

THE TRUTH CAN HURT

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

All these are the tribes of Israel, twelve in all, and this is what their father said when he blessed them. He gave each one his own personal blessing. (Bereshith 49:28)

This verse is ambiguous: though it says he blessed "them" it also states clearly that each son received a separate blessing. Rashi understood this to mean that the words, "when he blessed them" refers to a collective blessing directed to all twelve tribes at once. Not all of Yaakov's sons received a personal "blessing" from him; in fact Yaakov criticized some of them very strongly. "He gave each one his own personal blessing" therefore refers to what he told each of his sons individually - whether words of blessing or words of reproof.¹

We generally associate blessing with praise; when we bless someone, we often focus on his positive potential, beseeching God to help him realize that potential to the fullest. The one receiving the blessing is essentially good, although he needs God's help to bring forth all of his potential. Thus the purpose of a blessing is to help one to improve. If so, pointing out to someone a negative trait that he must work on helps to enable him to change his character for the better. That is a much greater blessing!²

When Rav Zvi Pesach Frank was rav of Jerusalem, he received an extremely sharp letter of criticism from someone whose opinions were very different from his own. The rav's secretary asked his permission to destroy the letter. Rav Frank refused. He hid the letter away and took it out to read from time to time, in order to boost his own efforts to work on himself. He bore no grudge against the person who wrote the letter; on the contrary, he felt deep appreciation for him.

Once, on his way to a wedding, Rav Frank met a funeral procession. When he asked whom the funeral was, he was told that the deceased was the person who had written him the very critical letter. Without a moment's hesitation he got out of the taxi that would have taken him to the wedding, and joined the funeral. On another occasion, the son of the deceased came to Rav Frank for assistance. Not only did the Rav help him, but he also showed him tremendous respect.³ Rav Zvi Pesach Frank was on an extremely high spiritual level. Like the sons of Yaakov, he could accept criticism as a blessing. Nevertheless, as righteous as Yaakov's sons were, Yaakov did not reprove them until he was on his deathbed, for he was afraid that should he criticize them earlier, they might leave his righteous path and follow Esav's ways.⁴ This shows us that, while we should always try to view criticism as a positive motivator, we should never feel free to criticize others indiscriminately.

1. *Rashi on Bereshith 49:28.*
 2. Rav Chaim Mordechai Katz, a past Rosh Yeshivah of the Telshe Yeshivah.
 3. MiDevar Sheker Tirschak, p. 200.
 4. Rashi on Devarim 1:1.
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