

TOCHACHA: THE STINGING REBUKE

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

There is an obligation to rebuke one's neighbor for a wrongdoing and not to bear a sin because of him (Leviticus 19:17). Of course, the object is to assist one's fellow Jew not to stumble by contravening a Torah law or acting in an inappropriate manner. To this end, this must be borne out of one's genuine interest in helping his fellow Jew and not wanting any harm to befall him. One cannot publicly embarrass the person, but should reprimand him in private in a tactful but firm manner.

The Torah relates how Moshe exited the comfort of the royal palace to see the suffering of his people: the enslaved Jewish nation. He first came to the rescue of a Jew suffering at the hands of an Egyptian officer. In the second episode, he intervened in a dispute between two Jews - that of the notoriously wicked brothers of Doson and Aviram, chastising the wicked one about to strike his fellow (Exodus 2:13). In effect, Moshe was engaging in the mitzvah to remonstrate with a sinner - which he did.

To contemporary eyes, however, Moshe's actions can be construed as provocative. After all, wasn't he meddling in a dispute that did not concern him? He had not yet been appointed as a leader. If so, why did he not mind his own business?

But that is the whole point.

A person does not live in isolation. He lives and takes his place as a valuable member of society. The famous maxim that underscores Jewish life is how "every Jew is a surety for his fellow Jew" (Talmud Shevuos 39a). There cannot be any indifference, a non-committal policy of "live and let live". The Jewish nation is one, unified and collective family. When one part of the body suffers, the distress is to the person who has control over his whole body. If one Jew acts in an unfitting manner it reflects poorly on the chosen people in its entirety.

Another's concerns are, per force, my own. I cannot shrug my shoulders and profess innocence by not reacting where another is clearly harming himself.

Where one person pollutes the environment, everyone suffers. A passenger who bores a hole under his seat in a boat jeopardizes the whole vessel. If one person sin, even in the privacy of his home, the spiritual damage is universally harmful. We are interrelated - in our businesses, conduct and life goals. Not only do I want to prevent him from harming himself, I am conscious that he is, in the

process, harming me and harming the world.

For the most part, contemporary society appears to have lost the fine ability of knowing how to rebuke. I was lucky to be on the receiving end on a Monday morning a few weeks ago in the synagogue for my morning prayers. Apart from feeling the Monday morning blues, I still had to put on the finishing touches to my lecture that evening and was resolute to finish it before going to work. Consequently, in the middle of the Amidah repetition, I pulled out two books to check on various sources.

After prayers, an elderly neighbor stopped me. He commented that he could not understand why some congregants feel the need to study during prayers and especially during the repetition of the Amidah, although this is not halachically permissible (See Mishneh Breurah, Orach Chaim 124:17).

I immediately understood that his comments were directed to me. I thanked him for the gentle manner of his rebuke and have tried since to prepare well in advance.

Just as medicine is essential to remedy a sick patient, a spiritual malaise must also be tackled and rebuke is the necessary course of action. Understandably, this mitzvah is juxtaposed to the respective commandments of not hating one's brother in one's heart and that of loving one's neighbor - "You should love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). For the remonstration to be efficacious, it must convey an outpouring of love and concern for the individual.

There must be no hatred felt. Your intention is not to be preachy or condescending; your motivations are, like a teacher or parent instructing a child, to prevent the person in question from coming to harm. But you continually have "his" interests to heart. Typically, this only works where the scolding is administered correctly: namely in a tactful, non- provocative manner. Where you know that the rebuke is going to fall on deaf ears, it should not be given (Yevamos 65b).

And Moshe had this, the hallmarks of leadership. Again and again, his actions in Egypt and the wilderness were exclusively executed in the interests of his flock. When he disciplined them, albeit it his capacity as a leader, it was that of a fellow Jew wanting the very best for his brethren.

Objecting to a wrongdoing is an indication of the importance that Torah observance has to me. Indeed, a G-d fearing Jew cannot be apathetic to what is morally reprehensible before his Creator. Not objecting to a sin is, in effect, condoning it that is unacceptable (See Talmud, Shabbos 54).

We cannot lose sight that our beloved city of Jerusalem was destroyed because a person did not rebuke another (Talmud Shabbos 119a). In our prevailing "tolerant" society, the Jewish committal to the timeless laws of the Torah cannot be waived. Our love for our fellow Jew urges us to willingly offer a rebuke - and even a stinging rebuke - to prevent him from coming to any spiritual harm. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).