

The Destructiveness Of Constructive Criticism

Rebbe Elazar Ben Azariah said, (ערכין טז) "I would be astounded if there is someone in this generation who knows how to give rebuke." It is evident from the words of Rebbe Elazar Ben Azariah, that properly correcting someone's behavior is not an easy task as it requires extreme consideration of one's dignity. In this week's Parsha we are taught, that even one who is on the מדרגה of knowing how to give rebuke faces a unique set of challenges when having to rebuke their own child.

פרשת דברים begins with Moshe Rabbeinu listing all of the places that the Jewish people sinned while in the desert, as a way of subtly rebuking them for their prior follies. Rashi (1:3) explains that by Moshe waiting to rebuke them until the end of his life, he was following in the footsteps of Yaakov Avinu, and was employing Yaakov's method of rebuke. Yaakov delayed his reprimand of the Shevatim until he was on his deathbed, fearing that if done earlier it may be to their detriment. He said to Reuven, "My son I didn't rebuke you all of these years, so that you should not leave me and join my brother Eisav." This thought regarding Reuven is echoed by the Ralbag in (תועלת יב) פרשת וישלח. The Ralbag points out, that there is no mention of Yaakov

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Avinu responding with anger towards Reuven for moving his bed. Only on his deathbed do we find Yaakov rebuking Reuven for this. The Ralbag extracts from here a powerful lesson regarding parenting. He says, "It is appropriate for a father to not be extreme in his anger towards his adult son who acts inappropriately, as it may overwhelm him and he will lose him. Rather the appropriate course of action is to draw him close so that you may guide him in the right path."

Upon further reflection, even though he deemed it to be fitting and proper on his deathbed, Yaakov's refrain in reproaching Reuven earlier requires clarification. Chazal tell us that after sinning, Reuven was not in a state of denial. On the contrary, he was preoccupied with doing Teshuva. Given that he was so receptive to his mistake, why would Yaakov's criticism overwhelm him? In addition, Chazal teach us that when someone goes into גלות, he must be accompanied by his Rebbe, as one can't live without his Rebbe. Surely someone as great as Reuven understood the immeasurable value of his Rebbe, Yaakov Avinu, and would not forfeit that relationship. Lastly, Yaakov Avinu knew how to give rebuke with the utmost care and love, ensuring the absence of any slight. Why would such a gentle and thoughtful rebuke have such devastating effects on Yaakov and Reuven's close relationship? In light of all of this, Yaakov's concern that rebuking Reuven would drive him away seems extremely puzzling!

We can derive an important insight into father-son dynamics from Yaakov Avinu's concern. Yaakov recognized that every child has an extreme desire for a relationship with his father that is devoid of any friction. If this need is not satisfied, the child may feel frustrated and pained, to the extent that he may feel forced to sever this relationship completely, in order to avoid feelings of anguish. Yaakov knew that it was possible that Reuven might have been so pained from any rebuke that he might get to the point of leaving him and joining Eisav! Understanding this, Yaakov felt he couldn't take the chance of placing even the slightest wedge between him and Reuven. Expressing any annoyance or disapproval could be devastating, as it could destroy the totally harmonious relationship that Reuven yearned for. If Yaakov had to be so cautious with his rebuke, with a son like Reuven, how much more so does this apply to our familial relationships.

BASED ON THE WEEKLY SHMUSS GIVEN BY HARAV SHAYA COHEN, ROSH HAYESHIVA ZICHRON ARYEH

לעילוי נשמת גיטל בת הרב אליעזר מנוח
לעילוי נשמת הרב יוסף חיים בן מאיר
לרפואה שלמה רפאל חיים דוב בן ריסא שושנה