

A CRITICAL DIFFERENCE

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Why do we cringe when our flaws and shortcomings are pointed out to us? Why do we find criticism such a bitter pill to swallow? Logic would seem to dictate the exact opposite. We all want to be the very best we can possibly be, to reach our full potential. Therefore, it is important that we know our flaws in order to correct them, and we should be happy to have them pointed out to us. Why then do we cringe? Why do we feel humiliated?

Furthermore, the Torah in this week's portion commands us, "Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rebuke your friend, and do not bear sin upon him." There seems to be a contradiction here. On the one hand, the Torah requires us to rebuke others. Yet the Sages tell us that "people who accuse others of shortcomings are themselves guilty of the same flaws," clearly implying that we should refrain from offering rebuke.

The answer lies in a closer reading of the Torah's commandment. "Rebuke your friend." Make sure your rebuke is delivered in a spirit of friendship. "Do not bear sin upon him." Separate the person from the sin. Rebuke the deed, not the person. People who judge and condemn, the Sages add, are generally guilty of the very crimes of which they accuse others. People who are righteous and free of guilt, however, offer constructive criticism in a spirit of friendship.

Criticism itself does not humiliate. After all, very few people consider themselves absolutely perfect. Rather, it is the manner in which the criticism is delivered that humiliates. Very often, unfortunately, it is delivered in a mean-spirited, malicious manner, whereby the critic demeans us in order to make himself appear "holier than thou." It is a put-down, and we instinctively recoil.

Constructive criticism, however, delivered in a pure spirit of love and compassion, is always welcome. Indeed, it is one of the primary catalysts of personal growth.

In a certain district of Jerusalem, all the storekeepers agreed to close down their stores for Shabbos - except for one grocer. No matter how much pressure was brought on him, he refused to budge.

One Friday, one of the prominent Jerusalem sages dressed in his best Shabbos finery and entered the grocery store. He stationed himself on a chair in the back of the store and proceeded to stay there for the entire day, watching the busy hustle and bustle of the grocery shoppers. As evening drew near, the grocer approached the sage and asked, "Is everything all right, rabbi? Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No," said the sage. "I have come here because I wanted to understand why you refuse to close your store on Shabbos. Now, it is clear to me. You have such a busy store that it would be a tremendous ordeal for you to close it, even for one day."

The grocer burst into tears. "You are the first one to try to see it from my side," he managed to say between sobs. "Everyone scolded and berated me, but before you, no one tried to understand me." After that day, it did not take long before the grocer agreed to close his store on Shabbos. A few kind words had been effective where threats and invective had failed.

In our own lives, we often feel a need to criticize others. Before we do so, however, we should ask ourselves: Are we doing it for their good rather than our own? Are our motives pure and compassionate? If the answer is yes, and if we deliver the criticism in a kind and gentle manner, it will undoubtedly be effective. The difference is critical. Text Copyright © 2008 by Rabbi Naftali Reich and **Torah.org**.

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