

CRITICISM - TO ACCEPT OR TO DEFEND

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Matos, the first of this week's two parshiyos, relates the story of bnei (Children of) Gad and bnei Reuven. They approached Moshe with a request that they be permitted to settle on the east side of the Jordan river, in the captured lands of Sichon and Og, instead of crossing the Jordan with the rest of bnei Yisrael to take their shares in Eretz Yisrael. Moshe was not excited with their request. Actually, he was furious. He accused them of forsaking their brethren in a time of danger, and launched into an intense and protracted verbal attack that spans ten verses! (32:6-15):

"And Moshe said to bnei Gad and bnei Reuven, 'Shall your brothers go out to battle, while you settle here? Why do you deter the heart of bnei Yisrael from crossing into the Land that Hashem has given them? This is [just like what] your fathers did, when I sent them from Kadesh- Barnea to see the land - They went up to the valley of Eshkol and saw the land, and they deterred the heart of bnei Yisrael, not to [desire to] come to the Land that Hashem has given them!... And behold - you have risen up in place of your fathers, a society of sinful people, to add to the burning wrath of Hashem upon Israel. For if you will turn away from after Him, He will again let [the nation] remain in the Wilderness, and you will have destroyed this entire nation!'"

Basically, bnei Gad and bnei Reuven responded by clarifying their request: It had never been their intention to free themselves from the impending war for the Land. Rather, they would build cities for their wives, children, and livestock, and they themselves would accompany bnei Yisrael into Israel and fight alongside them until the battles were successfully concluded. Indeed, they pledged to take a leading role at the forefront of the Jewish army. Furthermore, they would remain in Eretz Yisrael until the Land was allocated among the other tribes [which took a further seven years].

The obvious difficulty with this lengthy passage is this: If Moshe had indeed misunderstood the request of bnei Gad and Reuven, why did they allow him to castigate them at such length? Couldn't they have interrupted his wrathful rebuke and told him of their intent immediately, instead of allowing him to mistakenly berate them?

When the Sefas Emes (Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh Leib of Gur zt"l) was a youth, he was privileged to have a daily early-morning learning session with his grandfather, the holy Chiddushei ha-Rim (Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Gur zt"l). What his grandfather did not know is that before they learned, his young grandson had arranged an even earlier learning session with a friend. One morning, the Sefas Emes over-extended his first session, and arrived late to learn with his grandfather.

The Chiddushei ha-Rim was upset by his grandson's lateness. He began to admonish him for sleeping-in. "Laziness," he told him, "has no limits. Today you came late, tomorrow you will come even later, and before long you will be telling me that it's too hard to learn before Shacharis (morning prayers)! I want you to 'nip this in the bud' - Don't ever come this late again!"

R' Aryeh Leib nodded in respect, and gave his word that this would not happen again. His chevrusa (learning partner) happened to overhear the entire conversation. He couldn't understand why the Sefas Emes had not interrupted his grandfather and told him the truth - that he had not slept-in, but rather had been so engrossed in his Torah study that he lost track of time! Later on, he approached his friend and voiced his amazement.

"What?" said the Sefas Emes. "You wanted me to interrupt my grandfather, and miss out on an opportunity to receive such scathing rebuke! - Certainly not!"

This, said the Sefas Emes, is why bnei Gad and bnei Reuven allowed Moshe to chastise them at length, without interrupting him and correcting his misunderstanding. After all, it's not every day one merits to receive a personal mussar shmuess (chastisement) from Moshe Rabbeinu himself!

This thought is very deep and far-reaching. The question is this: When we receive criticism, what is our immediate reaction? Do we listen thoughtfully, or do we instantly take to the defensive? Do we consider in what ways the criticism might apply, and how we might change - or do we desperately search for excuses and rationalizations to justify ourselves.

Shlomo ha-Melech says in Mishlei (Proverbs 12:1), "One who loves mussar (discipline) loves knowledge, but he who hates rebuke is a fool!" Why is one who hates rebuke a fool? Over-sensitive perhaps, or even arrogant, but why a fool?

Growth comes through self-knowledge. Self-knowledge comes through introspection, through observing oneself with a critical eye, through self-rebuke. One who truly seeks to grow; morally, ethically, spiritually, seeks out his faults and shortcomings constantly. When he hears rebuke, he first thought is: How does this apply to me? Though there are almost always excuses - reasons why this specific criticism might not apply to him - he never voices them. Indeed, he has no interest in excuses, in defending himself. He sees it as counterproductive - addressing the immediacy of the situation instead of utilizing it as an opportunity for growth. And when there is no one to criticize him, he criticizes himself.

One who hates rebuke - who has an excuse and a justification for everything he does - is indeed a fool. He can never grow, and never change his ways, for it is impossible for him to find fault with himself.

The Sefas Emes, and bnei Gad and Reuven, were "lovers of rebuke." Although at first glance it would appear that the criticism was off the mark, they accepted it sincerely. If we teach ourselves to accept criticism, instead of knee-jerkingly jumping to defend ourselves, we will find in every criticism an

opportunity for growth and self- knowledge.

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