

CHAPTER 6, LAW 7(B) - TRUE FRIENDS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

If one sees his fellow sin or following an improper path, he is obligated to return him to the better [path], and to inform him that he is sinning to himself with his evil ways. [This is] as it is stated, 'You shall surely rebuke your fellow' (Leviticus 19:17).

"When one rebukes his fellow, whether in matters between the two of them or in matters between him [the sinner] and G-d (lit., 'the Omnipresent'), he must rebuke him privately (lit., 'between him and himself'). He should speak to him gently, in a soothing (lit., 'soft') tone, telling him that he is only saying this to him for his benefit and to bring him to the life of the World to Come.

"If his fellow accepts his words, it is good. If not, he should rebuke him a second and third time. And so too, he is continuously obligated to rebuke his fellow until the sinner hits him and says to him 'I will not listen.'

"Anyone who has the ability to prevent [others from sinning] and does not prevent [them] is held to blame (lit., 'grabbed') for the sins of all those he could have prevented.

Last week we discussed one of the key concepts of this law -- that we must rebuke our fellow with kindness and compassion, so as to make it clear to him we mean his best. We saw that this too is G-d's way in dealing with mankind -- that even while punishing us He tempers His justice with compassion, sending us clear messages that He's still there watching over us. And this is His way of telling us that although He is now dealing with us harshly, He is doing so mercifully, as a means of leading us to repentance, rather than venting His own Divine wrath.

As an important aside, this principle has application in Jewish law. Theoretically, "You shall surely rebuke your fellow" would seem to obligate us to reprimand our fellow Jew whenever we see him doing something wrong -- even if he's a complete stranger. However, most folks would not take kindly to some stranger coming along and butting into their affairs. Thus, practically speaking, we generally only rebuke those with whom we have some sort of relationship, who we know will be amenable to constructive criticism (see Be'er Halacha 608, s.v. "chayav l'hochicho").

The Rambam continues (based on Talmud Erchin 16b), that if one's fellow does not accept his rebuke, he must continue to tell him off, basically until the sinner strikes him or the situation otherwise gets utterly out of hand. This seems a little strong. I could imagine getting up the guts to rebuke my fellow once -- and that in itself is not easy -- but if he brushes it off with some non-answer as most people do, I can't really imagine trying again -- and again and again. I mustered up

the courage to politely and passingly mumble something to him once . If he doesn't want to take up on my suggestion, it's now his own problem.

(By the way, I've had occasions in which people criticized me and I brushed it off at the time -- only to reconsider later and improve on account of it. Most people will respond with a reflexive defensiveness when challenged (usually accompanied with some stupid deflective or self-deprecating wisecrack) but may very well come to their senses shortly after.)

I believe, however, an important distinction is in line here. The Talmud, in obligating us to rebuke our fellow, was assuming our fellow knows full well he should be behaving better. He knows G-d is watching over him and judging his every act. He knows he is sinning and should not be -- just that he either cannot control himself or is not allowing himself to think about it. (Alternatively, our fellow may be sinning out of ignorance, but would be more than happy to have another enlighten him and correct his error.) All such a person needs is a caring friend to basically give him a swift kick in the pants, knocking him back to his senses.

Such a person will actually probably be grateful to his fellow for forcibly helping him out of his rut. Even if he's kicking and screaming the entire time and seems totally unreceptive to your words, he knows deep down his behavior isn't appropriate. He knows he should break away. And if you bang him on the head enough times, he'll be **happy** that you brought him back to his senses.

(See also for example Mishna Erchin 5:6 and Gittin 9:8 that if a husband refuses to grant his wife a divorce (when he is obligated to), "we force him until he says he wants." According to Jewish law, a bill of divorce must be granted willingly by the husband. Yet if we beat him senseless until -- viola! -- all of a sudden he realizes he **does** want to give it, that is acceptable -- because deep down a Jew really wants to do G-d's will. It just sometimes takes a little prodding to get him in touch with his true wants.)

Needless to say, the situation is very different today. We could hardly say every Jew we meet really wants to keep the Torah to the letter but just cannot restrain himself -- and just needs a little tough-love medicine to bring him back to his senses. Tragically, the vast majority of Jews have virtually **no idea** what Judaism is and what they're missing. (And even if they have **heard about** traditional Judaism, we would hardly say that they really know what it's all about. They might have heard that there are these archaic winter-clothes-wearing "Ultra-Orthodox" Jews in Jerusalem who throw stones at cars on the Sabbath and beat up women who dress immodestly -- it hardly helps having PR about as good as ISIS.) Forceful persuasion would hardly benefit the situation but would likely turn off the unaffiliated even further.

As an interesting aside, the Talmud cannot even envisage Jews who know virtually nothing about Judaism -- who have never even **heard** of the Sabbath, holidays and dietary laws in any serious way. How can a Jew -- no matter where he lives and whom he was born to -- not even **know** that we don't eat seafood or open our stores on the Sabbath? The Talmud occasionally discusses such a

case theoretically, referring to such a person as a "baby who was taken captive." Must have been someone who was kidnapped by pirates as an infant, to be whisked off to some exotic island in the South Pacific and grow up among the heathens.

Thus, practically speaking, the mitzvah (obligation) to rebuke as the Sages envision it is far less relevant today than it once was. In fact, the scholars of the Talmud themselves commented that few in their generation were up to receiving rebuke -- and few were sincere enough to properly administer it (Erchin 16b). It takes a great person to admit to his faults and yet another great one to truly and genuinely point them out. I believe it was R. Yisrael Salanter (great scholar and ethicist of 19th century Europe) who commented that his teacher, the holy R. Zundel of Salant, was one who could sincerely tell people off, but that he could not see himself doing the same.

And so, rebuke, done properly, is relegated to the domain of a chosen few. We can do it only to those we know and love, and only to those who are both amenable to constructive criticism and who know we truly care about them. I will conclude though, that I hope we all have such people in our lives. There is nothing more instructive and enlightening than having a close friend tell you what's wrong with you -- and your being such a close friend for another. As we get on in life, we realize that our friends are not the fellows we joked with in the back of the class in college. (As I heard R. Motty Berger (www.aish.com) once comment, if we so much as remember their names a year later, we're doing better than most.) The friends that stick with us in the long run are the ones we opened up to, we developed true relationships with, and we shared with and grew with. Those are the type who can both see our faults and who care enough to tell us about them. If we have a few such in our lives, we must cherish them. For they are our best hope for true fulfillment.

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