

WISE REBUKE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel across the Jordan, in the desert, in the plain, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel, Lavan and Chatzeiros and Di-Zahav." (1:1)

All these "places" are allusions to sins committed by the Jewish people during their forty years of wandering in the Sinai Desert. Moses rebuked them only by insinuation so as not to embarrass them. (Rashi)

The "words" refer to Moshe's strong words of rebuke. Moshe Rabeinu (our teacher) begins sefer Devarim by reminding the Jews of the many national shortcomings and sins that had occurred since their Exodus from Egypt.

It is interesting, notes the Chidushei HaRim (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Gur zt"l), that for the most part the subjects of Moshe's rebuke - the people who had actually sinned - weren't even alive any more. They had all died during the forty years in the desert. He spoke to their children. So why rebuke the children? What had they done wrong? Nothing. But, says the Chidushei HaRim, every person, in every time period, if he will examine himself under the penetrating light of the Torah and Moshe Rabeinu's words, will find that in some way he too has fallen victim to the mistakes of the dor ha-midbar (generation of the desert). These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel.

This is unusual. Rebuke is usually specific to its subject. Moshe, as leader of the Jews, had a personal connection with every Jewish soul. He was able to contain within his words rebuke that applied to each and every Jew in all generations. It is said that when the Ba'al Shem Tov would rebuke his disciples, they would often argue afterwards as to what had in fact been the main point of the Rebbe's rebuke. Each disciple had understood the words as they applied to his personal situation.

The Tzemach Tzedek zt"l once delivered a scathing critique of a certain behaviour. Afterwards, a number of his disciples approached him, each one complaining that the Rebbe had publicly embarrassed him, seeing as how his scathing rebuke had obviously been directed at him. Replied Rabbi Menachem Mendel, "Did I mean each of you? Yes, in a way, I did. You see, I am a like a hat-maker. The hat-maker fashions a hat and places it in his store window. People come in and try the hat on, until eventually someone finds that it suits his head perfectly. Whom did the hat-maker have in mind when he made this hat? Why, he made it precisely for the very customer who finds that it fits him! So, whoever feels that my words apply to him - for him, in fact, my criticism was meant."

Perhaps, though, the most critical aspect of tochachah (rebuke) is not how it is said, but how it is

received. One who is open minded to self-betterment, and constantly seeks to improve his character, finds rebuke in almost everything he sees and hears, and loves it. "Rebuke the wise, and he will love you (Mishlei 9:8)." And for one who closes his eyes and mind to criticism, there are no words, no matter how eloquently spoken, that will change him. "Do not rebuke the scorner, lest he hate you (ibid)."

The Talmud tells the story of a certain sage who was always the last to leave Beis HaMidrash (the Study Hall) in the evening and the first to arrive the next morning. One morning, he arose only to find that some farmers had already begun working the field. He took this as a rebuke: If they, whose work involves only the material fruits of the field, manage to arise so early, then I, who toil in the Torah of Hashem, how much more so should I be getting up early! From then on, he arose even earlier.

The Ben Ish Chai relates the story of one time the Yetzer Hara (Satan) approached Hashem: "I have a complaint about a certain man - specifically about R' Asher the carpenter," he said.

"Why, what could you possibly have against R' Asher," asked Hashem, "he is among the righteous individuals of the world?"

"True," said the Yetzer Hara, "but he hasn't been truly tested! I propose You allow me to take him to one of my theatres, just for one evening. Then we shall truly see where his piety stands."

That evening, as R' Asher walked home from his shop, he felt drawn by a sudden uncontrollable urge to enter the theatre. The performers were acting out a comedy/satire, and the audience sat mesmerized; applauding, laughing, and cheering at the appropriate moments. R' Asher stood at the back of the theatre, not uttering a word. The longer he stood, the happier the Yetzer Hara became. He could sense how the theatre was casting its satirical spell over the previously pious Jew. For hours R' Asher stood and watched, until, close to midnight, it all ended and everyone went home.

R' Asher too went home. His wife, who knew he always came home right after work, was frantic with worry. "Where have you been?" she nervously blurted.

"At the comedy theatre," he replied simply.

"Aha, and just what did you see at the theatre," she asked sarcastically, not for a moment believing that her husband, the pious R' Asher, would ever go to the theatre, which was renowned for its profanity and vulgarity.

"I learned how poorly I serve Hashem," he replied.

"I see, and you learned this at the theatre?"

"Yes actually. You see those men that go to the theatre, they, like I, have worked a full day. Yet this does not deter them from sitting for many hours with hardly a break, attentively taking in every moment that the theatre has to offer. And all this - for folly and nonsense! How much more so should I go to the Study Hall at night, to study the holy words of the Torah, with energy and

enthusiasm!" And from then on, R' Asher studied even longer and harder than he had in the past.

Text Copyright © 1998 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Project Genesis, Inc.](#)**
