

Nesiya High Holidays Study Guide 5773/2012 A Season of Forgiveness, Rebuke and Love

עבירות שבין אדם למקום, יום הכיפורים מכפר; שבינו לבין חברו – אין יום הכיפורים מכפר, עד שירצה את חברו.

(משנה יומא פרק ח')

"Yom Kippur achieves atonement for sins between humans and G-d. For sins between people, however, atonement is achieved only after one has appeased his fellow."

(Mishna Yoma Chapter 8)



לֹא-תִשְׁנָא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ; הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ, וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא. לֹא-תִקֶּם וְלֹא-תִטּוֹר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ, וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ: אֲנִי יְהוָה.

(ויקרא יט: יז-יח)

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord.

(Leviticus 19:17-18)



אֶל-תּוֹכַח לֹא, פֶּן-יִשְׁנָאֲךָ; הוֹכַח לְחָכָם, וַיְאָהֲבֶךָ. תֵּן לְחָכָם, וַיְחַכְּמֶם-עוֹד; הוֹדַע לְצַדִּיק, וַיּוֹסֶף לְקַח.

(משלי ט: ח-י)

Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; reprove a wise man, and he will love you. Instruct a wise man, and he will grow wiser; teach a righteous man, and he will gain in learning.

(Proverbs 9:8-10)



אמר רבי טרפון: "תמיהני [תמה] אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה. אם אמר לו 'טול קיסם מבין עיניך' אמר לו 'טול קורה מבין עיניך'. אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה 'תמיהני אם יש בדור הזה שיודע להוכיח.'"
(תלמוד בבלי ערכין טז ע"ב)

Rabbi Tarfon said, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to accept rebuke. For if one says to his fellow 'remove the splinter from your eye,' the other will respond 'remove the board from yours.'" [i.e., if one calls attention to a flaw of his friend, his friend will respond by identifying a greater flaw in the first person.] R. Elazar b. Azariah said: I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke.

(Tractate Arachin 16b)



רבי יוסי בר חנינא אמר: כל אהבה שאין עמה תוכחה אינה אהבה.
(בראשית רבה פרשה נד)

Love unaccompanied by criticism is not love.

(Genesis Rabbah 54)

Questions for Reflection

- Can you think of examples when you have rebuked with anger, and when you have rebuked with love? When others have rebuked you with anger or love?
- What is the difference in your tone of voice and intent when you rebuke with anger and when you rebuke with love? How do you feel when someone criticizes you with care and affection?
- Have you ever been part of a group which supported constructive criticism? What do you need from others in order to feel safe enough to give and receive criticism?

Nesiya Thoughts

As we enter the Ten Days of Repentance between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, our tradition offers us the annual opportunity to work actively to repair our relationships. The Mishnah states: *"Yom Kippur achieves atonement for sins between humans and G-d. For sins between people, however, atonement is achieved only after one has appeased his fellow."*

When we think about our role in achieving atonement for "sins between humans," what usually comes to mind is repenting for our own wrongdoing and asking those we have hurt to forgive us. However, if repairing our relationships is our goal, the Mishnah presents a double challenge: our attempts to heal our relationships also depend upon our willingness to approach those who have hurt us and give them the opportunity to make amends. If this is true, the season of forgiveness and renewal is also a time of rebuke and criticism.

This conclusion may make us uncomfortable. Don't words like "criticism" and "rebuke" imply judgment, anger, and accusation? How can rebuke be compatible with the love, appreciation, and affirmation that we want our renewed relationships to reflect, especially at this time of year?

The Rabbis of the Talmud were well aware of the challenges posed by both sharing and receiving critical feedback with our peers: *Rabbi Tarfon said, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to accept rebuke. For if one says to his fellow 'remove the splinter from your eye,' the other will respond 'remove the board from yours.'" [i.e., if one calls attention to a flaw of his friend, his friend will respond by identifying a greater flaw in the first person.] R. Elazar b. Azariah said: I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke.*

Confronting others about their behavior is challenging and scary. Rebuke and critique are often met with defensiveness, counteraccusations, hurt, or denial. With so many negative feelings associated with criticizing others, how can we succeed in rebuking others and accepting rebuke as expressions of care and appreciation?

Rebuking others is a biblical commandment. When we look at the context in which the commandment appears, we notice what seems at first to be a surprising contrast – the obligation to rebuke is mentioned in the context of loving one's neighbor: *"You shall not hate your brother in your heart; Rebuke your kinsman but incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."* When read in this context, rebuking one's fellow seems to be presented as an expression of love, and part of the process of developing a loving relationship. The Rabbis emphasize this understanding of rebuke: *Rabbi Yossi b. Chanina said: Rebuke leads to love, as it is written, "Rebuke a wise man and he will love you."* According to Rabbi Yossi b. Chanina, *love that contains no rebuke is not love at all.*

How can rebuke be an expression of love?

One way to understand the relationship of rebuke and love is to compare it with the relationship between God's commandments and God's love. The commandments are an expression of love because they demonstrate God's faith in our ability to become better people. This love reflects the message that we can live according to demanding standards because we are capable of transforming ourselves into better people. God's love and commandments express a persistent faith in human potential and capacity for goodness.

We can apply this model to human relationships. While we love people for who they are, we also love them for the potential that we discover in them, the person we believe can and will emerge. We challenge those close to us to improve their behavior because we love them and believe they are capable of growth. Rebuke, when offered with love and respect, affirms the positive potential we find in others, and expresses a faith that the person who hurt us can change. When done in a caring and respectful way, rebuke reminds us that the behavior and the person are not the same.

Our families and communities play a critical role in making it possible to both rebuke others and accept rebuke gracefully. Individuals are most cared for and honored in a group which supports challenging and questioning the behavior of others. Because I love you and respect you, I believe that you want to know how your actions have affected me and want to learn from my experiences with you. This kind of rebuke is an expression of optimism, love, and deep belief that our fellow human beings can grow and that we can improve our relationships.