

When I think each year of all the things which I regret having done, handing out criticism is always at or near the top of the list. I can recall sermons I regret having given and conversation I regret having. I don't think I'm unusual - for me, as for many people, I believe the tendency to criticize is very nearly a compulsion -- someone makes a mistake, and another feels an immediate need to correct it. We might see something happening that we don't like, and feel immediately motivated to let someone know.

It's interesting, how much more motivated we are to criticize than to praise. We have complaint departments, not satisfaction counters.

I am aware of this tendency within myself and usually am grateful when someone, often Marisa, reminds me when I am being too critical. I think - I hope - that I am growing wiser and more sparing in my use of the tool of criticism, correction, and reproaches. I have thought about the reasons I become hyper-critical, and I think my reasons apply to others, as well. I share them with you, with the twofold hope that it will reinforce my own struggle against being inappropriately critical, as well as give you food for thought on how you might restrain your own tendency to criticize.

One reason that people are quick to criticize and correct is to defend one's professional credentials. Each of us have certain expertise in our lives which are part of the way we make our living. If one is an accountant and hears someone give an opinion on how best to set aside taxes, one might think that giving one's own contrary opinion boosts one's professional image. A rabbi, an expert on Jewish matters, might feel a need to prove that expertise by correcting those who do or explain something wrong. A doctor, an electrician, a mechanic, all might correct those who share opinions that fall within their expertise, thus proving their superiority.

Much more criticism falls into the category of a simple desire to demonstrate that I am generally an intelligent person by proving that I am smarter than the person being corrected. Much discussion of politics, for example, falls into this category. I have heard political opposites debate in a respectful framework, each clearly listening and learning from the other. More often, however, each frames the arguments so as to make the other appear stupid for his or her opinion. The intent is not so much to share ideas as it is to prove that the opposing idea is asinine.

In general, the difference between good criticism and bad criticism has to do with the intent -- is the intent to boost the ego of the criticizer or is it to help the criticized grow to become a better person?

It is possible to have a good intent but nonetheless deliver the criticism poorly, so that the listener does not grow from it. Most of the time, the criticizer does not take the time to frame the criticism in order to contribute towards growth, rather than simply showing superior knowledge.

There is in fact a Jewish way to give reproach. It begins with Leviticus 19:17:¹

לֹא-תִשְׁנֵא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא:

“You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely reprove your neighbor and incur no guilt because of him.”

First of all, the instruction begins with the phrase, “you shall not hate your brother in your heart.” This means that before opening our mouth to share any reproach, we need to examine our heart, our motivation. If there is any shred of dislike for the other, any sense that ‘I’m going to cut that know-it-all down to size,’ it is best to close the mouth and engage the brain before continuing.

The verse continues, “You shall surely reprove your neighbor and incur no guilt because of him.” How might you incur guilt? If you share any criticism in a way which causes the other to resent you, you will have caused him or her to violate the first part of the verse. If you cause someone to resent or hate you, you share a part of their sin -- you incur a measure of guilt.

Based on this verse, the Talmud and codes stress that it is a positive obligation to reprove your fellow Jew. The Talmud says, “Jerusalem was destroyed because the inhabitants failed to rebuke one another” (Shabbat 119b); and [The repetition in the words] ‘... You shall surely reprove [hokhei’ah tokhi’ah] your neighbor’ means not just once or twice, but rather a hundred times (Bava M’tzia 31a).

Maimonides says, “If you see that someone has transgressed or is behaving improperly, you are obligated to correct him (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 6:7).

With these sources of instruction, no wonder Jews are so critical! I wonder if this could be related to the reason why across North America, more Jews stay away from synagogue on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur than come and participate? Could it be that this holiday, which focuses so heavily on examining all which we have done wrong, is just too guilt-inducing in a community already rife with criticism? It is fair to ask, ‘Is the Torah’s insistence on reproach effective?’

I’m not the first to have asked this question. In the Talmud, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said, “I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to reprove!” (Arachin 16b)

Learning how to give reproach is the key. When you are tempted to pass out some corrections, first search your heart to be sure that you have no hatred or self-interest clouding your intent. Make sure that your motivation is pure, that your intent is to help the other experience growth, not to put down another to raise up yourself.

Second, before saying anything consider the following story:

Rabbi Yannai had a tree that overhung the public way, and another man also had a

¹ The Major sources for this paper came from “It’s Okay, I’ll Sit in the Dark: What Judaism Says about Reproaching Others By Rabbi Irwin A. Zeplovitz, published by the URJ.

tree overhanging the street. Some passersby objected, and the other man was summoned before Rabbi Yannai's court. Rabbi Yannai said to him, "Go away now, and come again tomorrow." During the night he had his own tree cut down. The next day the man came back, and Rabbi Yannai told him to go and cut his tree down. The other man said, "But you, sir, also have one." Rabbi Yannai replied, "Go and see. If mine is cut down, cut yours down, and if mine is not cut down, you need not cut yours down." ... [His decision was made to] conform with the maxim of Resh Lakish, who said: "It is written, 'Trim yourselves and then trim others.' (Bava Batra 60b)²

Too often, we criticize others for the same faults of which we ourselves are guilty. So before opening your mouth, consider in what ways you yourself might be guilty of the same fault. Spend some time in self-correction, and then you will be ready for the next step.

Next, consider how the person who you are considering correcting will accept the criticism. In the Talmud passage quoted above, Rabbi Tarfon said, "I wonder whether there is anyone in this generation who accepts reproof? The passage continues by quoting Proverbs 9:8: "Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; Reprove a wise man, and he will love you," suggesting that if you know the other will categorically reject your reproach, hold back!

Consider the following story about the Hasidic Rabbi Israel of Vishnitz. On one of his customary evening strolls, he stopped by the house of a wealthy bank manager.

Although the banker was surprised to see him, he invited the rabbi in to his home respectfully and politely. Rabbi Israel took the seat that was offered him, and sat for quite some time without saying a word.

After a while, the rabbi rose to leave, and said goodnight. The bank manager walked him to the door and finally asked, "Rabbi, I don't mean to be impolite – but why did you honor me with a visit, and sit the whole time without saying a word?"

"I went to your house in order to fulfill a mitzvah," the rabbi replied, "and thank God I was able to fulfill it."

"And which mitzvah was that?" asked the confused bank manager.

The rabbi replied: "Our sages teach that 'Just as one is commanded to say that which will be listened to, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be listened to.' Now if I stay in my house and you stay in yours, how can I really perform the mitzvah of not telling you 'that which will not be listened to'? In order to fulfill the mitzvah, one obviously has to go to the house of the person who will not listen, and there not say anything. And that is exactly what I did."

²Zephania 2:1 The NJPS version this phrase as, 'Gather together, gather.' Resh Lakish, however, derives it from the word kash, stubble, and translates, 'Remove the stubble from between your own eyes, and afterwards remove it from others.')

If you know the reproach will fall on un-hearing ears, think twice, three times, and even a fourth time before speaking.

Finally, when you have completed all of the previous steps and if you feel fairly certain that the other will be able to hear your corrective message, before saying anything consider the words of two early modern ethicists, who suggest that one be sensitive to the tone of one's voice when delivering rebuke:

The Chofetz Chayim said, "When you perform mitzvot, you don't raise your voice. So, too, with rebuke. It is not necessary to yell. If you are sincere in your actions and words, your message will penetrate the most stubborn of hearts."

Rabbi Chayim of Volzhin said, "If a person is unable to admonish others in a pleasant tone of voice, that person is exempt from the obligation to deliver reproof."

A colleague of mine Rabbi Paul Arberman, told the following story:

Over Shabbat dinner with family, one guest began to talk about the disengagement and how the settlers were treated -- in her opinion. "I don't think God will forgive the soldiers for what they did," she said. My colleague, who happens to live in Israel, lost it. He was offended that someone was speaking for God, especially when that someone was so clearly wrong. The prolonged exchange generated quite a bit of heat.

Neither one of them were convinced by the other of the error of their ways. At the end of the evening, the score was one annoyed guest: no change in belief. One annoyed young rabbi: no change in belief. One annoyed family. One ruined Shabbat meal.

Ben Franklin said: If you argue and rankle and contradict, you may achieve a victory sometimes; but it will be an empty victory because you will never get your opponent's good will. So -- Take a deep breath, put a smile on your face and in your voice, go ahead and share your criticism. Realize that you still might be rejected, but you have done your best to follow the Torah's instructions.

Let's review the steps in sharing reproach in an authentically Jewish way:

1. First, examine your heart, investigate your motives - make sure that your aim is to enable the other's growth, not feed your own ego at his/her expense.
2. Second, clean your own house first -- make sure you are not in any way guilty of the same fault.
3. Third, consider whether the person will be able to accept your reproach in the positive spirit in which it is being offered.
4. Fourth, take care to moderate your voice so the message is delivered infused with love and caring rather than anger or sarcasm.
5. Fifth, say what you need to say - once - and if it not accepted, let it go. You have done your best, you have followed the Torah's sage advice -- feel good about that, and stop pushing.

Our goal in sharing reproach ought to be to increase the level of goodness, shalom, and ahavah in the world. Remember -- we will never have peace and love if the faults we see and try to correct are replaced by anger and resentment at our criticism.

עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו -- Let the Divine source of Shalom
הוא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ -- infuse us with shalom --
וְעַל כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל -- so that we can spread it among our families and community --
וְעַל כָּל-יְהוּדֵי תֵבֶל -- and it will spread out among all peoples living on earth --
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן.