

**Moshe's Rebuke**  
**Devarim, 5781**  
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Jeremiah is the prophet most identified with the observance of the upcoming day of, Tisha Be'Av. On Tisha Be'Av night we read the Book of Eicha, which rabbinic tradition ascribes to Jeremiah (Bava Batra, 15a). On Tisha Be'Av morning we read a Haftorah which is taken from chapters 8 and 9 of Jeremiah. And on the day of Tisha Be'Av we read kinot, many of which are dominated by phrases lifted from the prophetic words of Jeremiah.

In the short term it is hard to imagine a less successful prophet than Jeremiah. While over the long arc of history, his words have endured, inspired, and encouraged us with their timely message, his words were not taken to heart by his immediate audience. In his lifetime, his words were ignored or completely rejected. Indeed, Jeremiah himself was thrown into prison on account of the message of rebuke that he brought to his beloved people. And yet, despite his suffering, Jeremiah heroically never wavered from his unflinching message of rebuke:

Says the Book of Jeremiah:

*When the army of the Chaldeans raised the siege of Jerusalem on account of the army of Pharaoh, Jeremiah was going to leave Jerusalem and go to the territory of Benjamin to share in some property there among the people. When he got to the Benjamin Gate, there was a guard officer there named Irijah son of Shelemiah son of Hananiah; and he arrested the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "You are defecting to the Chaldeans!" Jeremiah answered, "That's a lie! I'm not defecting to the Chaldeans!" But Irijah would not listen to him; he arrested Jeremiah and brought him to the officials. The officials were furious with Jeremiah; they beat him and put him into prison, in the house of the scribe Jonathan—for it had been made into a jail. Thus Jeremiah came to the pit and the cells, and Jeremiah remained there a long time. Then King Zedekiah sent for him, and the king questioned him secretly in his palace. He asked, "Is there any word from the LORD?" "There is!" Jeremiah answered, and he continued, "You will be delivered into the hands of the king of Babylon" (37:11-17).*

Jeremiah was disgusted by the corruption, hypocrisy, and completely unreflective behavior he saw amongst his brothers and sisters. He says about them: "No one regrets his wrongdoing. Each pursues his course like a horse charging into battle" (8:6). What an image—a horse charging into battle! About this verse, the great, Ramchal, writes: "He means that they act out of impulse and habit, without leaving themselves time to evaluate their actions and ways, and, as a result, fall into evil without noticing" (*Mesillat Yesharim*, 2).

The Haftorah that we read on Tisha Be'Av morning comes from perhaps one of the lowest points in Jeremiah's life. He throws up his hands in complete despair. All of his words and stinging rebukes are not penetrating the hearts of the Jewish people. He breaks down in tears and abandons all hope of success. All has been lost. The only thing left to do is to cry: "Oh, that my head were water, My eyes a fount of tears! Then would I weep day and night for the slain of

my poor people” (8:23). These words are some of the most moving words of despair in our entire corpus of traditional texts. They are so powerful that they were adopted in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century by the Jewish community of the Rhineland as the opening words of a kinah that was written to memorialize the massacre of the Jewish community during the First Crusades.

Along with his despair, Jeremiah also has anger. With his message ignored, he gives in to his feeling of disgust and wishes the worst for his people and blames them for their doom. He cries out in the Haftorah for Tisha Be’Av:

*Oh, to be in the desert, At an encampment for wayfarers! Oh, to leave my people, To go away from them— For they are all adulterers, A band of rogues. They bend their tongues like bows; They are valorous in the land For treachery, not for honesty; They advance from evil to evil. And they do not heed Me —declares the LORD. Beware, every man of his friend! Trust not even a brother! For every brother takes advantage, Every friend is base in his dealings. One man cheats the other, They will not speak truth; They have trained their tongues to speak falsely; They wear themselves out working iniquity (9:1-4).*

How can Jeremiah say, “they are **all** adulterers.” That doesn’t seem possible. In his moment of terrible frustration, he lashes out at **all** the people and thereby makes certain that his rebuke will have no chance to succeed.

Jeremiah was a beautiful soul and inspirational prophet. We still read his powerful words and find incredible meaning and insight in them. We are inspired and moved by his fiery passion.

He was also a near-total failure for his own generation. His words were not heeded by his beloved people. His rebuke was ineffective. He did not prevent the calamitous tragedy that he foresaw—the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash and the exile from the land.

One of the most important skills we can acquire in life is how to offer rebuke in an effective manner—in a way that actually helps the situation and inspires change.

It is a mitzvah to rebuke another person. Says the Torah: *Hocheiakh tochiach et amitecha*, you must rebuke your fellow (Vayikra, 19:17).

However, before one goes and rebukes another person, in these days of everyone (hopefully) getting their covid-19 vaccine, it is important to remember a teaching of Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch. He compares the mitzvah of rebuke to administering an injection: “the needle must be free of any germs, and the doctor and his attendants must wear white clothes and sterilize their hands. Similarly, someone giving rebuke must have pure motives (his ‘clothes,’ i.e. means of expression—thought, word, and deed—must be ‘white’) and be sure that his injection will not cause harm” (Chumash, Based on the Works of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, 738).

In the beginning of our portion, Devarim, we see another example of a great leader offering rebuke. The portion begins, “*Eleh hadevarim asher dibber Moshe el benei yisrael*, these are the

words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan—Through the wilderness, in the Arabah near Suph, between Paran and Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth, and Dizahab” (Devarim, 1:1).

Even though this opening verse looks innocuous enough and it doesn’t sound like a rebuke, Rashi quoting the Talmud tells us that it was actually a veiled rebuke to the Jewish people.

*THESE ARE THE WORDS — Because these are words of rebuke and he is enumerating here all the places where they provoked God to anger, therefore he suppresses all mention of the matters in which they sinned and refers to them only by a mere allusion contained in the names of these places out of regard for Israel (cf. Sifrei Devarim 1:1; Onkelos and Targum Jonathan).*

*[THE WORDS WHICH HE SPAKE] TO ALL ISRAEL — If he had reproved only some of them, those who were then in the street (i.e. those who were absent) might have said, “You heard from the son of Amram, and did not answer a single word regarding this and that; had we been there, we would have given him an answer!”. On this account he assembled all of them, and said to them, “See, you are all here: he who has anything to say in reply, let him reply!” (Sifrei Devarim 1:6-7).*

*IN THE WILDERNESS — They, however, were not then in the wilderness, but in the plains of Moab (cf. Numbers 36:13 and further on verse 5 : (What, therefore, is the meaning of במדבר? It does not mean “in the wilderness”, but the meaning is: he reproved them on account of that wherein they had provoked Him to anger in the wilderness — that they said, (Exodus 16:3) “Would that we had died [by the hand of the Lord]” (cf. Sifrei Devarim 1:11).*

*IN THE PLAIN — i.e. he reproved them regarding the plain: that they had sinned through Baal Peor at Shittim in the plains of Moab (cf. Sifrei Devarim 1:13)*

*OVER AGAINST SUPH — i.e. he reproved them regarding that in which they had shown themselves rebellious at the Red Sea (סוף): viz., on their arrival at the Red Sea — that they said, (Exodus 14:11) “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt [that thou hast brought us to die in the wilderness?]”; and similarly when they left the midst of the Sea, as it is said, (Psalms 106:7) “They murmured because of the Sea, at the Red Sea”, as it is related in Treatise Arakhin 15a (cf. Rashi on Numbers 14:22 and Sifrei 1:14).*

*BETWEEN PARAN, AND TOPHEL AND LABAN — R. Jochanan said: We have gone through the whole Bible and we have found no place the name of which is Tophel or Laban! But the meaning is that he reproved them because of the calumnious statements (טפלו) they had made regarding the Manna which was white (לבן) in colour — that they said, (Numbers 21:5) “And our soul loathes this light bread”; and because of what they had done in the wilderness of Paran through the spies.*

*AND HAZEROTH — i.e. regarding what they had done there at the insurrection of Korah. — Another explanation :He said to them , “You ought to have taken a lesson from what I*

*did to Miriam at Hazeroth because of the slander she uttered, and yet you even after that spoke against the Omnipresent (Sifrei Devarim 1:15).*

*AND DI ZAHAB (the name is taken in the sense of “sufficiency of gold”) — He reproved them on account of the golden calf which they had made in consequence of the abundance of gold which they had, as it is said, (Hosea 2:10) “And silver did I give them in abundance and gold: they, however, made it into a Baal” (cf. Berakhot 32a; Sifrei Devarim 1:18).*

We see from this Rashi two very important lessons regarding rebuke:

- a) Moshe rebukes them in a veiled manner by hiding the specific places they sinned so as not to embarrass them.
- b) Moshe holds them accountable by making sure to rebuke all of them together so no one can claim that they never heard any rebuke.

Asks the Imrei Elimelech (of R. Elimelech Shapira--the grandson of the Noam Elimelech, and the father of the Aish Kodesh), how can we say that Moshe Rabbeinu only alluded to their sins implicitly so as not to embarrass them, when we know that in the rest of the parasha, Moshe goes into great detail and explicitly describes their sins. For example, soon after Moshe “hides” their sins, he then goes and describes the sin of the *meraglim* in great detail (1:12-46).

Explains the Imrei Elimelech, once the Israelites heard the rebuke from Moshe given in such a discreet and respectful manner, they were immediately inspired to do a complete repentance. The Talmud in the last chapter of tractate Yoma discusses that there are two types of repentance—repentance out of fear and repentance out of love. In this case, they were so moved by the manner in which they were rebuked, that they repented out of love. Says the Talmud, when one repents out of love, all of one’s sins are turned retroactively from sins into mitzvot. In this case, once the Israelites repented, they then turned to Moshe and asked him to please recount their sins in great detail so that all their sins could be turned into mitzvot. This means that once they were willing to accept their rebuke, they became wide open to reflecting upon their behavior. They internalized their previously sinful ways to such a powerful degree, that they were able to focus on turning their mistakes into mitzvot.

How does one reach the level of offering a rebuke in such a modest manner that it allows the person being rebuked to embrace it fully and with an open heart?

There is not an easy answer to this question, but it would be very smart in this area to follow the approach of Rav Mottel Katz, zt”l, the Rosh Yeshiva of Telz.

Rav Yissocher Frand tells the story that back in the 1940’s, Rav Mottel Katz was approached by the students of the yeshiva and asked if that night they could change the time for maariv. There was a boxing match the students wanted to listen to on the radio and they didn’t want to miss out on account of having to pray the maariv prayer. The Rosh Yeshiva –to say the least --was not an American who enjoyed the sport of boxing. He was a person who lived and breathed

Torah. He was known for never putting anything in front of Torah studies. He could have reacted by rebuking his students harshly and explaining to them that the very fact that they asked the question demonstrated how much more they needed to study in order to improve themselves spiritually. But he didn't take that approach. Instead, the Rosh Yeshiva in his great wisdom, bit his tongue, and allowed the time of maariv to be changed for that one night.

When I heard this story, I was moved and inspired. Sometimes the most effective rebuke is given with a hug. At the time the students probably did not feel that they were being rebuked. But over time they surely reflected on whether or not they had acted properly in prioritizing a boxing match over the yeshiva's maariv.

Sometimes if we want to inspire a repentance of love, then we need to teach with love.

***You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:***

***<https://youtu.be/Gx3ePZZRNDM>***