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## On Rebuking Your Neighbor

It was almost exactly twenty years ago – August, 2000. The Republican National Convention descended on Philadelphia. For days, protests erupted throughout the city. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets carrying life-sized puppets and signs.

I was a young rabbinical student, and I got swept up in the intensity of the moment. We were protesting for universal healthcare and economic equality and against the criminal justice system. But the police – they were everywhere. They arrested more than 400 protesters, and often did so violently. They raided a puppet warehouse, arresting 80 puppeteers on charges of conspiracy. Their goal was to get the protesters off the streets, setting bail at one million dollars for a few activists.

My friend, Elliott, and I were outraged. We decided that we had to do something. So, we organized a press conference. We got a group of rabbis and rabbinical students to sign a statement protesting police brutality. We found a museum downtown that agreed to rent us a room. We contacted the media. And they came in droves. A camera guy from a television station told me that they needed more color on the podium. A custodian got him a banner with the museum's name on it. It appeared in every news report.

The truth was that we really had no idea what we were doing, and it was amazing the damage that we caused. A month later, the president of my rabbinical college asked to meet with me in his office. He explained that our failure to let him know ahead of time what we were doing left him ill-prepared to handle the controversy. He told me that the leadership of the museum was furious with the college. He let me know that my activism had cost the college \$50,000 in lost donations.

And then, he told me that if I ever wanted to do something so controversial and so public again, then I should at least do it well. He proceeded to teach me, at the end of a long day, how to organize a proper press conference.

We might call this a teachable moment, but in Jewish tradition it's called *tochecha*, or rebuke. It was the best *tochecha* I have ever received.

The idea of *tochecha* comes from Leviticus 19:17-18. It begins, "*Lo tisna et achichah bilvavechah* – You should not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. *Hocheyach tochiyach et amitechah* – You should surely rebuke your friend. *V'lo tisa alav cheyt* – So that you do not sin because of him. *V'ahavta le'reyecha kamocha* – You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

To expand on the text:

Don't hold anger in your heart; don't let resentment well up inside of you. If your neighbor has done something wrong, don't think that it won't impact you. It will. It will bother you so much that you might be tempted to gossip about them or take vengeance on them or pull away from them. Don't do that. Keep your heart open. Talk honestly and directly to your neighbor. With any relationship, you are going to misstep. You will inevitably hurt and annoy and insult other people. They will do the same to you.

You have to give your neighbor the opportunity to do *teshuvah*, to correct their wrongs, to make amends, to take responsibility for their actions, to repair the relationship. By speaking to them about how they let you down, you hold them accountable to a set of shared values. Repair can take place when we are real with each other. Love your neighbor, love your friend, love your colleague and your community member and your spouse and your child and your parent. These relationships are holy. Do not take them for granted.

Jewish tradition presumes that we are responsible *to* one another and we are responsible *for* one another. It's a radical idea in this hyper-individualistic world we live in, especially now when we are unbearably distanced from one another.

*Tochecha* can feel like a burden at this time of pandemic, when we're already anxious. Work is stressful. School is stressful. Being alone is stressful. Raising children is stressful. Who wants to give or receive criticism right now?

The problem is that there are so many ways our relationships don't work. Our spouse prioritizes his needs over ours, or betrays us, or yells at us. Our coworker neglects her responsibilities and it impacts our work. Our colleague remains silent when he should have spoken out. Our friend ignores us with no explanation. Our boss harasses us. Our neighbor makes a racist remark. Our teacher misgenders us. Our parents take their frustrations out on us. The very people we count on are insensitive and self-absorbed. Our relationships become tense and then we hurt each other. So then what? We can slink away or try to ignore the harsh words that were exchanged or just lash out. But sometimes we need to address the rupture directly, and have difficult conversations, and even give a little *tochecha* when it's needed.

It doesn't mean we're going to do it all the time. That would be exhausting. We have to pick and choose and be thoughtful about when we offer *tochecha*. Not everyone can handle it. And sometimes giving it is not the right thing to do.

I learned that the hard way with a close friend who had made a bad parenting move (in my humble opinion). I don't even remember the details anymore. What I do remember is that our kids had gotten in a fight, and I felt the need to reach out to my friend about it, parent to parent. I thought she should intervene and talk to her daughter about her behavior. It was an awkward conversation punctuated by lots of uncomfortable silences. That part was unforgettable. At the time, I had genuinely thought I was being helpful.

But I really offended her. She was defensive and became distant. It's true, I overstepped. I assumed a mutual desire to problem-solve that didn't exist. I was meddling. I made the situation worse. Parenting is a touchy subject, and I should have kept my mouth shut.

What's also true is that she hated having difficult conversations. Which meant that when one of us annoyed the other in the ways that close friends sometimes do, we couldn't talk about it and make things better. It reminded me of a teaching from the Talmud: "Just as there is a commandment for a person to say words of rebuke that will be accepted, so too there is a commandment for a person *not* to say words of rebuke that will *not* be accepted." (Yevamot 65b)

Sometimes we confuse *tochecha* with dumping. Like when you use it as an opportunity to tell your friends or family members every terrible thing about themselves. That's not *tochecha* -- or it's not *tochecha* done well. It's supposed to come from a place of love and respect, with a sincere wish to help the other person do *teshuvah*, to change themselves or make amends. We're supposed to be honest, patient, compassionate, vulnerable and direct. When we want to pounce on someone with arrogance or we just want to get even, we know that it's at these times that we should be silent. (Hilchot De'ot 6:7)

Often, though, we're just afraid to have these difficult conversations. We are conflict avoidant. Many years ago my cousin was having an affair. I know that because several of my female relatives ran into him with his girlfriend at the theater. I can only imagine the scene. It was intermission, and they were probably delighted to see him. And then the realization set in that he wasn't there with his wife, but with someone else.

Afterwards, my relatives had a big disagreement -- should they tell his wife? The stakes were high, as he was a public figure. The older women said no. That would be improper and embarrassing. It would hurt his wife too much. This was a private matter. The younger women were appalled. How could they *not* tell her? How could they let my cousin get away with this? How would his wife feel if she found out later that everyone knew?

I don't remember anyone suggesting that they speak to my cousin, that they give him some *tochecha*, that they tell him that he needs to tell his wife what he's doing. They could have held him accountable. He might very well not have gone through a big process of *teshuvah*, but they could have put him in a position that would have forced him to end his deception.

Maimonides encourages us to do our *tochecha* privately. Public shaming is off limits in Judaism. The rabbis say that humiliating a person is akin to murder. (Bava Metzia 58b) Because again, the whole point of *tochecha* is to help someone do *teshuvah*. People don't change when they feel disparaged, when they have become disempowered and when they hate themselves. People change when they can recognize what they've done wrong and can see a path forward.

There are times, though, when public rebuke is not only warranted but necessary. #Me Too and Black Lives Matter have taught us that. These movements created public space for *tochecha* so that people who have been marginalized can address injustice and the overwhelming imbalance of power.

The murder of George Floyd created real reckoning among many white people. Many of us have thought deeply about how we have failed and how it is our responsibility to do *teshuvah* for passively accepting or actively perpetuating racial inequities. In becoming better allies, sometimes we need to give and receive *tochecha*, and sometimes it has to be public.

The Rabbis teach us that if we don't speak up, we bear the burden of responsibility. They write:

Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's household and does not, is held responsible for the actions of the members of the household. Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of one's townspeople and does not, is held responsible for the transgressions of the townspeople. Anyone who is able to protest against the transgressions of the entire world and does not, is held responsible for the transgressions of the entire world. (Shabbat 54b-55a)

So yes, there are certainly times when we should make our rebuke public, when we do need to challenge our elected officials and other leaders in public forums. This is true especially when we don't have the kind of relationship with them where we can have these difficult conversations privately; when we know that the person refuses to change; and when there is a good chance that their actions will lead to others being harmed in the future.

In the best of circumstances, when *tochecha* is done right, it gives us an opportunity to grow and to change. Thinking back towards my blundered press conference twenty years ago, it wasn't just that I made some errors here and there. It was that I didn't reach out for more support, that I jumped too quickly, that my insecurities led me to making poor decisions. I was too afraid to tell the president of my rabbinical college what I was doing.

After my conversation with the president, I was left with a feeling that I really screwed up. Giving and receiving *tochecha* is not fun. But that experience shaped me, made me more willing to have difficult conversations, in spite of all the ways it can go wrong.

It's difficult to talk about this on Yom Kippur, at a time of pandemic when life is so stressful. So why do it? Because we have a hard winter ahead of us, one that will present many challenges and much heartache. We need each other now more than ever. We need to show up for each other. And when we do, we will inevitably hurt and disappoint each other because that's just what we do. The only alternative is to go it alone. And that would be a tragedy.

*Tochecha*, along with *teshuvah*, gives us a way forward, an opportunity to address the harms we've done and to move forward with grace. *Tochecha* and *teshuvah* give us the opportunity to be better allies and better friends, to foster a sense of curiosity and learning, to be brave and open-hearted.

On this Yom Kippur, let's offer *tochecha* when we see a wrong, or a rift, or a relationship that needs mending. Let's be a little stronger and be willing to receive *tochecha* when others need us to change. Let's stay connected to each other, deepen our relationships, and foster real community.

*Gmar chatimah tovah* – may we all be sealed for good.