

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Devarim (Devarim 1:1–3:22)  
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

### Devarim – Gentle criticism

In this week's Parasha we begin reading the book of Devarim. Most of sefer Devarim contains Moshe's final words to Bnei Yisrael before his death. The Parsha opens with a lengthy description of Bnei Yisrael's location:

*“These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel, on the side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the plain, opposite the Reed Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Chatzerot and Di-Zahav. It is eleven days' journey from Chorev by way of Mount Seir to Kadesh Barnea.”* (Devarim 1:1-2)

Many commentators question the need for such a convoluted description of Bnei Yisrael's geographical location. Rashi explains that embedded in this description are words of rebuke for Bnei Yisrael. Instead of mentioning their sins explicitly, the Torah alludes to the sins in the names of places. For example:

- the reference to the desert alludes to when Bnei Yisrael angered Hashem in the desert by saying “if only we had died”;
- the reference to the plain alludes to when Bnei Yisrael sinned in the worship of Baal-Peor in the plains of Moab; and
- the reference to Di-Zahav (literally: sufficient gold) hints at the sin of the golden calf which was created with Bnei Yisrael's abundant gold.

Instead of explicitly reminding Bnei Yisrael of their past sins, the Torah uses these hints to convey the rebuke. The first few pasukim of Parshat Devarim can thus be read as a gentle rebuke and as a personal message to work on ourselves. It is much easier to accept rebuke when it is presented in such an indirect manner.

There is a Torah obligation to reprove a fellow Jew if we see them transgressing a mitzvah.<sup>1</sup> This requires a lot of tact. Furthermore, there are times when one should not do so, for example, if we know that the recipient of the rebuke will not listen to us. Rabbinical guidance is required to understand the parameters of this obligation. However, many of us are regularly required to rebuke others, whether it is our employees, our children or our students. Let's see what lessons we can learn about how to rebuke effectively.

Newton's third law of motion states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. This means that if one body exerts a force on a second body, the second body simultaneously exerts a force equal in magnitude and opposite in direction on the first body. That's why, if you punch a wall, it hurts. The same applies when giving rebuke. When one tries to rebuke someone directly, the other person will inevitably push back. They will often become defensive or launch an attack of their own. For example:

*“What you said this morning really made me upset.”*

*“And don't you sometimes say things that upset me?!?”*

We can learn from the beginning of our Parasha that a more indirect approach to giving rebuke can often be more effective. One reason is because when the rebuke is indirect, the recipient of the rebuke is left to work out for themselves how they were wrong. Thus, they are more likely to take ownership of the problem and be committed to finding a solution. Instead of the rebuker and recipient sitting on opposite sides of the table and pushing against each other, it is as if they are both sitting on the same side of the table and pushing together against the problem.

Effective managers in the workforce often employ this technique. A good manager will often ask a junior employee “What do you think?” or “How are you going to solve that problem?”. This approach has the effect of

<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 19:17.

making the employee feel more responsible. Employees will then more likely be proactive and come up with creative solutions.

The following story clearly demonstrates this approach of giving indirect rebuke.<sup>2</sup>

*This story takes place when Rav Kook was the Chief Rabbi of Jaffa.<sup>3</sup> During Shabbat services a congregant stood up on the bimah and announced to the congregation: "At this very moment, Shmuel the cobbler is working in his shop in flagrant violation of Shabbat". The congregant demanded that services be suspended so the entire congregation could walk together to rebuke Shmuel. Rav Kook silenced the angry crowd and insisted that they finish davening. "After the services are finished, we can all walk to Shmuel's shop, but only on condition that everyone follows my orders and acts as I do". At the end of the service the entire congregation followed the Rav to Shmuel's shop. The Rav approached Shmuel and said amiably "Good Shabbos, Reb Shmuel" and then continued on his way. Then, one by one, all of the members of the synagogue did the same. This gentle approach greatly impressed Shmuel. He locked his store and came to the Rav's house. He explained that he was suffering financially and felt forced to work on Shabbat. The Rav, together with the communal board, organised to improve Shmuel's financial situation. Shmuel never worked on Shabbat again.*

Unfortunately, we cannot avoid criticism completely. Human beings are not angels and are not perfect. We are placed in this world to constantly work on ourselves and to improve. This necessitates giving and receiving criticism. However, many people, especially in this generation, are not receptive to mussar and are exquisitely sensitive to criticism. This is most likely due to the endemic of low self-esteem. This suggests that there is even greater need to couch any rebuke in gentle words or to give the rebuke indirectly.

In his commentary to our Parasha<sup>4</sup>, Rashi points out that Moshe, like Yaakov, rebuked Bnei Yisrael shortly before his death. The Sifrei lists a number of reasons why rebuking before death is the best time to give rebuke. If we explore these reasons, we can derive some tips for successful rebuke in general.

1. **Rebuke given just before death is not repeated.** This suggests that a single, effective rebuke might be more successful than repeated rebuke. We can try to give effective rebuke the first time and then be patient, giving the recipient time to respond.
2. **Rebuke given just before death avoids the pitfall of the recipient suffering embarrassment every time they see the one who rebuked them.** When we give rebuke, we can admit that we also suffered from the same, or a similar, fault. In that way, the person is less likely to feel inferior or embarrassed.
3. **Rebuke given just before death reduces the likelihood of the recipient feeling hatred toward you.** If we point out that the rebuke is for their benefit and/or how much we care about them, there is less chance of such hatred.
4. **Rebuke given before death is clearly meant with pure intentions so it won't lead to a lack of peace.** If we try to develop a positive loving relationship first, the recipient will know that we want the best for them. They will be less likely to be angry with us and more likely to accept our rebuke.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to only rebuke out of love and when it is in the other person's interest or really necessary.
2. When we need to rebuke someone, let's try to emulate the method used in the beginning of this week's Parasha, i.e. use an indirect, gentle approach.
3. Do not remind others of past rebuke or mistakes.
4. Give rebuke once only. Wait patiently for a response and only repeat if absolutely necessary.
5. One effective method of gently rebuking someone is to talk about ourselves as struggling with the same issue and perhaps suggesting methods that have been effective for us.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>2</sup> Raz, Simcha, *An Angel Among Men*, (Kol Mevaser Publications 2003), 88.

<sup>3</sup> He went on to become the chief Rabbi of Israel.

<sup>4</sup> Rashi's commentary to Devarim 1:3.