

טעמו וראו

A taste of the
Rebbe's teachings

Parshat Yitro



>>

Leadership of Love

Some religious leaders speak derogatorily about others. How did G-d respond to such behavior? What did Rabbi Eliezer do when faced with a similar situation? What did the Rebbe say?

In memory of our beloved grandmother
Miriam Weiss
of blessed memory
Yahrzeit, Rosh Chodesh Shevat

Dedicated by
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Part 1: Honor G-d's People

The Rebbe, Part 1

Wise Words are Spoken Gently

There are many worthy rabbis and adult educators, but some profess expertise while being wholly unqualified; in the words of our sages, they are “unworthy of instruction—yet instruct.”

What is this about? The month of Elul has begun and rabbis have started preparing their sermons for the High Holidays, Shabbat Selichot and so on (after they've returned from their summer vacations). Some are under the impression that sermons in the month of Elul and during the High Holidays need to be full of anger, following the mold of the verse, “Can one hear the Shofar's call and not tremble?” In fact, these days are called “Days of Awe,” so, they assume, the style of education must be “fire and brimstone.”

He thinks that the angrier the sermon, the better the educator. In his perception, a willingness to upset your listeners shows your selfless devotion to education. For the sake of Heaven, you are willing to tell off another person.

The louder he screams, the more pleased he is with his performance. He is a true orator—he knows how to tell another person off..

But first and foremost, Torah states a basic rule: “The words of the wise are accepted when spoken gently.” We can also infer the opposite: If you don't speak gently, your words will not be accepted, and sooner or later, you'll lose your following—whether immediately, the next day, or sometime later. Nobody will follow your guidance.

Even if you are not wise, there is no need to announce it from the pulpit letting everyone know that when Torah equates wisdom with gentleness, it is not referring to you.

But moreover: Every honest person is aware of his own spiritual lacking. So how can you stand before an entire community and belittle them with such shocking declarations, Heaven forbid?

Source 1

Isaiah 6:1, 5-7



In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the L-rd sitting on a high and exalted throne, and its legs filled the Temple.

...And I said, "Woe is me for I am doomed, for I am a man of impure lips, and I dwell among a people of impure lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the L-rd of Hosts." One of the angels flew to me holding a glowing coal; he had taken it from the altar with tongs. He touched it to my mouth and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity shall be removed, and your sin shall be atoned for."

Metzudat David on the verse:

Behold, this has touched: His point was—the burn of the coal was a punishment, and it absolved Isaiah of his sin. Our sages explained that Isaiah sinned by calling the Jews "a people of impure lips." It was not an appropriate thing to say about Israel.

Source 2

Genesis 7:7-8



Noah, along with all his sons, his wife, and his sons' wives, came into the Ark ahead of the waters of the flood. The pure animals, the animals which were not pure, the birds, and all that walk the earth, came two by two to Noah, to the Ark.

ספר ישעיהו, פרק ו' פסוקים א', ה'-ז'

בְּשַׁנְת־מוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ עֲזַיָּהוּ וְאָרְאָה
אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשְׂא
וְשׁוּלְיוֹ מִלְּאִים אֶת־הַהֵיכָל:

וְאָמַר אוֹיְלִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי כִּי אִישׁ
טְמֵא־שִׁפְתִים אָנֹכִי וּבְתוֹךְ עַם־
טְמֵא שִׁפְתִים אָנֹכִי יוֹשֵׁב כִּי אֶת־
הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוָה צָבָאוֹת רָאוּ עֵינָי:
וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִזֹּה־הַשָּׂרָפִים
וּבְיָדוֹ רִצְפָה בְּמִלְקָחִים לְקַח
מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: וַיַּגַּע עַל־פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר
הִנֵּה נֹגַע זֶה עַל־שִׁפְתֶיךָ וְסָר עֲוֹנֶךָ
וַחֲטָאתְךָ תִּכָּפֵר:

מצודת דוד על הפסוק

הנה נגע: רצה לומר, בכזית
נגיעת הגחלת קבלת העונש,
ובזה סר עונך. וארז"ל שהעון
היה במה שאמר: ובתוך עם טמא
שפתים וכו' ולא היה ראוי לומר
כן על ישראל:

ספר בראשית פרק ז', פסוקים ז'-ח'

וַיָּבֵא נֹחַ וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ וּנְשֵׁי־בָנָיו
אִתּוֹ אֶל־הַתֵּבָה מִפְּנֵי מֵי הַמַּבּוּל:
מִן־הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה וּמִן־הַבְּהֵמָה
אֲשֶׁר אֵינְנָה טְהוֹרָה וּמִן־הָעוֹף וְכָל
אֲשֶׁר־רָמַשׁ עַל־הָאָדָמָה:

Source 3

Talmud, Tractate Pesachim 3a

מסכת פסחים, דף ג' עמוד א'



Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: A person should never speak crudely. The Torah added eight letters to avoid speaking crudely. Instead of saying *hatme'ah*, the impure animals, the verse states, "the pure animals and the animals *asher einenu tehorah*, which were not pure."

דָּאָמַר רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לֵוִי: לְעוֹלָם
אֵל יוֹצִיא אָדָם דְּבַר מְגוֹנָה
מִפִּי, שֶׁהָרִי עָקָם הַכְּתוּב שְׂמוֹנָה
אוֹתִיּוֹת, וְלֹא הוֹצִיא דְּבַר מְגוֹנָה
מִפִּי. שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "מִן הַבְּהֵמָה
הַטְּהוֹרָה וּמִן הַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנָה
טְהוֹרָה."

The Rebbe, Part 2

Don't Denigrate My People



The Torah relates that when G-d commanded Isaiah to serve as a prophet to the People of Israel, Isaiah—in his response—made a derogatory comment about the Jewish people ("I dwell among a people of impure lips"), and he was immediately punished for his statement ("One of the angels flew to me holding a glowing coal; he had taken it from the altar with tongs...").

His derogatory statement was not declared publicly, G-d forbid, nor was it meant to shame anyone. Isaiah was in the midst of a private dialogue with G-d and he needed to respond to G-d's request that he fulfill a specific mission—to serve as G-d's prophet to the Jewish people. Certainly, he needed to tell G-d the truth; after all, G-d is the "G-d of Truth", and the truth was that he was afraid of the mission, because he felt that the Jews were a people of impure lips. Certainly, G-d Himself was also aware of the spiritual state of the Jewish people; in fact, in the same conversation, G-d critiques the Jewish people, "This people's heart is becoming fat." And yet, Isaiah was punished for expressing himself in a negative way about the Jewish people.

Furthermore:

The Torah is careful to use positive language, whenever the subject matter does not have implications in Jewish law. For example, the Torah says that “animals which were not pure” entered Noah’s ark. This describes an event which took place before the Torah was given, and the description is not relevant to the laws of Kosher food. However, when the subject matter has practical implications—to teach the reader what is kosher and what is not—the Torah uses more direct language: “Separate between the *tamei*-impure and the pure animals.”

In our case, Isaiah’s description of the Jewish people had very practical implications. He was telling G-d that he cannot serve as their prophet specifically because they were a nation of “impure lips.” Nonetheless, his description was inappropriate. One should never speak of G-d’s people in that manner, even though he merely criticized their lips for being impure—making no comment about their minds and hearts—and even though his comment was made in a private conversation which had real-life consequences.

Since this story was shared in Torah, it obviously contains an eternal lesson, because “the Torah will never be replaced”—its message remains in effect at every place and time!

Part 2: A Lesson from the Prophet

The Rebbe, Part 3

Learn a Lesson from Isaiah



The lesson is clear:

Most people occasionally feel an urge to criticize someone. They might assume that the critique is well-intentioned, and that it comes from a place of love and concern for the person's spiritual and moral well-being. Out of an abundance of ahavat yisrael, love for your fellow, you want to criticize him.

This story teaches us: There was no greater lover of Israel than the Prophet Isaiah. [His name is often compared to his counterpart, Jeremiah. Jeremiah's Hebrew name, Yirmiyahu, contains the word mar, which means bitter. Isaiah's Hebrew name, Yishayah means salvation. Indeed, Jeremiah prophesied bitter and unfortunate events like the destruction of the Temple, while Isaiah was a prophet of comfort who prophesied salvation]. Nonetheless, he suffered immediate consequences for expressing himself negatively about the Jewish nation, even though he did so in a private setting, as we explained above at length.

Isaiah's Error Teaches Us a Lesson



But why did Isaiah express himself that way, if he was indeed the great lover of Israel who was chosen to be the prophet of redemption?

Our sages said of King David, "That sin was out of character for him." But, they explain, "it provided an opening for penitents," and "established the power of repentance." This is a similar case: Isaiah did an act of self-sacrifice and gave later generations the ability to correct such behavior.

Source 4

Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 4b



Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says: The Jewish people made the Golden Calf only to give a claim to penitents, as the verse states about their spiritual state at Mount Sinai: "If only their hearts would always remain this way, where they are in such awe of me." Clearly, the Golden Calf was out of character.

As Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: The incident with Batsheva was out of character for David, and the incident of the Golden Calf was out of character for the Jewish people. It was out of character for David, as it is written: "My heart is empty within me," i.e., he had vanquished his evil inclination, **and it was out of character for the Jewish people, as it is written, "If only their hearts would always remain this way, where they are in such awe of me."**

Rather, why did they commit these deeds? So that if an individual sins, we say to him: Learn from that individual, David, who sinned—you too, can repent. And if a community sins, we say to them: Learn from the community, the Jews of the Golden Calf—your community can repent as well.

...As Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani says in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: What is the meaning of the verse: "The saying of David ben Yishai, and the saying of the man raised on high [al]"? This is the meaning of the verse: **The saying of David ben Yishai, who raised the yoke [ullah] of repentance, as he taught the power of repentance through his own example.**

מסכת עבודה זרה, דף ד', עמוד ב'

ואמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: לא עשו ישראל את העגל, אלא ליתן פתחון פה לבעלי תשובה. שנאמר: "מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם ליראה אותי כל הימים".

והיינו דאמר רבי יוחנן משום רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: לא דוד ראוי לאותו מעשה, ולא ישראל ראוי לאותו מעשה. לא דוד ראוי לאותו מעשה - דכתיב: ולבי חלל בקרבי, ולא ישראל ראוי לאותו מעשה, דכתיב: מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם ליראה אותי כל הימים.

אלא למה עשו? לומר לך, שאם חטא יחיד אומרים לו כלך אצל יחיד, ואם חטאו צבור אומרים לו כלך אצל צבור.

...והיינו דרבי שמואל בר נחמני א"ר יונתן מאי דכתיב נאם דוד בן ישי ונאם הגבר הוקם על? נאם דוד בן ישי, שהקים עולה של תשובה.

Source 5

Maharsha on the Talmud



The people of Israel were worthy that G-d should shield them from such a great sin. Although G-d does not influence our decisions in matters of “Fear of Heaven,” nonetheless, “G-d directs a person in the direction he wants to go.” Furthermore: Torah study protects us from sin. David deserved to be protected from sin for the same reason. The Talmud points this out by citing the verse, “If only their hearts would always remain this way”—to point out that they wanted to fear G-d. David too: “My heart is empty within me,” indicating that he wanted to do the will of his Father in Heaven. They were worthy of being protected from these sins. Why were they ultimately not protected? “So we can say to them...” as explained.

מהרש"א על הגמרא

דהיו ישראל ראויים שהקדוש ברוך הוא יצילם מחטא גדול כזה, דאף-על-גב דהכל בידי שמים חוץ מיראת שמים, מכל מקום בדרך שאדם רוצה לילך מוליכין אותו. ועוד אמרינן: דהתורה מצלת מן החטא. וכן בדוד מטעם זה היה ראוי להיות ניצול מחטא. ולזה מייתי מקרא: והיה לבבם זה כל הימים וגו', שהוא רצונם ולבבם ליראה את ה'. וכן בדוד: לבי חלל בקרבי לעשות רצון אבי שבשמים. והיו ראויים להצילם מן חטא גדול כזה. אלא למה עשו ולא נצולו מעשיית החטא? לומר לך כו' וק"ל.

Part 3: Jerusalem's Abominations

Source 6

Talmud, Tractate Megillah 25a



Mishnah: Rabbi Eliezer says that we do not read the Haftorah of "Inform Jerusalem..."

מסכת מגילה, דף כ"ה, עמוד א'

ר' אליעזר אומר: אין מפטירין בהודע את ירושלים:

Talmud, Tractate Megillah 25b



We learn in a beraita: There was one individual who stood above Rabbi Eliezer and read the Haftorah of "Inform Jerusalem of its abominations..." Rabbi Eliezer said to him: "Before you scrutinize the abominations of Jerusalem, scrutinize the abominations of your mother." An investigation revealed that he was of questionable lineage.

מסכת מגילה דף כ"ה עמוד ב'
(עם ביאור שטיינזלץ)

ד ת נ י א [ש כ ן ש נ י -
נו בברייתא]: מעשה באדם אחד
שהיה קורא למעלה [בפני] מר'
אליעזר בהפטרה של "הודע
את ירושלים את תועבותיה".
אמר לו רבי אליעזר: עד שאתה
בודק בתועבות ירושלים צא
ובדוק בתועבות אמך. ומסופר:
בדקו בו, ומצאו בו שמץ (חשש-
מה) של פסול.

The Rebbe, Part 4

First Scrutinize Yourself



The Talmud relates the following story:

The final Mishnah in Tractate Megillah chapter 3 speaks about the specific details of various Haftorahs. It says there: "Rabbi Eliezer says that we do not read the Haftorah of 'Inform Jerusalem...' This refers to Ezekiel 16, which speak negatively about Jerusalem. According to Rabbi Eliezer, this segment was not to be read as a Haftorah, "for Jerusalem's honor," so as not to insult its inhabitants.

The Talmud then relates:

“There was one individual who stood above Rabbi Eliezer [apparently on the raised platform of the synagogue] and read the Haftorah of ‘Inform Jerusalem of’ its abominations...’ Rabbi Eliezer said to him: ‘Before you scrutinize the abominations of Jerusalem, scrutinize the abominations of your mother.’ An investigation revealed that he was of questionable lineage.”

Rabbi Eliezer was upset at him for choosing this Haftorah, even though a Haftorah is a direct quote from the Prophets and not the individual’s personal ideas. He felt that the choice to read this Haftorah implied a deeper problem with his education, which is why he told him to scrutinize his own origins—which were found to be lacking.

This Mishnah which tells us not to read that Haftorah, and especially the story of Rabbi Eliezer, are a powerful lesson about how careful we need to be to protect the dignity of G-d’s people.

Part 4: How to Influence

The Rebbe, Part 5

Speak Positively

Another important point: Even when you speak gently, choose to speak about good and about reward, instead of about evil and punishment.

Why focus on the negative when you could focus on the positive? Speak about reward for fulfilling Mitzvot, the reward for repentance, and so on. The Torah is filled with descriptions of reward, both in the Five Books of Moses—“If you follow My laws and safeguard my commandments... I will provide rain in its season”—and even more so in the Prophets, and even more so in the Oral Torah. There is plenty of uplifting material for speeches that will suffice for the month of Elul, the High Holidays and the entire month of Tishrei—there is enough for all year round. You’ll never run out of material.

Don’t Focus on Weakness

G-d forbid to mention a person’s weak point, especially since you don’t know what brought him to that situation. As the Mishnah rules, “Judge every person favorably,” and “Don’t judge a person until you live through his experience.” The books of ethics and Chassidism expound on this concept in detail. How much more so, during a public speech!

And most importantly: Derogatory talk stems only from a lack of good character traits. It is totally ineffective—you will inspire people to improve themselves much faster if you speak in gentle and positive terms about the benefits and rewards of keeping the commandments, and you will automatically achieve your goal to keep them away from sin.

In simple terms: The best and most effective way to inspire others to improve themselves is by drawing attention to their potential. They can each achieve great spiritual heights—to the extent that, as Maimonides says, “through one good deed, you have the power to tip the scale for yourself and for the entire world—to good.”

Rosh Chodesh Elul 1982
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מיזם של "משרד השלוחים"

נוסד בימי השבעה לזכרון ולע"נ הרב גבריאל נח וזוגתו רבקה הי"ד
שלוחי הרבי במומבאי, הודו

