

Class One

Intro

According to the perhaps the greatest traditional Kabbalist of the 20th century, Rav Yehuda Ashlag, the purpose of Judaism is to create a community of god-like beings. Rather than the “lords of the earth” imagined by today’s techno-visionaries, however, what he had in mind was humans who, like the En Sof Baruch Hu (Limitless Divinity, Blessed Be), are givers. All the mitzvot are trainings in this, he wrote, but particularly the mitzvot known as “bein adam l’ chavero,” or interpersonal mitzvot.

Though the Orthodox mainstream asserts that all mitzvot are of equal value, Rav Yehuda disagreed and said that in fact the interpersonal mitzvot are more valuable than ritual, dietary, and devotional mitzvot because they do more to accomplish the goal of the divine- the changing of human beings into other-regarding, loving beings.

Rav Yehuda brought many proofs to show that the purpose of Torah is to foster a culture where Jews love each other as themselves, and on this basis love the whole world as this themselves, and model and teach ways of living which fulfill the Divine’s desire for humanity.

This week we will look at five of the interpersonal mitzvot. I have been wanting to do this course because I believe that our interpersonal behavior has, in some ways, been stressed and damaged by the pandemic. While perhaps in other ways it has benefitted as well, I think it’s a good time for a review of these fundamentals for everyone– it definitely is for me.

We will begin today by looking at the mitzvah of Tochecha, or the obligation to criticize. It may be obvious to some why I’m starting here- I believe our current culture of rage has gone off the rails and we could benefit from looking at what our sages said about how and when to offer constructive criticism to others.

Tomorrow we will look at our sages counter cultural teachings on ka’as, or anger, and then we will take three days to look at their guidance on Loshin Hora, or violent speech, and Onaas Dvarim, or words that hurt others.

Tochecha

לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הַזֶּה תוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְא:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Surely reprove your kin but incur no guilt on their account

The Mitzvah of Tochecha states that one is obligated to criticize one's fellow Jews if one sees them doing something wrong. Note that the language, "your kinsfolk" (achecha) suggests that it may only apply to those close to you, although it is usually understood to apply to any Jew, and I think we could extend the sense of "Jew" to mean anyone we feel is trying to live a life guided by ethical values. There is little to be gained in offering criticism to someone who is not, and as we shall see in a moment our sages advised against it.

The Rabbis limit this mitzvah in important ways. Wishing that it produce peace and authentic transformation, and be rooted in love, they say that one should only offer criticism to someone one thinks will receive the criticism well and be open to hearing and understanding it. Bearing in mind that the use of unwanted nicknames, insults, and degrading speech are forbidden by Jewish law, it goes without saying (or should) that the critique should be offered gently, with humility and with a complete absence of insults and harsh or degrading speech.

This is wise both considering the main point of rebuke- helping the other- and the secondary point- reducing the hatred in one's own heart. Offering correction to someone who will not hear it is likely to do the opposite, as is speaking in a way which provokes or escalates conflict.

Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin warned: "A person should not speak harshly when rebuking; rather, they should speak gently. Harsh words are not heard. If it is not in one's nature to speak softly, then one is exempt from the mitzvah of tochecha." (Keter Rosh)

The Reishit Chochmah warns, "An angry person violates the positive commandment to "Rebuke your fellow man." They can't fulfill this mitzvah properly, since the Torah says, "And you shall not carry a sin for him"—rebuke must initially be delivered in a soft and gentle manner. If a person rebukes in a loud, angry tone, they are transgressing this commandment. Furthermore, the person being rebuked will not be able to accept the rebuke and will instead stubbornly persist in their ways, as is human nature. So said Shlomo Hamelech (Koheles 9), "The words of the wise are heard with pleasantness."

If one is not able to meet these requirements, then according to our sages one should not offer the criticism, but rather **be silent**. Let's review them:

The one we wish to speak to is trying to live by ethical values

There is a decent chance they will be open to our feedback and giving it will not provoke or escalate conflict

We feel confident that we can speak gently, humbly, and without insults or harsh speech.

If we are not able to meet these requirements, we are not to offer the feedback, as doing so will not only risk provoking division, conflict, distress and hatred, but also may drive the person away from the very ethical values we wish to promote.

We can see here also that though *tochecha* does include the purpose of removing hatred from your own heart, it is not mere “venting” or “speaking one’s truth.” It is only the mitzvah of *tochecha* if it is a thoughtful, constructive, and responsible action to help both the speaker and the spoken to.

Also note that *tochecha* should generally be in private: *In rebuking them you shall not expose them to shame (make their face pale) in public in which case you would sin.* (Rashi, Talmud Commentary).

Before we discuss this, I want to tell you a quick story.

Further Reading:

Telushkin, Joseph. *A Code of Jewish Ethics, Vol.2 Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.*

Ashlag, Yeshudah Lev. “Matan Torah” (Essays of Rav Yehudah Lev Ashlag).

A series of shiurim (classes) on this topic, very in-depth:

<https://torah.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-01the-centrality-ofmitzvot-bein-adam-le-chavero>