



Thanks for the Feedback • Parshat Kedoshim

In this week's sedra, *Kedoshim*, the challenging mandate to correct friends and colleagues who have erred or lost their way is sandwiched between a complex cluster of interpersonal emotions: "You shall not hate your friend in your heart. Correct your friend and incur no guilt on his account. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am God" (Lev. 19:17-18). In only two biblical verses, we mention hate, guilt, revenge, and love.

It's not only the hatred of friends that is prohibited but the hatred of strangers. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a very profound observation helps us understand why we should never hate the stranger: "If you are human, so is he. If he is less than human, so are you...Why should I not hate the stranger? Because the stranger is me" ("Loving the Stranger," *Mishpatim, Covenant & Conversation*). We have all been strangers and felt the contempt that people express towards strangers. But not hating a friend, a prohibition in our Torah reading, feels like another dialogical command entirely.

Maimonides, in his "Book of Character Traits," helps us think about what we might call soft honesty when he writes about how to give feedback, wherever relevant, to fulfill this biblical commandment. In the 6th chapter, he advises that the one giving feedback should make clear what's at stake for the person receiving it. These conversations, he recommends, should always take place in private and with patience. The giver must

employ gentle language and remind the receiver that it is for his or her own good. Sometimes, in the face of denial or resistance, the person dispensing the criticism must be insistent and even sharp.

There are indeed times that call for urgency and persistence to prevent a person from self-harm or from hurting others. Maimonides concludes with what is at stake for the giver, not only the receiver: "Whoever has the possibility of rebuking [a wrongdoer] and fails to do so is considered responsible for that sin, for he had the opportunity to rebuke the [wrongdoer]." We may opt not to say anything, but, because the Torah believes we are responsible for one another, we each hold some of the wrongdoer's blame if we stay silent. Ultimately, what this communicates, is that the culture of any society is dependent on the behaviors of every member of that society.

At the same time, not everyone can handle constructive criticism. Proverbs 9:8 wisely states that we must be judicious when correcting others: "Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; correct a wise person, and he will love you." People who are defensive cannot grow. It's not worth saying anything because they will not listen. People who are wise, however, thrive on feedback.

If you're a leader, you're likely offering and hearing feedback all of the time so it's important to get good at giving and receiving it. Douglas Stone in his book, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, claims that, "Receiving feedback sits at the intersection of..."

two needs—our drive to learn and our longing for acceptance.” We want to grow, and to do that effectively, we need the observations and recommendations of others. We also want to be recognized and praised. Stone contends that we generally get too much feedback. He warns that before you give him any constructive criticism, “... know this: I’ve heard it before. I’ve been graded, rated, and ranked. Coached, screened, and scored. I’ve been picked first, picked last, and not picked at all. And that was just kindergarten.”

Stone reminds us that no matter how carefully one person critiques another, the person on the receiving end has control over what he lets in and how he makes sense of what he is hearing. That’s why he believes we need to help people become more skillful listeners, reshaping feedback from an instrument of rejection or criticism to one of curiosity and learning, even when “it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you’re not in the mood.”

Dr. David Burkus in “How to Get Better at Receiving Feedback” (Sept. 15, 2021) says that even though good feedback is a gift, it is also a risk. He offers a few helpful steps for those on the receiving end.

- Respond to feedback with a ‘thank you’ first. It can make you aware of your own defensiveness.
- Restate what you heard so that you can check for understanding; let the giver know they’ve been heard.
- Mention what you are changing – if you don’t use feedback to change anything, growth never happens.

Seek out more feedback. That’s how you get really better at work and at life.

Turning back to the verses in our *parsha*, we notice the unusual ending to the string of emotions mentioned above: “Love your neighbor as yourself: I am God.” I am the God who sees through to the heart where the resentment, revenge, and bitterness lies. I am the God who cuts through

the false feelings, the acting, and the superficial attempts to make peace. We might lie to ourselves so profoundly that we don’t even realize that our hatreds are hard to conceal. Punctuating these verses with “I am God” also lets us know that because each and every one of us is God’s concern, we imitate God when we make others the core focus of our lives. Hate is a poison. Anne Lamott in *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* famously wrote, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

Explaining the connective tissue in these few verses can help us understand why we should correct a friend or colleague at all. When we let wounds fester, we develop negative feelings that risk turning into disgust and resentment if not articulated and healed. The vehemence of these emotions can also turn inward into regret and shame. Hate is forbidden in the Torah. Love is commanded. Honesty lives somewhere in between.

How well do you accept feedback? Name a time that a piece of feedback changed you.