

# CRITICISM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*Know in your heart that just as a man criticizes his son, so does God, your God, criticize you. (Devarim 8:5)*

Is this supposed to make me feel good? Quite honestly, I haven't done such a good job criticizing my children, and I have a lot of regrets to this very day. This is especially true when I see them, or children from other families, struggle with life emotionally because of shortcomings I may have personally caused my children, or their parents may have caused them. I would have felt better reading, ". . . as a man *SHOULD* criticize his son."

Maybe it says what it does because, even if we are wrong about what we say and how we criticize our children, the bottom line is that most parents do it because they care about their children. They really want the best for their children, and they are taking the time to get involved in their lives, right or wrong, because they want to help them in whatever way they can get the most out of life.

God, however, has a great advantage over the average parent. He not only gets involved in our lives and chastises us because He cares about us, but He also knows exactly what to say to us, and how. Knowing us better than we know ourselves, He custom designs His criticism of us for maximum positive impact.

However, while this makes perfect sense in theory, it seems far from understandable in practice. Some people have turned their backs on God because of personal suffering, while others have used it to even 'disprove' the existence of God. Any heated conversation with an atheist on this topic will inevitably turn to the issue of good people suffering and evil people prospering.

Of course, the Book of Job, or *Iyov* in Hebrew, is all about this age-old philosophical perplexity, and it behooves every civilized individual to learn it well. Indeed, it wouldn't hurt if a person read a chapter or two each day of the book . . . the rest of his or her life! Without doubt, the quality of one's life would certainly increase manyfold over time as a result.

To understand why, let's start with a different question: Why read the Book of Job on Tisha B'Av?

After all, Tisha B'Av is a day of mourning because of national tragedies, not personal ones. Furthermore, as *Eichah*, or *Lamentations*, which we read on the day makes clear, we mourn on Tisha B'Av because of what we once had, and as a result of our own sins, lost, whereas the story of *Iyov* is about a righteous man who, through no obvious fault of his own, lost everything because of what

seems like, on the surface of it, a bet between God and the Satan. What's the connection?

To unravel this mystery and life-altering insight, let's start with the punchline of Iyov, summed up in one classic line for all time:

*"Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell [Me] if you have knowledge to understand its foundation?" (Iyov 38:3-4)*

Life is like a movie, at least like one that we tend to always enter in the middle and leave before it ends. No matter which incarnation we may be on, it is always preceded by a lot of history, and there seems to be plenty left to go after we leave this world. Our lives may be important to us but, they are only a few out of billions today, and from billions over the millennia.

That does not mean that our lives are not important. They are, to us, to the people we impact, and above all, to God. But, as Iyov found out, being important goes beyond one's own personal sense of self-worth and entitlement. The 'ship' may have many 'cabins' in which different things happen at different times, but all of them belong to one ship, and all of them travel in the same direction.

To further use the analogy, it is only the captain who has the complete picture of where the ship is traveling and why. The fastest path between two points may be a straight line, but the safest, or the most meaningful one may not be. Passengers who can see the sea for miles may wonder why the ship has suddenly changed directions, but the captain, who has both radar and sonar to see the dangers that lie beneath the surface, knows exactly why.

Indeed, it was the captain who ordered the change of direction. After studying the map, receiving a weather update, and going over the sonar reports, he decided, in the best interest of his passengers and crew, to take a better route. Sometimes that suits the passengers immediate whims, sometimes it does not.

How many times have we felt cheated, only to later find out that we misunderstood why we were charged what we were? How many times have we been disappointed by someone's behavior, only to later learn the logic behind it? How much has gone wrong in history because one person has misunderstood someone else's actions or intentions?

That is why we even have a mitzvah to judge our fellow man to the side of merit (at least up until doing so endangers us or others), as the Talmud explains:

Our Rabbis taught: He who judges his neighbor to the side of merit is himself judged favorably. A story is told of a certain man who descended from the Upper Galilee and who was employed by an individual in the south for three years. On Erev Yom Kippur, he told him, "Give me my wages that I may go and support my wife and children."

"I have no money," he answered.

"Give me produce," he requested.

"I have none," he replied.

"Give me land."

"I have none."

"Give me cattle."

"I have none."

"Give me pillows and bedding."

"I have none."

[So] he slung his things behind him and went home with a sad heart.

After the Festival his employer took his wages in his hand together with three laden donkeys, one carrying food, another drink, and the third various delicacies, and went to his house. After they had eaten and drunk, he paid him his wages. He said to him, "When you said, 'Give me my wages,' and I answered you, 'I have no money,' of what did you suspect me?"

"I thought that perhaps you came across cheap merchandise and had purchased it."

"And when you told me, 'Give me cattle,' and I answered, 'I have no cattle,' of what did you suspect me?"

"I thought that they may be hired to others."

"When you asked me, 'Give me land,' and I told you, 'I have no land,' of what did you suspect me?"

"I thought, perhaps it is leased to others."

"And when I told you, 'I have no produce,' of what did you suspect me?"

"I thought, perhaps they are not yet tithed."

"And when I told you, 'I have no pillows or bedding,' of what did you suspect me?"

"I thought perhaps you had sanctified all your property to Heaven."

"By the [Temple] service!" he exclaimed, "That is what actually happened! I vowed away all my property because of my son Hyrcanus, who would not learn Torah, but when I went to my colleagues in the south they absolved me of all my vows. And as for you, just as you judged me favorably, so may God judge you favorably." (Shabbos 127b)

It's quite a story, and you can assume it really happened as it is recorded. And, though stories like this may not happen to us in their entirety, they do happen to us partially. It is very common to misread people and situations, to jump to incorrect conclusions and to respond out of step with reality.

If this is true with respect to our relationships with our fellow man, how much more so is this true with respect to our relationship with God. The true difference between a believer and an atheist is not the questions, but the answers, and the willingness to go the full distance to see how nothing in history ever contradicts the reality of God, His involvement in history, or His desire to do good.

There are things my father and mother criticized me for when I was growing up that I hated and

rejected. Then, but not now, not after I have grown up and come to see the world as they did, and do, as a mature adult. It will be likewise for my children, God willing, and all of mankind for that matter, when we finally grow up and learn to see the world and history as God does.

Text

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