to hear,
3. and the words of the reproach itself must be uttered with wisdom and sensitivity.

Let us review these points.

R. Tarfon says that to fill the role of rebuker, one must himself be accomplished in the relevant issue. For instance, if you wish to remind your friend that he has not been arriving on time for morning prayers, you must make quite sure that you yourself get up punctually each day.



R. Elazar ben Azariah relates to the one on the receiving end. He must be willing to pay attention, improve, and rectify. He should be able to be genuinely happy for the chance to fix the problems that are keeping him from reaching his full potential in serving Hashem.

Finally, R. Akiva emphasizes the way in which the rebuke is delivered: One must learn how to give rebuke without insulting, without exacerbating tensions, and without causing resentment or denial, so that his words will be received in their intended manner and bring about the desired change.

In sum: R. Tarfon emphasizes the starting point, R. Elazar ben Azariah looks at the target, and R. Akiva links the two by emphasizing the path between them.

■ Pangs of Conscience

The Gemara in Tractate Chagiga (page 4b) tells us that R. Elazar would shed tears upon reading Yaakov's sons' reaction when they learned the identity of the Egyptian ruler standing before them. When Yosef revealed himself to them and said, "*I am Yosef!*", his brothers were so shocked that they were unable to respond:

וְלֹא יָכְלוּ אָחָיו לְעֹנוֹת אֹתוֹ כִּי נִבְהָלוּ מִפְּנָיו.

*His brothers were unable to answer him,
because they were frightened before him.* (B'reshit 45,3)

R. Elazar felt that this situation spoke directly to him: If the brothers were stricken dumb by the reproof of a mortal man, how will we respond when Hashem Himself will reproach us for our deeds??

A similar response was that of the Talmudic sage Abba Cohen Bard'la. These are his words in Medrash B'reshit Rabba (93,10):

Woe unto us on the Day of Judgment, woe unto us on the Day of Rebuke! Bilam, the prophet of the idol-worshippers, was unable even to stand up to the reproach of his donkey, who said to him: "Have I ever done this to you, that you should hit me?" And Bilam [could not deny, and] said, "No." (Bamidbar 22,30)

Abba Cohen Bard'la makes the following calculation: If Bilam, the wisest of the Gentile sages, had no answer for reproach emanating from a donkey, and if the sons of Yaakov Avinu could not answer their little brother, then what chance have we when we face G-d Himself and His rebuke for our deeds?



Let us try to understand this: What type of rebuke penetrates the deepest? – has the strongest effect on our soul? – brings a person to genuine tears? – creates true regret? The answer is that the strongest reproach is *mussar* that comes from a new perspective, that enables one to see his actions in a different and more accurate light – and that will then irrefutably bring out the truth of what happened.

Look at Bilam: He hit his donkey because he thought it was humiliating him for no reason. When he learned that the opposite was the case, and that his ever-loyal donkey was simply acting to protect him from the angel's sword, just as it had always selflessly looked out for him, he was struck dumb. He realized that his donkey was right!

Consider Yosef's brothers. Yaakov Avinu sent Yosef to find out how they were faring and to bring them gifts from home. The brothers, suspecting that he was out to spy on them and bring back tales to Yaakov, threw him in a pit and then sold him as a slave. And now, Yosef suddenly appears before them as the Viceroy of Egypt and informs them:

אֲנִי יוֹסֵף אֲחֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר מְכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי מִצְרַיִם.

I am your brother Yosef, whom you sold to Egypt! (B'reshit 45,4)

Yosef tells them: "I am your brother, and I came to you as someone who loves you and cares for you. I brought you gifts of peace from our father, and I wished to find out how you were and to boost your spirits. And in return for my efforts, you sold me as a slave?!"

These words of rebuke, years after the event, cut through their hearts like a knife. Looking back on what they did, they knew they had nothing to answer. They were struck dumb.

Back here in D'varim, Moshe reminds Bnei Yisrael that they made several bitter accusations against G-d during their 40 years in the desert after the Exodus:

וַתִּרְגְּזוּ בְּאֶהְלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ בְּשׂוֹנְאֵת ה' אֲתָנוּ הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
לְתֵת אֲתָנוּ בְּיַד הָאֱמֹרִי לְהַשְׁמִידָנוּ.

*You complained in your tents, saying,
"In His hatred of us, G-d took us out of Egypt
in order to deliver us into the hands of the Emorites,
so that they might destroy us."* (D'varim 1,27)



How can they have even entertained the absurd possibility that G-d hates them!? What really happened was quite the opposite, as Moshe tells them a few chapters later:

כי מאהבת ה' אתכם ומשמרו את השבעה אשר נשבע לאבותיכם
 הוציא ה' אתכם ביד חזקה ויפדה מידי עבדים מיד פרעה מלך מצרים.
*It was because of G-d's love for you, and to preserve the
 oath He made to your forefathers, that He extricated you with
 a strong hand and redeemed you from the house
 of bondage and from King Pharaoh of Egypt.* (D'varim 7,8)

Moshe tells them: "How could you have totally distorted the situation like this?! The total opposite is true! In fact G-d, in His true love for you, thinks only good about you and wants only what is best for you, *'as a man carries his son'*" (1,31). This is thus another example of rebuke that bares the fundamental truth and the naked reality of our sins, leaving no room for argument or excuses.

The same thing occurred with the Prophet Jeremiah. The nation plotted against him:

ויאמרו לכו ונחשבה על ירמיהו מחשבות...
 לכו ונבנהו בלשון ואל נקשיבה אל כל דבריו.
*The people said: Let us plot against Jeremiah...
 let us smite him with the tongue,
 let us not listen to his words.* (Jer. 18,18)

But the truth was very different, as the Prophet says in his prayer to Hashem:

הקשיבה ה' אלי ושמע לקול יריבי. הישלים תחת טובה רעה?
 כי כרו שוחה לנפשי, זכר עמדי לפניה לדבר עליהם טובה,
 להשיב את חמתך מהם.
*Pay heed to me, Hashem, and to my adversaries.
 Shall good be repaid with evil?
 For they have dug a pit for my soul.
 Remember that I stood before You to speak good of them,
 to turn Your wrath from them.* (18,19-20)

Hashem Himself corroborates Jeremiah's words:

כי אנכי ידעתי את המחשבת אשר אנכי חשב עליכם, נאם ה'.
 מחשבות שלום ולא לרעה, לתת לכם אחרית ותקוה.



*For I know the thoughts that I think of Israel, says G-d.
They are thoughts of peace and not evil,
to give them a future and hope. (29,11)*

This is the true *mussar*, the genuine rebuke that must touch each and every one of us very deep inside our hearts. The day will come when G-d will reveal, as He did in the case of Jeremiah, what He did for us every hour of every day – and what we did for Him in return. This is what our Medrashic Sages meant when they said: “Woe unto us on the Day of Judgment, woe unto us on the Day of Rebuke;” it is not the fear of punishment, but rather the shame that we will feel for our sins.

Every year, we encounter this Torah portion, and the stories in it, shortly before Tisha B’Av. This is the day of the Destruction of the Holy Temples, the day we lost our prophetic link with the Creator of the World and were scattered all over the world. This, too, will be shown in the end to have been for our benefit, and we will be built even more solidly than when we started.

■ Pure, Deep Love

King Solomon, author of the Book of Proverbs, succinctly sums up the precise nature of the correct form of rebuke:

טוֹבָה תּוֹכַחַת מִגֵּלָה מֵאַהֲבָה מְסֻתֶּרֶת.

Open reproach is better than hidden love. (Mishlei 27,5)

The straightforward meaning of this verse seems to be this: It is better to admonish one in an open manner, thus giving the person a chance to rectify his wrongs, than to remain “secretly loved” without making comments that might evoke a negative reaction.

But in truth, the lesson in this verse is even deeper.

If we replace the word “*than*” with the word “*from*” (the two are sometimes interchangeable in Hebrew), we understand the verse to mean that “*open reproach is good* when it *stems from hidden love*.” That is, the effectiveness of the rebuke is dependent on the motivation, which is the “*hidden love*.”

This corresponds very well with the context in which we find the Torah’s mitzvah of rebuke. Let us look at the verse that commands us to reproach others when necessary, and the commandments that precede and follow it:



1. לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך.

2. הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא.

3. לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה'.

1. *Do not hate your neighbor in your heart.*
2. *You shall surely admonish your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.*
3. *Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against your compatriots; you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am G-d.* (Vayikra 19,17-18)

The Torah's point of departure for the mitzvah of giving reproach is this: It could be that your brother or neighbor has hurt or insulted you, and you are just waiting for the right time to "get him back." Finally, one day, the opportunity comes: He commits a sin! In the secrecy of your heart, you watch happily from the sidelines, saying nothing, hoping that he will continue to sin and be punished. Do not do so! *Do not hate your neighbor in your heart!* Make sure you overcome these feelings; tell him he is sinning and offer him rebuke, so that he will mend his ways. *You shall surely admonish your neighbor*, in the proper way, to help him get back on the right track. *Do not take revenge nor bear a grudge; love your neighbor as yourself*, and only thus should you admonish him.

When rebuke is given out of love, then the one who receives the admonishment responds with love as well. In this vein, we have the following fascinating testimony from R. Yochanan ben Nuri, one of the Sages of the Mishna:

I affirm before the Heavens and the Earth that R. Akiva was rebuked many times because of me, because I complained about him to Rabban Gamliel. But not only did R. Akiva not get angry at me, his love for me actually increased, in fulfillment of this verse (Proverbs 9,8): "*Rebuke a wise man and he will love you.*" (Arachin 16b)

R. Yochanan ben Nuri knew how to offer rebuke, and R. Akiva knew how to receive it.

With this in mind, let us note that the Book of Jeremiah is full of bitter, harsh admonishment directed at the People of Israel. But let us see how Hashem instructs the prophet to begin his piercing prophecies:



וַיְהִי דְבַר ה' אֵלַי לֵאמֹר.
הֲלֹךְ וְקִרְאתָ בְּאָזְנֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם לֵאמֹר:

*This was G-d's word to me:
"Go and call in the ears of Jerusalem:*

כֹּה אָמַר ה': זְכַרְתִּי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרֶיךָ אֲהַבַת כְּלוּלֹתֶיךָ
לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה.

*'G-d says, I have remembered the kindness of your youth,
your love as a bride, when you walked after Me in
the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.'* (Yirmiyahu 2,1-2)

My brother Rabbi Mordechai Sabato explains this to mean that Yirmiyahu wants to emphasize the contrast: While G-d remembers Israel with favor for having followed Him in the desert for 40 years, Israel takes the opposite approach and shows ungratefulness:

מָה מָצְאוּ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם בִּי עוֹל כִּי רָחֲקוּ מֵעָלַי...
וְלֹא אָמְרוּ אֵיךְ ה' הִמְעֵלָה אֶתְנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
הַמּוֹלִיד אֶתְנוּ בְּמִדְבָר בְּאֶרֶץ עֲרָבָה וְשׁוּחָה...

*What wrong did your forefathers find in Me, that they
distanced themselves from Me... that they did not say, "Where
is G-d Who brought us up from Egypt, Who led us in the desert,
in a land of plains and pits..."* (verses 5-6)

I believe, however, that this opening of the Prophet Yirmiyahu comes to emphasize something else: He wishes to tell Israel that all the prophecies of doom that G-d will soon command him to deliver stem only from a place of love. "Hashem loves Am Yisrael," the prophet makes clear, "and never forgets His affectionate memories of the devotion and closeness the people showed Him throughout four decades in the desert."

My brother Rabbi Nissim Sabato added this explanation: What is the *kindness of your youth... walk[ing] after Me in the wilderness?* It is this: Despite the fact that after the Sin of the Scouts, it was decreed that all the adults were to die in the desert – meaning that they were essentially wandering in the desert for no purpose and to no destination! – they still continued to *"walk after Me in a land that was not sown."*



The Nation of Israel is a holy nation, and this is why G-d cares strongly that it retain a high standard of ethics and faith, as is fitting for a Divine nation.

The Prophet concludes by saying that despite the prophecies of wrath they will soon hear,

קֹדֶשׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל לַה' רֵאשִׁית תְּבוּאָתָהּ...

Israel is sacred unto G-d; the first of its produce. (verse 3)

