



Parashat Vayetze
Rabbi David Silverberg

We read in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov's arrival at the well outside Charan, where he would spend the next twenty years of life. As he approached, he observed three herds of sheep with their shepherds waiting idly by the well. Yaakov, thinking that the shepherds had intended to return to the city for the day, commented to them that it was still early, and thus the sheep should continue grazing. The shepherds explained that they had come to give the sheep water, but had to wait until all the local shepherds assembled so that they could together remove the heavy stone that covered the well.

A number of writers noted Yaakov's congeniality in initiating this exchange: "My brothers, from where have you come?" (29:4). Rather than immediately expressing his criticism for what he misconstrued as the shepherds' laxity, Yaakov began with a friendly "Hello, where are you from?" and even referred to the shepherds as "my brothers." Rav Yaakov Kaminetzky, among others, suggested that this cordiality helped ensure that the shepherds would react politely to Yaakov's remarks. Normally, people would not respond too kindly to a stranger who suddenly appears and offers unsolicited criticism. But since Yaakov had prefaced his criticism with a polite, friendly greeting, the shepherds responded in kind with courtesy and respect.

Maimonides, in his presentation of the *mitzva* of *tokhacha* – correcting those who violate the Torah – emphasizes the importance of criticizing in a polite, respectful manner:

One who reproves his fellow – whether in matters between the two of them, or in matters between him and the Almighty – must reprove him in private, and speak to him pleasantly and in a soft manner, and inform him that he says this to him only for his own benefit, to bring him to life in the next world.
(Hilkhot Dei'ot 6:7)

At first glance, we might assume that this requirement to offer criticism gently and pleasantly stems from the concern not to humiliate the sinner. The obligation of *tokhacha* does not override the prohibition against embarrassing one's fellow Jew, and thus for this reason, it would seem, Maimonides emphasizes the gentle, respectful tone required when offering criticism. In truth, however, Maimonides stresses the importance of avoiding embarrassment in the subsequent *halakha* (6:8). This would seem to suggest that the requirement discussed here in *halakha* 7, the obligation to offer criticism pleasantly, stems from a different concept.

Indeed, a number of *Acharonim* suggested, quite simply, that this requirement is an integral part of the *tokhacha* obligation itself. It stems not from an external concern – such as the prohibition against causing embarrassment – but rather from the inherent definition of the *mitzva* to offer criticism. This *mitzva* is defined as offering criticism in order to help a fellow Jew improve and correct his behavior. Maimonides thus intuitively

concluded that it requires offering criticism in a polite, courteous and respectful manner – for otherwise, it cannot possibly yield the desired effect. Criticism that will serve only to anger or irritate one’s fellow, and stands little chance of improving his behavior henceforth, has no value. Intrinsically, then, the obligation of *tokhacha* requires speaking courteously – because only this kind of criticism has a reasonable chance of effecting a change.

Before offering criticism, one must seriously consider whether he speaks simply to vent anger or assert superiority, or out of a sincere desire and attempt to help the other party. If one assesses that his words will not likely cause the other person to rethink his behavior, then they are best left unspoken.

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