Constructive Criticism

Making a More Perfect Vessel

by

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*The trouble with most of us is that we'd rather be ruined by praise than saved by criticism.*

– Norman Vincent Peale

We devote so much time and energy to how we appear to the world. Each of us wants our students to think we are the wisest, most knowledgeable teacher; each of us wants our children to respect us as parents and not see us as fallible human beings. We want our neighbors to see our homes and families as beautiful and serene.

We bristle whenever anyone notes a flaw in our carefully constructed personas.

Not long ago, I met a man who makes a living doing small home repairs. When he was hanging a new closet door, he happened to notice a small drip under the bathroom sink. He noted the drip to the homeowner who dismissed the observation.

“Likely just condensation. We had that bathroom redone not that long ago.” He then suggested the man keep his focus on the task at hand and make sure the door was level.

The man I met shrugged and advised the homeowner to “keep an eye on it.”

The homeowner didn’t and so he didn’t realize that the small drip was actually originating in the wall behind the sink. Several weeks later, the man had to have significant work done to fix the leak, replace the section of wall that had become moldy and prop up the weakened floor under the sink.

It is easy (and self-evident in retrospect) to point out the homeowner’s obvious error in not listening to the handyman. But we all find reasons to ignore being told that something is “wrong”. After all, do any of us really *enjoy* being criticized? Do any of us take pleasure in having our weaknesses, our foibles, or conceits poked at and prodded?

Consider the last time someone noted a weakness of yours. Did you think, “You know, maybe he’s right. Maybe I do need to make a change!”

If you answered, “yes”, you can most likely add self-deception to your list of weaknesses! If you are like the vast majority of us, you were more likely to react by thinking something along the lines of, “Who does this so-and-so think he is? Telling me how I should be living my life… ”

None of us wants to be told we are less than perfect. No rabbi enjoys hearing that his sermons drag on too long, that there is too much of the “you don’t do enough, learn enough, give enough” in them. As flesh and blood humans, we have an instinctive resistance to criticism and *tochacha.*

We are hard-wired for self-preservation and that means resisting anything we find threatening. However, when it comes to criticism, our gut reaction might not serve us well. For, without criticism, timely, constructive and compassionate, we can never grow.

Our tradition fully understands our need for and our resistance to criticism. That is why the Talmud teaches that Ezra ordained that we read the *tochacha* in *Vayikra* prior to Shavuot, so we may genuinely accept the Torah, and the *tochacha* in *D’vorim* before Rosh Hashanah, so we may effectively do *teshuva.*

We must hear criticism as a people and as individuals. In Vayikra, we are chastised in the plural, for it is the nation of Israel that must incorporate Torah into its existence. In *D’vorim* the censure is in the singular, for it relates to every single individual. *You*, yes, I’m pointing at you, must be able to hear and accept the criticism.

Do not be like the shul member who approaches the rabbi after a fiery and dynamic Mussar sermon in which he takes the people to task for their deficiencies and slaps the rabbi on the back in the most complimentary fashion and says, “Rabbi, that was terrific! You really told those people off!”

How the rabbi’s heart sinks! For this member *didn’t hear a thing* he so desperately tried to communicate. To accept criticism – and grow from it – you must hear it as an individual, not as part of a crowd. You must feel that the *baal mussar* is talking to *you*, not *them*. Perhaps the most telling thing about not wanting to hear criticism or be rebuked is the old “cus­tom” that the *tochacha* is read in an undertone, and that someone unaware and illiterate is sought out as the one who is called up for the *tochacha aliyah.* After all, every average Jew thinks that all of the harsh words stated in the Torah’s rebuke are meant for someone other than him. It’s reminiscent of the Jew in the shtetl who at the end of the rebbe’s Mussar shmooze said, *“Nisht mir meint men,* - He wasn’t referring to me.”

The first step to *teshuva* is *hakarat ha’chet,* the recogni­tion that we sinned. None of us is so self-aware as to be able see our own failings. We need others to see us as we are. We must hear criticism and then, in submissiveness and humility, to do something about it. To truly hear and accept criticism and *tochacha,* we must possess humility and submissiveness. We must be humble enough to recognize that we all err and we must and can learn how to begin anew.

Submis­siveness and humility entail the rending of the heart; we must suffer and bemoan our shortcomings, they must break our hearts.

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the Sages compared this concept to impure earthen vessels which become pure again when they are broken. Man who origi­nates from earth, *afar min ha’adamah*, is thus likened to an earthen vessel which once it becomes impure cannot regain its purity until it is broken. The broken spirit and soul similarly, regain for man his state of purity.

It begins with the humility that allows us to realize and accept that we are impure and imperfect; that we have shortcomings and must do *teshuva.*

It is time.