

This year, the practical ethics column will focus on personal and social ethics. Each month a guest columnist will wrestle on paper with situations where ethical considerations tugged on the heart and demanded deeply thoughtful consideration. The column is co-sponsored by Shelley and Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. The series of columns, with responses, is available on www.shma.com.

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Offering Rebuke in an Age of Understanding

Leonard Gordon

"YOU SHALL SURELY rebuke your neighbor." (Leviticus 19:17)

The biblical text and the rabbinic commenting tradition are clear: we are responsible for one another, and part of that responsibility demands that we confront a friend who endangers her own health and welfare. This requirement is complicated and difficult: we value privacy, and it can seem impolite, even a breach of etiquette, to confront someone about a personal matter; we risk inspiring anger when we ask someone to be self-reflective, leading to the loss of the very friend whom we hoped to help; finally, we may doubt our capacity to be effective and worry that we will do more harm than good.

As a rabbi, I struggle with these doubts both in my public role and in the privacy of my office. Because I believe that Judaism requires us to take care of our bodies, which have been entrusted to us by God, in whose image we are made, I do speak from the pulpit, especially during the High Holidays, about this aspect of *teshuvah* (ethical transformation). While I hope to inspire self-care, I am humbled by the difficulty of leading by example. Over the years I have learned that more important than the teachings themselves is what my delivery communicates about me as rabbi. I need to convey accessibility, disinterested caring, and, most important, freedom from personal judgment, and then — harder still — I have to live up to those expectations.

It is of course harder to deliver messages that are difficult to hear in the office than from the pulpit, where people have more freedom to decide what is and is not intended for them.

Sometimes, family or friends hope that the rabbi can interfere with a beloved person's self-destructive habits. Sometimes I can see for myself the importance of trying to intervene in someone's life. Often I am not sure. What I have learned from my experiences and from Jewish tradition, which recognizes the obstacles to effective chastisement and offers direction about how to intervene when someone disregards the needs of body and soul, is the importance of staying in relationship, self monitoring, following up, and dealing with rejection. I have also learned that the responsibility to rebuke is best exercised by those who can manage to be selfless and nonjudgmental, by friends who can be trusted to stay present after the hard words are spoken.

Jewish tradition actually recognizes the obstacles to effective chastisement and offers direction about how to intervene when someone disregards the needs of body and soul.


Rebuke in the context of relationship

The interpretive tradition that links us to our verse from Leviticus takes seriously the meaning of "neighbor." Rebuke should only take place in the context of an established relationship: no "hit and run" criticism. We offer loving critique to someone who has heard us offer prior words of praise. Extrapolating from the tradition of reading three *haftarot* of rebuke before Tisha B'Av and seven *haftarot* of consolation afterward, we learn that words of rebuke and support should come in ratio of three to seven. We are told that Moses offered his critique to the children of Israel only at the end of his career for similar

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truth. In a frankly hilarious turn, God is depicted as an enormous chicken, and Morgenstern, a recently dead, pious Jew, is horrified to find that all his life he'd been praying to a fowl deity. Given a chance to return to his family, Morgenstern tries to tell them the truth. Ultimately, faced with their unshakeable faith, he can't go through with it. Belief, like everything else, this story assures us, represents an agreement among people to believe.

In some ways, Marche's novel is the most interesting of the three, especially because it shows how a set of communal beliefs can be taught and learned. Although his novel is so sympathetic to his character Hannah's growing attachment to Jewish rituals and ways

of thinking, Stephen Marche is not Jewish. Unlike Apple, who revels in his own neuroses, or Auslander who writes about the Orthodoxy that he no longer practices, Marche approaches Judaism without any preconceptions; he treats its beauties and its limitations with the same sincerity. Judaism remains foreign and problematic for Raymond while, at the same time, it evinces a tribal but never simplistic pull on Hannah's emotions and loyalties. Perhaps this is the greatest testament to the inroads ethnic literature has made in just over half a century: a gentile can convincingly write about Judaism now with the same authority as someone born into its strange and wonderful ways. 

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reasons. Maimonides adds that rebuke needs to be spoken patiently, gently, and privately. (*Hilchot De'ot* 6:7)

Clarity of motivation

Maimonides' point suggests a second guideline: clarity of motivation. There may be complicated conscious or unconscious motivations for offering apparently helpful rebuke, including causing shame, showing our own superiority, or even getting back at someone who has criticized us in the past. Before we offer rebuke we need to do our own *heshbon hanefesh* (self analysis): why are we choosing this role? Only if we are certain (or as certain as we can be) that our motivation is clear and simple should we proceed.

Following up

Rabbi Shneur Zalman in the *Tanya* insists that "your neighbor" only applies to one who is with you in Torah and mitzvot, that is, to a fellow student, or in contemporary terms, someone with whom you are in a long-term relationship. (Chapter 32, citing *Babylonian Talmud Shevuot* 30a) Because change comes painfully and slowly (masters of the *Musar*, or ethical tradition, speak of 40 days of concentrated effort to change even a minor habit), any proffered critique implies a contracting to help in the process of making change. "I will

call you next week to follow up"; "you may call me any time if you need support"; "let's make a plan to go to the gym or take a daily walk together."

Dealing with rejection

Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona in his *Gates of Teshuvah* recognizes the problem of inhibiting anxiety: "perhaps they will not listen if I tell them the truth." (Section 196) The book of Proverbs warns us to avoid rebuking a scorner "lest he hate you." (9:8) Critique involves an analysis of how the rebuke will be heard. If we feel that our words will be rejected we may only be compounding the problem, stiffening our neighbor's resistance to change and ruining our relationship. My late uncle, Rabbi Shmuel Schechter, once told me that he had avoided rebuking one of my decisions lest I sin intentionally rather than unintentionally and also be guilty of disobeying an elder. (see *Babylonian Talmud Beitzah* 30a)

Ultimately, the rabbinic tradition directs us to take responsibility for one another and offer our friends and family needed correction to help them lead a healthy and balanced life. To accept that challenge, we need to build trust in our relationships, offer praise, lead by example, be humble, and understand ourselves and our motivations. 