

Parshas Devarim – Rabbi David Riffkin

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The final Book of the Torah begins with the famous rebuke or mussar of Bnei Yisrael by Moshe. This episode took place five weeks before his death, and Moshe did not castigate them explicitly for their sins, but made veiled references to the incidents and places where they angered Hashem. An example of this is the place "Dee Zahav", which is mentioned in the opening passuk. Rashi explains "He (Moshe) rebuked them regarding the sin of the Egel hazahav, because of the abundance of gold that they possessed..."

With regards the concept of rebuke, the Torah, in Parshat Kedoshim is quite unequivocal when it states "hochayach tochiach et amitecha" "You shall reprove your fellow man" (19:17). On the one hand it seems abundantly clear that this is a mitzvah asehi, and that we must always tell off others if it seems that they deserve it! On the other hand, much has been written by Chazal regarding the fact that this is one of the most difficult mitzvot to fulfil properly, because there are times when you can not and should not castigate sinners. One needs to weigh up carefully when reproof will be effective and when it will be counterproductive. (Orach Chayim, 608:2, Rema, Mishna Brura and Biyur Halacha).

Indeed, we have a classic example in Sefer Bereishit, which certainly raises an interesting question regarding this mitzvah. We are all familiar with the famous appeal of Avraham on behalf of the two evil cities of Sodom and Amora. The incredible dialogue between Hashem and Avraham and of course the 'tzaddik search' of 50,45,40,30,20 and 10. However, nowhere do we find any mention of Avraham and his dear wife Sarah actually going to these cities and attempting to use their magic and TRY and mekarev these people. Why not? We are all familiar with the energy and influence that arguably the very first Kiruv Couple in our history, Avraham and Sarah possessed. We all know about the Midrash, regarding the idol store, when Avraham was in charge and the biggest one 'smashed' all the little ones! We are told by Rashi that Avraham and Sarah converted at least 250 idol worshippers over to the ways of Monotheism. Surely, they could influence the people of Sodom and Amora, under the banner of "hochayach tochiach et amitecha" using their charisma, charm and most importantly their emunah shelayma? Why did this not happen?

Rav Pam, in his Sefer Darchei Noam on the Parsha, quoting the Dubno Maggid in Ohel Yaakov (Ber 18:17) answers this question. Based on the Gemara in Yevamot 65b he explains that just as there is a Mitzvah to say words of rebuke that will be accepted, so too it is a mitzvah to withhold words if it will not be accepted. Here the Gemara elaborates that the effectiveness of the person offering rebuke might be so badly dented if the recipients simply offer ridicule, cynicism or even hatred that there are occasions when rebuke is simply not the correct route. This explains Avraham's rather passive approach to the people of Sodom. He made a sensible calculation that even had he tried to mekarev them, they would not listen, would even ridicule them and therefore his overall effectiveness would be greatly reduced. Avraham was preserving his ability to effectively reprove his own family and disciples, the people who would actually listen.

The most effective reproof is the one given softly and calmly. The many sefarim written by the Chafetz Chayim are filled with words of mussar and rebuke, yet he constantly prefaced his reproof with the words "My dear and precious brethren". His words were accepted and treasured because they were conveyed with love for his fellow Jews, no matter how far removed they were from mainstream Torah Judaism. The same can be said for Reb Aryeh Levine, the famous Rav of Yerushalayim, who also adopted the gentle approach to reproof. Both of these great Torah leaders of the last generation fulfilled the words of Kohelet (9:17) "The gentle words of the wise are heard".

I would like to dedicate this Dvar Torah to the ilui neshama of R' Shlomo Reuven ben R' Yitzchak Leib Riffkin, who was taken to the Olam Haemet two years ago on 2 Menachem Av. I would also like to dedicate this Dvar Torah to the safe return of all our chayalim kedoshim from the essential mission that they are doing lema'an Am Yisrael and for a Refuah Shlayma to all those who are injured.

Shabbat Shalom and Besurot Tovot.