

WELCOME CRITICISM

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In summing up the story of the Jewish people, from Egyptian slavery to the eve of their entry into their promised homeland, our great teacher and leader Moshe minces no words. He reminds the people of Israel of their shortcomings and of their transgressions during the 40 years that he has led them. There is very little bitterness in his narrative but rather just the damning truth of hard facts and known circumstances.

Though this fifth book of the Bible will contain many commandments and legal matters in it, the overall message of the book is one of historical perspective – of the past and of the future, of the weaknesses and foibles of the people and of their greatness and search for spirituality and holiness. The rabbis taught us that it is better to hear criticisms and chastisement from Moshe who loves us, then compliments and blandishments from Bilaam, who essentially hates us.

The truth is that all of us find it difficult to accept criticism easily and coolly. Our ego flares up and we immediately build up a wall of resentment and excuses in order to deflect the criticism leveled against us. But that is certainly a self-defeating mechanism that only reinforces our shortcomings and prevents us from taking the necessary steps to bring about self-improvement. The Talmud itself bemoans the fact that the diminution of the generations has left us with a society that finds it difficult to accept criticism, and a lack of people who can administer criticism correctly. That certainly seems to be the case in our world today as well.

The reading of the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah, from which this Shabbat derives its name –Chazon - is a strongly worded indictment of the Jewish society in first Temple times and provides the background as to why destruction and exile followed. The prophet will complain later that the people were not attentive to his words and in fact inflicted physical harm upon him for having the temerity to address them in such a fashion.

The great men of Mussar over the past two centuries have placed a greater emphasis on being able to hear the opinions and criticisms of others. Needless to say, this attitude did not prove to be overly popular even amongst religious Jews. Yet, it is abundantly clear that having a closed mind and deaf ears leads to great societal problems, both personal and national.

I would say that, in my opinion, it is one of the more serious failings that exists in our attitudes and behavior patterns. Smugness and self-righteous contentment are truly enemies of progress and spiritual advancement. The Lord Himself, so to speak, asks of us to come, debate and discuss

behavior and problems directly with the Almighty. But the fear of criticism and the lack of the ability to truly digest such criticism prevents many such a discussion or debate from somehow taking place. A little less ego and a lot more humility and attentiveness to others would certainly stand us in good stead.

Shabbat shalom

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