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Effective Leadership

At the beginning of the Book of Deuteronomy, Moshe begins his parting words to the Jewish people by rebuking them for their mistakes throughout their forty years in the desert. In order not to embarrass them, Moshe veils his rebuke by alluding to their transgressions through names of places. "In the desert" refers to when the Jewish people complained to God about the lack of food in the desert, saying, "If only we had died by the hand of Hashem in the land of Egypt" (*Shemos* 16:3). "*Di-zahav*," which literally means "enough gold" is a reference to the sin of the Golden Calf. (Rashi ad loc.)

Moshe also recounts the implementation of Yisro's advice to create a judicial system. "Provide for yourself distinguished men, who are wise, understanding, and well known to your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads. You answered me and said, 'The thing that you have proposed to is good.'" (*Devarim* 1:13-14)

Rashi explains that this is not a digression

from his rebuke; rather, Moshe is criticizing the Jewish people for accepting Yisro's idea. "You should have replied, 'Our teacher, Moshe! From whom is it proper to learn, from you or from your disciple? Is it not better to learn from you, who has taken such pains about them?' However, I knew your thoughts; you were saying to yourselves, 'Many judges will now be appointed over us; if one does not know us, we shall bring him a gift, and he will show us favor.'"

But why did Moshe rebuke them only now for the transgressions they committed forty years ago? The Torah obligation to rebuke someone begins as soon as we see they are making a mistake. Waiting to rebuke them and allowing them to continue in their mistake is damaging to all. The Rambam writes:

It is a mitzvah for a person who sees that his fellow Jew has transgressed or is following an improper path to rebuke him for his behavior and to inform him that he is causing himself a loss through his evil deeds, as the Torah says: "You shall surely admonish your fellow" (Vayikra 19:17)... Whoever has the ability to rebuke and fails to do so is considered responsible for those people's sin, for he had the opportunity to rebuke them. (Laws of Character Development 6:7)

Delaying to give rebuke, for decades no less, is playing with fire. You risk becoming accountable for the people's transgression by not trying to stop their errant behavior. So how is it possible that Moshe waited so many years and did not rebuke the Jewish people immediately?

Moshe was not the only major figure in Jewish history to delay giving rebuke. Rashi (1:3) says that Moshe waited until a short while before his death to give rebuke, drawing on the example of Yaakov, who reproached his sons

just before he died. Yehoshua, Shmuel the Prophet and King David also waited until they were on their deathbed to rebuke their children and followers. How could they all delay in fulfilling such a consequential mitzvah?

Leaders Must Pick their Battles

When it comes to giving rebuke, there is a crucial difference between the responsibilities of an individual and a leader. Concerning the individual, the halachah is very clear: Provided our words will be heard, we are obligated to rebuke someone immediately. If we do not, we share in their transgression. But a leader is different. He cannot admonish the people for every mistake he sees, even if in the short run he will be listened to, because this will ultimately undermine his effectiveness as a leader and cause even greater damage. He needs to weigh his words carefully and ensure that his reprimands do not become nothing more than a broken record. A leader needs to pick his battles wisely, in order to preserve the respect of the people and safeguard his role as their leader.

When someone is on his deathbed, it is the most opportune time to offer words of criticism. In this situation people are listening intently, because they realize that whatever the person is saying at this critical time must be of utmost importance. Under these circumstances, there is no concern that the person's voice will be ignored. The words he offers at this crucial moment will stay with their listeners forever.

Parents and Children

This approach to giving rebuke is true not only for leaders like Moshe, Yehoshua, Shmuel and David, it also applies to anyone in a leadership capacity, including parents, managers and employers. One of the greatest curses that can

happen to parents is having their children simply ignore them. Nothing they say registers, because their children have grown tired of their constant barrage of criticism. In order to prevent this from happening, parents must be very discerning regarding how and when they criticize their children. Criticism needs to be done sparingly and when truly necessary, in a way that does not destroy the love and trust between parent and child. This same dynamic applies to bosses and their relationships with their employees as well.

For words of rebuke to be effective, they must emanate from a warm, loving place of concern. The Rambam writes: "A person who rebukes a colleague... should speak to him patiently and gently, informing him that he is making these statements only for his colleague's own welfare..." (Laws of Character Development 6:7). If a person feels that you genuinely have his best interests at heart, and that you are speaking not as a ploy to manipulate, but because you truly care about him, he will listen and be more open to accepting your criticism. One suggested formula is to give ten portions of love for every portion of criticism. Express your love before, during, and after criticism. Reassure the person that you are on his side.

This principle cannot be overstated when it comes to parents and children. Parents often make the mistake of criticizing their children too often and without emphasizing how much they love them. Like Moshe, put the overall relationship first. Focus on being effective, not just right. Evaluate your words and ensure that they promote a loving, trusting relationship, because in the long run, that connection and trust will prove to be most effective vehicle for communicating with your children.



When Less is More

Let's face it: No one wants to be criticized, but constructive criticism can be a positive tool when delivered correctly. Although it's natural to dislike criticism, a growth-oriented person will come to appreciate and value it. Constructive criticism or feedback has many benefits, among them increased self-awareness and clarity.

At the end of his life, Moshe admonished the people for their past transgressions simply by alluding to them or recalling where they occurred. For example, the sin of the Golden Calf is recalled through the words *di zahav*, a place whose name means "much gold." These two words transmitted a powerful message. Recognizing the value of a veiled reference attests to how well Moshe knew and understood his audience. Rather than delivering a lengthy diatribe, Moshe maximized his impact by minimizing his words.

We can emulate this relevant lesson by choosing our words wisely and speaking succinctly. What must we know in order to take criticism well and constructively deliver it to others? Constructive criticism is distinguished from destructive criticism by how the remarks are presented and how they are perceived by the recipient. It focuses on building up the other person and respects the recipient's dignity. In contrast, destructive criticism is delivered by put-downs intended to inflict pain or insult. Such rebuke generally is rejected.

The art of giving constructive criticism requires practice, just like any other skill. It is crucial to be mindful of your emotions and your timing. Avoid offering feedback to a person who isn't willing or ready to receive it. Clarify that the rebuke is about the situation and not about the person. Personal attacks always should be avoided, as they result in anger and disdain.

When on the receiving end, try to keep your composure. Take time to process and consider how the criticism can be used for your personal growth. Remember to avoid a combative reaction, especially if the admonishment is coming from someone who cares about you. The best response is to express appreciation, such as, "Thanks for pointing this out to me. I value your feedback. I'll work on it." Such a response creates an atmosphere of cooperation and prevents confrontation.

We all have rough edges that need smoothing out. Our close friends and loved ones often see them more clearly than coworkers or acquaintances. We're usually more transparent in the presence of those with whom we feel the most comfortable, yet we may not treat our "inner circle" with the courtesy and consideration we show to mere acquaintances. The most effective way to enrich our closest relationships is to choose our words wisely. Be careful never to shame others. If you must admonish someone, do so in a constructive, positive way. Begin and end with an encouraging statement; place your criticism in between.

We can fall prey to the natural tendency to "overkill." Unfortunately, going on and on fails to be helpful. The sage advice that "less is more" should reign supreme. We should speak briefly and to the point.

Constructive criticism can increase our own and others' self-awareness and wisdom, but we must be open to it. In the words of King Solomon: "Don't criticize a fool, for he will hate

you. Criticize a wise man, and he will love you.”

How does one transform a fool into a wise man? Rather than state what another is doing wrong, tell the person what he needs to do differently. Compliment or acknowledge something positive that the person has done so that they'll be more receptive to your suggestion for change. The most effective criticism is that which is motivated by a genuine concern and caring for another.

This week's Torah portion is read on the Shabbat preceding Tisha B'Av, the date on which both Temples were destroyed. The Talmud states that the reason for the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash and Jerusalem was that people failed to rebuke one another. What does the Talmud mean by this? *Rambam* explains that the driving force of criticism of others should be your love of them and your desire that they don't hurt themselves.

Most of us only criticize the behavior of others when it bothers us, not when it's harmful to them. We may ignore the actions of family and friends that clearly are detrimental to them. Of course, we'll rush into action if they do or say something that is disruptive to *us*. Otherwise, we'd prefer to turn a blind eye to their shortcomings and maintain the status quo.

That's what the Talmud means when it says that Jerusalem was destroyed because we didn't criticize one another. The Talmud is reminding us that we neither cared enough about each other nor attempted to prevent others from harming themselves. Such behavior epitomizes baseless hatred, which the Talmud lists as another reason that the second Temple was destroyed.

The wise King Solomon said: “In all your ways, know Him [God].” This applies to all actions of a person, including delivering and receiving criticism. We “know” God by recognizing that

each of our character flaws and imperfections is Divinely bestowed upon us to refine. This realization should permeate and influence each step along one's personal journey. Such acquired wisdom gives purpose and meaning to the arduous challenge of refining one's character and actions. Realizing that perfection is unattainable, we nevertheless can strive to improve our relationships with one another. Let's start by becoming a little bit better each day than we were the day before.

I could go on and on about this, but I recognize that...less is more!

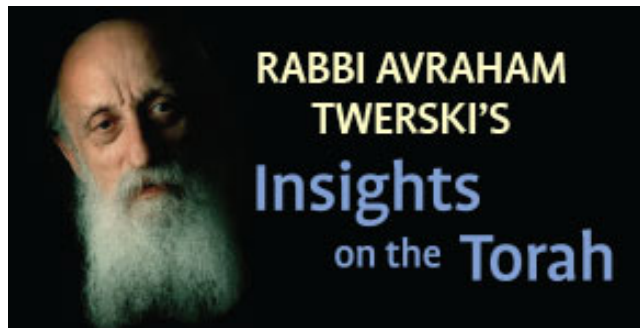
Making It Relevant

1. Recognize that your tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, as well as your actual words, truly matter. They can cause your criticism to be received positively or negatively.
2. Picture this scenario: You notice, at a public gathering, that someone you know has a large stain or a hole on the back of their clothing. What would you do?
 - Mind your own business and say nothing.
 - Approach the person and privately tell them about the problem.
 - Scream across the room something to the effect of, “You've got a big stain/hole in your clothes! You look like a slob.”
 - Point it out to your friends and laugh and snicker behind the person's back.

What would you want someone to do if it was you with the stain or hole?

3. Make yourself into King Solomon's “wise person” who recognizes the value of criticism. Then share your “wisdom” with others, by offering

criticism in a loving, positive, and sensitive way.



How Much Money is Enough?

Chastising the Israelites for the incident of the spies, Moses said, "God heard the sound of your words, and He was incensed" (Deut. 1:34).

What is meant by "the sound of your words"? Would it not have been sufficient to say, "God heard your words?"

Moses said, "They took in their hands from the fruit of the Land and brought it down to us; they brought back word to us and said, 'Good is the Land that God gives us. But you did not wish to ascend' (Deuteronomy 1:25-26). If the report was so favorable, why did they not wish to ascend?

The spoken word is different than the written word. The tone of voice can be sarcastic and give words the diametrically opposite meaning. When the spies said, "The Land is good," the sarcastic tone of their voices indicated just the reverse.

The spies showed the Israelites the beautiful fruit they had brought. But the inflection of, "This is its fruit," conveyed the message, "Just look at the size of the fruit! Gigantic fruit, gigantic people. They are invincible" (Midrash).

This is what Moses meant. The words in themselves were good, but the sound of the words conveyed their real meaning.

We must be as careful of how we speak as well as of what we say. The Chafetz Chaim says that one can be in violation of *lashon hara* (defamatory speech) without uttering a single word. If at the mention of a person's name you grimace in a way that indicates your disapproval of him, you are guilty of *lashon hara*.

Modern psychologists speak of the importance of body language. Non-verbal communication may be even more effective than what one verbalizes. We must be as careful not to "speak" *lashon hara* with the body as well as with the tongue.

"For God, your God, was with you; you did not lack a thing" (Deut. 2:7).

Solomon says, "A lover of money will never be satisfied with money" (Ecclesiastes 5:9). The multibillionaire J. Paul Getty was asked, "How much money is enough?" He responded, "Just a bit more."

This is true not only of money but of virtually all earthly pursuits. Our desires are like bottomless pits, leaving us devoid of lasting satisfaction.

The Talmud says, "This is the way of Torah: eat bread with salt, drink water in small measure and sleep on the ground" (Ethics of the Fathers 6:4). This does not mean that we must live a life of deprivation. Rather, if we can be satisfied with the bare essentials of life, then we are free to pursue the study of Torah even if we live in comfort. But if we must have comfort and conveniences, the pursuit of these will dominate our lives and detract from Torah.

A person whose primary desire is a closeness with God lacks for nothing. Whatever he has is

satisfactory.

I was privileged to visit the Steipler Gaon. He lived in utter simplicity. He turned down gifts of money because he had no need for anything more than he had. He was much happier than many people who live in great opulence.

This was true of many of our righteous leaders. The Chafetz Chaim kept his store open only until he had earned enough for that particular day. He lived into his 90s and is far better remembered than some people whose constant pursuit of wealth brought their lives to a premature end, and who may be remembered only by inanimate monuments.

We are subject to two major influences; our emotions and our intellect. Our emotions may produce infinite appetites, whereas our intellect teaches us that happiness is not achieved by gratification of our earthly desires.

Our uniqueness as human beings is in our intellect. Animals, too, are driven by emotions. We ought to have sufficient pride in the dignity of being human to live our lives according to our intellect. That will confirm for us the words of Moses, that when God is with us, we lack nothing.



The Secret of Great Teaching

Imagine receiving the news that you have only weeks left to live. The people you led for

decades - through rebellion and triumph, despair and deliverance - who you thought you'd lead on their final mission - must go on without you. Moses faced this reality as he stood at the border of the Promised Land, banned from entering, blocked from fulfilling his greatest dream. Yet instead of withdrawing in disappointment or despair, Moses dedicated his final days to preparing the Nation for their future.

These final teachings became the book of Deuteronomy. Unlike the first four books, which were dictated verbatim by God with Moses serving as a faithful scribe, the Talmud¹ teaches that, in Deuteronomy, Moses assumes the role of narrator, conveying God's message through the lens of human experience.

Why this change? Why would God's perfect words need Moses' interpretation? And if Moses is simply retelling God's laws in his own words, why does Deuteronomy repeat certain commandments while completely omitting others?

Making the Timeless Timely

The answer to all three questions lies in a brilliant observation of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. When discussing Jewish holidays, Moses focuses exclusively on Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot—the pilgrimage festivals that would come into effect only when the nation would enter the land. In doing so, he omits Shabbat, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur, which could be observed anywhere.

This selectivity reveals Deuteronomy's master class in education: A teacher doesn't just share knowledge; he anticipates which knowledge will matter most, making timeless wisdom immediately relevant for his students. Moses applies this principle throughout Deuteronomy, systematically addressing every challenge awaiting the nation as they conquer and settle the Land:

In matters of governance, to replace his direct oversight, he emphasized the laws that establish judicial systems (16:18-20) and military protocols (20:10-12). For spiritual integrity, to maintain divine connection when obvious miracles faded, he dedicated extensive passages to eliminating idolatry (7:1-6) while prescribing daily disciplines like the Shema (6:4-9). In economic and social life, to prepare them for permanent settlement after nomadic desert life, he outlined everything from tithing (14:22-29) to inheritance rights (21:15-17).²

Even the narrative sections follow this theme. When Moses recounts the nation's desert travels, our Sages teach that his mention of specific locations subtly reminds them of past failures.³ His message carries both warning and hope: 'If you stumbled in the desert amid open miracles, prepare for greater challenges in the Land. Yet with proper awareness and preparation, you will succeed.'

The Role of a Rabbi

No one in Jewish history carries the title "*Rabeinu*" (our Rabbi) except Moses—not Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any other towering figure. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains that Moses earned this unique designation not for his perfect transmission in the first four books, but for his revolutionary role in Deuteronomy: becoming the first person to translate eternal wisdom into practical guidance for a specific generation.

This insight reframes our understanding of teaching itself. Information transfer—even perfect information transfer—doesn't qualify someone as a rabbi. True rabbinic leadership requires the much more difficult art of translation: taking timeless truths and making them speak to immediate circumstances.

Consider the difference:

- A lecturer shares knowledge

- A teacher creates understanding
- A rabbi transforms lives

Moses achieved this transformation by focusing not on what had been revealed, but on what his students would need to succeed in their unprecedented challenges ahead.

Speaking to Our Generation

We live in an era of information overload where ancient wisdom feels increasingly irrelevant to modern struggles. Young people abandon tradition not because it lacks truth, but because no one has translated that truth into language that speaks to their actual challenges—career anxiety, relationship confusion, purpose crisis, social media comparison. Those privileged to study Torah bear the responsibility to share it with others. But effective teaching requires following Moses's example—carefully considering our audience's challenges and translating Torah's timeless wisdom into immediate guidance.

Whether you're a parent guiding children, a rabbi leading a community, or simply someone with wisdom to share, ask yourself:

- What unique challenges does my audience face that previous generations didn't?
- Which timeless principles will they need most for their specific journey?
- How can I present ancient wisdom in language that speaks to their experience?

In following the insights we gain from these questions, we honor the selflessness of Moses, who, rather than despairing, created something more lasting than any physical conquest: a template for making timeless truth relevant to every generation. Thousands of years later, we still turn to Deuteronomy not just for its content, but for its method.

May we merit to follow in Moses' footsteps,

finding ways to align Torah's eternal truths
with the unique challenges of our generation.

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

1. Megillah 31B
2. Rabbi Hirsch identifies six major categories: National Security and Diplomacy (chapters 20-21), Religious Infrastructure (eliminating idolatry 7:1-6, establishing worship centers 12:5-14), Civil Administration (judicial systems 16:18-21:9), Economic Framework (tithing 14:22-29, debt relief 15:1-11, business ethics 25:13-16), Family and Social Structure (inheritance 21:15-17, marriage/divorce 24:1-4), and Spiritual Maintenance (daily disciplines in chapters 6 and 11).
3. Rashi on Deuteronomy 1:1 explains that the place names mentioned in the opening verse are not merely geographical locations but subtle reminders of Israel's past failures. According to Rashi, Moses chose to reference their sins indirectly through place names rather than explicitly detailing their failures, out of respect for the nation's dignity.