

To Rebuke or Not Rebuke: That is the Question

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תלמוד בבלי מסכת ערכין טז:

מנין לרואה בחבירו דבר מגונה שחייב להוכיחו שנאמר (ויקרא יט, י) הוכח תוכיח הוכיחו ולא קבל מנין שיחזור ויוכיחנו תלמוד לומר תוכיח מכל מקום יכול אפי' משתנים פניו ת"ל לא תשא עליו חטא תניא א"ר טרפון (תמיהני) אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה אם אמר לו טול קיסם מבין עיניך אמר לו טול קורה מבין עיניך אמר רבי אלעזר בן עזריה תמיהני אם יש בדור הזה שיודע להוכיח... עד היכן תוכחה רב אמר עד הכאה ושמואל אמר עד קללה ורבי יוחנן אמר עד נזיפה כתנאי רבי אליעזר אומר עד הכאה רבי יהושע אומר עד קללה בן עזאי אומר עד נזיפה

From where is it derived with regard to one who sees an unseemly matter in another that he is obligated to rebuke him? As it is stated: “You shall rebuke [*hokhe’ah tokhiah*] your neighbor.” If one rebuked him for his action but he did not accept the rebuke, from where is it derived that he must rebuke him again? The verse states: “You shall rebuke [*hokhe’ah tokhiah*],” and the double language indicates he must rebuke in any case. One might have thought that one should continue rebuking him even if his face changes due to humiliation. Therefore, the verse states: “Do not bear sin because of him”; the one giving rebuke may not sin by embarrassing the other person. It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Tarfon says: I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who can receive rebuke. Why? Because if the one rebuking says to him: Remove the splinter from between your eyes, i.e., rid yourself of a minor infraction, the other says to him: Remove the beam from between your eyes, i.e., you have committed far more severe sins. Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria says: I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke correctly, without embarrassing the person he is rebuking. ... The Gemara asks: Until where does the obligation of rebuke extend? Rav says: Until his rebuke is met by hitting, i.e., until the person being rebuked hits the person rebuking him. And Shmuel says: Until his rebuke is met by cursing, i.e., he curses the one rebuking him. And Rabbi Yohanan says: Until his rebuke is met by reprimand. The Gemara points out that this dispute between these *amora'im* is like a dispute between *tanna'im*: Rabbi Eliezer says: Until his rebuke is met by hitting; Rabbi Yehoshua says: Until his rebuke is met by cursing; ben Azzai says: Until his rebuke is met by reprimand.

Questions to consider:

- What is the limit of my requirement to rebuke someone who is sinning?
- How might the statements of Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah impact on the halacha of our responsibility to rebuke?
- What is the advantage of constantly rebuking someone if he doesn't listen the first time and what is the disadvantage?
- Why might you be allowed or required to stop rebuking once the person being rebuked hits you, curses you or reprimands you?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת נד: - נה.

כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה - נתפס על אנשי ביתו, באנשי עירו - נתפס על אנשי עירו, בכל העולם כולו - נתפס על כל העולם כולו... אמר ליה רבי זירא לרבי סימון: לוכחינהו מר להני דבי ריש גלותא. אמר ליה: לא מקבלי מינאי. אמר ליה: אף על גב דלא מקבלי - לוכחינהו מר

Anyone who had the capability to effectively protest the sinful conduct of the members of his household and did not protest, he himself is apprehended for the sins of the members of his household and punished. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the people of his town, and he fails to do so, he is apprehended for the sins of the people of his town. If he is in a position to protest the sinful conduct of the whole world, and he fails to do so he is apprehended for the sins of the whole world.... With regard to the issue of reprimand, it was related that **Rabbi Zeira said to Rabbi Simon: Let the Master reprimand the members of the house of the Exilarch, as Rabbi Simon had some influence over them. Rabbi Simon said to him: They will not accept reprimand from me. Rabbi Zeira said to him: Let my master reprimand them even if they do not accept it.**

Questions to consider:

- *Do you think that the Gemara's view of protesting sinful conduct is consistent with secular society's view and why?*
- *Why do you think Rabbi Zera told Rabbi Simon to reprimand the house of the Exilarch even though they won't listen and what might that indicate about the responsibility to rebuke someone?*

תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות סה:

ואמר רבי אילעא משום ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון כשם שמצוה על אדם לומר דבר הנשמע כך מצוה על אדם שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע רבי אבא אומר חובה שנאמר (משלי ט, ה) (אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאהבך

The Gemara cites other statements made by Rabbi Ile'a in the name of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon. **And Rabbi Ile'a said in the name of Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon: Just as it is a mitzva for a person to say that which will be heeded, so is it a mitzva for a person not to say that which will not be heeded.** One should not rebuke those who will be unreceptive to his message. **Rabbi Abba says: It is obligatory for him to refrain from speaking, as it is stated: "Do not reprove a scorner lest he hate you; reprove a wise man and he will love you" (Proverbs 9:8).**

Questions to consider:

- *Why might you not be permitted to rebuke someone if you know that he won't listen to you?*
- *How does this Gemara seemingly contradict the previous two Gemarot that we learned?*
- *How might we reconcile this Gemara with the previous two Gemarot that we learned?*

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ביצה ל.

א"ל רבא בר רב חנין לאביי תנן אין מטפחין ואין מספקין ואין מרקדין והאידינא דקא חזינן דעבדן הכי ולא אמרינן להו ולא מידי אמר ליה ולטעמך הא דאמר (רבא) לא ליתבי איניש אפומא דלחיא דלמא מגנדר ליה חפץ ואתי לאתויי (ד' אמות ברה"ר) והא הני נשי דשקלן חצבייהו ואזלן ויתבן אפומא דמבואה ולא אמרינן להו ולא מידי אלא הנח להם לישראל מוטב שיהיו שוגגין ואל יהיו מזידין והא הנח להם לישראל מוטב שיהיו שוגגין ואל יהיו מזידין והני מילי בדרבנן אבל בדאורייתא לא ולא היא לא שנא בדאורייתא ולא שנא בדרבנן לא אמרינן להו ולא מידי דהא תוספת יום הכפורים דאורייתא הוא ואכלי ושתו עד שחשכה ולא אמרינן להו ולא מידי:

Rava bar Rav Ḥanin said to Abaye: We learned in a mishna: The Rabbis decreed that one may not clap, nor strike a hand on his thigh, nor dance on a Festival, lest he come to repair musical instruments. But nowadays we see that women do so, and yet we do not say anything to them. He said to him: And according to your reasoning, how do you explain that which Rava said: A person should not sit at the entrance to an alleyway, next to the side post that has been placed at the edge of an alleyway in order for it to be considered a private domain, as perhaps an object will roll away from him and he will come to carry it four cubits in the public domain, thereby transgressing a biblical prohibition? But don't these women take their jugs, and go, and sit at the entrance to an alleyway, and we do not say anything to them? Rather, the accepted principle is: Leave the Jews alone; it is better that they be unwitting sinners and not be intentional sinners. If people engage in a certain behavior that cannot be corrected, it is better not to reprove them, as they are likely to continue regardless of the reproof, and then they will be sinning intentionally. It is therefore preferable for them to be unaware that they are violating a prohibition and remain merely unwitting sinners. Here, too, with regard to clapping and dancing, leave the Jews alone; it is better that they be unwitting sinners and not be intentional sinners. The Gemara comments: There were those who understood that this principle applies only to rabbinic prohibitions but not to Torah prohibitions, with regard to which the transgressors must be reprimanded. However, this is not so; it is no different whether the prohibition is by Torah law or whether it is by rabbinic law, we do not say anything to them. For example, on the eve of Yom Kippur, there is an obligation that one begin the fast while it is still day, before sunset, as the extension of Yom Kippur. During this time, one must observe all the halakhot. This mitzva of extending Yom Kippur is by Torah law, and yet people eat and drink until darkness falls but we do not say anything to them, as we know they will pay no attention.

Questions to consider:

- *What is the reason why we don't rebuke those who dance on a Yom Tov, sit at the entrance of an alleyway next to a Lechi on Shabbat, or do not observe Tosefet Yom Kippur (extending the prohibitions of Yom Kippur before sunset)?*
- *How might we reconcile this Gemara with the first two Gemarot that we learned?*

- *It seems from the end of the Gemara that we don't rebuke those who are committing a sin unintentionally with respect to a Mitzva D'oraita (Torah obligation.)*
- *Might there be a distinction between a Mitzvah like Tosefet Yom Kippur which is not explicit in the Torah and one like eating non-Kosher food that is explicit in the Torah and why?*

שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תרת: ב

נשים שאוכלו ושותו' עד שחשכה והן אינן יודעו' שמצוה להוסיף מחול על הקודש אין ממחין בידם כדי שלא יבואו לעשו' בזדון: הגה והוא הדין בכל דבר איסור אמרינן מוטב שיהיו שוגגין ולא יהיו מזידין ודוקא שאינו מפורש בתורה אע"פ שהוא דאורייתא אבל אם מפורש בתורה מוחין בידו (ר"ן פרק ד' דביצה והרא"ש בשם העיטור). ואם יודע שאין דבריו נשמעין לא יאמר ברבים להוכיחן רק פעם אחד אבל לא ירבה בתוכחות מאחר שיודע שלא ישמעו אליו אבל ביחיד חייב להוכיחו עד שיכנו או יקללנו (ר"ן ס"פ הבע"י:)

Women who eat and drink until dark, and they do not know it is a command to add from the weekday to the Holy day, we do not contest their actions in order that they do not so willingly. *Note (Rema): Similarly, every matter it is better a prohibition done negligently and not done purposefully. This is specifically when it is not explicit in the Torah even though it is a Torah command. But if it is explicit in the Torah, we do protest in the (transgressor's) action [Ran Chapter 4 of Beitzah, and Rosh in the name of the Ittur]. And if it is known that his words will not be listened to, do not say publically to rebuke except once, but don't increase rebuke since he knows that they won't listen to him. But privately, a person is obligated to rebuke until hit or cursed (by the transgressor) [Ran end of Chapter].*

Questions to consider:

- *How does the Rema seem to reconcile the various Gemarot that we learned?*
- *What is our responsibility to rebuke those who sin intentionally versus unintentionally? Individual versus a large group?*
- *Why do you think that there should be a difference if the prohibition is explicit in the Torah or not?*
- *Do you think the responsibility to rebuke someone should be the same if the person is generally Torah observant (keeps Kosher, observes Shabbat, etc.) versus if he is not?*

Summary of the Topic:

We live in a generation in which people generally do not like to be told what to do and therefore, admonishing others seems to be counterproductive. The Gemara (**Arachin 16b**) pointed out that this isn't a 21st century problem. Rabbi Tarfon questions whether anyone in his generation knows how to accept rebuke and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah questions whether anyone in his generation knows how to effectively rebuke others. At the same time, the Torah (**Vayikra 19:17**) commands us to rebuke those who sin.

Different Gemarot seem to provide different guidance as to the parameters of our responsibility in this regard. The Gemara (**Arachin 16b**) cites a three-way debate as to whether you must continue rebuking your friend until he hits you, curses you or reprimands you^[1]. Additionally, the Gemara (**Shabbat 54b-55a**) holds us responsible if we have the ability to protest sinful behavior and we do not protest and we are responsible to do so even if those listening will not accept our rebuke. However, the Gemara (**Yevamot 65b**) also states that we should not rebuke someone if we know that they won't listen and the Gemara (**Beitza 30a**) states elsewhere that we should not rebuke people who are sinning unintentionally who will not accept our rebuke because it is better for them to sin unintentionally than to sin intentionally, i.e., if we make them aware of their sin.

The Rema (**Orach Chayim 608:2**) reconciles the seemingly different opinions in the different Gemarot by arguing that they are discussing different situations. The Gemara in Arachin discusses a typical case, where your friend, an individual, is sinning intentionally and you have a responsibility to try to rebuke him up to the point where it's clear that he definitely won't listen to you and any further rebuke will be counterproductive. What is that point? The Tannaim and the Amoraim provide three different standards: Until he hits you, curses you or reprimands you. The Rema rules that you must rebuke him until he hits you or curses you, but in the Mishna Berura (**MB 608:11**) and the Shaar Tziyun (**SZ 608:13**), the Chafetz Chayim rules that you only need to rebuke him until he reprimands you, at which point you should not rebuke him anymore.

The Rema likely bases his understanding of the Gemara in Shabbat (**54b-55a**) & Yevamot (**65b**) on the Nimukei Yosef^[2] and the Ra'ah^[3]. According to the Nimukei Yosef and the Ra'ah, the Gemara in Shabbat (**54b-55a**) discusses a case where you are required to rebuke a group of people (the household of the exilarch) when they are sinning intentionally and you know that they won't listen. However, you only need to rebuke them once. Why once? Maybe you are wrong and maybe they will indeed listen to your rebuke. The Nimukei Yosef also reasons you must rebuke them once so that they can't claim later on that you knew what they were doing and you condoned their behavior. The Gemara in Yevamot is also discussing a situation where a group of people sin (even though it is not obvious from the simple reading of the Gemara) intentionally, and when the Gemara states that there is a mitzvah not to rebuke them, it means that you should not rebuke them constantly, i.e., more than once.

The Gemara (**Beitza 30a**) discusses a case where someone is sinning unintentionally and you know that they will not accept your rebuke, in which case it is better that you don't rebuke them so that they continue sinning unintentionally rather than sin intentionally. However, this leniency only applies if they are committing a sin that is not explicit in the Torah, like Tosefet Yom Kippur. If the sin is explicit in the Torah, then you must rebuke them. The Mishna Berura (**MB 608:6**) explains that if the sin is explicit in the Torah, we can't make the argument that they are sinning unintentionally. Because the sin is explicit in the Torah, they must be sinning intentionally, and therefore, we have a responsibility to rebuke them.

In sum, the Rema, as qualified by the Mishna Berura, rules that:

If an individual sins, then:

- Rebuke him until he reprimands you if the sin is either intentional, explicit in the Torah or if you believe that he may accept your rebuke.
- Do not rebuke him if the sin is unintentional, not explicit in the Torah and you believe that he will not accept your rebuke.

If a group of people sins, then:

- Rebuke them once if the sin is either intentional, explicit in the Torah or if you believe that they may accept your rebuke.
- Do not rebuke them if the sin is unintentional, not explicit in the Torah and you believe that they will not accept your rebuke.

There are a few final points that we may wish to consider. The Biur Halacha (**BH 608:2 d”h: Chayav l’hochicho**) rules that we are only obligated to rebuke our friends with whom we have a relationship, but we should not rebuke someone with whom we do not have a relationship lest that person hate us or take revenge on us. This ruling may be based on Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah's statement in Arachin (**16b**) that nobody knows how to rebuke or accept rebuke nowadays. The Biur Halacha (**BH 608:2 d”h: Aval**) also rules that we need not rebuke those who have thrown off the yoke of Torah and mitzvot completely, like those who publicly violate Shabbat or eat forbidden foods as an act of rebellion against Hashem. The Biblical obligation of rebuking someone only applies with reference to someone who generally observes Torah and mitzvot.

In Tenuat Ha-Mussar (**Volume 1, p. 184**), the following story is told attesting to Rabbi Yisrael Salanter's greatness in drawing people closer to Torah and mitzvot. “Before Rabbi Yisrael [Salanter] came to Memel, Judaism was in a very bad state, as in the rest of the cities of Germany during that period. Jewish stores were open on *Shabbat*, and the merchants, most of whose business was connected with the port, would load and unload their merchandise on *Shabbat* as during the week. Rabbi Yisrael's attitude toward them and the moderate and graded manner in which he influenced them are very typical of his approach. When he came for the first time to the synagogue where the merchants and port agents would pray in order to preach about *Shabbat*, he asked whether there were any Lithuanian Jews present. When they told him that such people were indeed

present, he refrained from preaching and returned home. The next week he came a second time, and when he was told that no Lithuanian Jews were there, he began to preach. After explaining to them the value of *Shabbat*, in their style and according to their spirit, he reached the conclusion: Dealing with the freight that arrived in the port on *Shabbat* may be necessary, but writing is unnecessary. The merchants accepted what he said and agreed not to write. Sometime later, Rabbi Yisrael delivered another sermon in that synagogue, saying that unloading their merchandise on *Shabbat* may be necessary, but loading their merchandise on *Shabbat* is certainly unnecessary. The merchants accepted this as well. Later he arrived once again, and forbid unloading as well. In this way, he influenced the community step by step, until finally he effected a total upheaval.” May we all be inspired to strengthen not just ourselves, but those around us, in their commitment to Torah and mitzvot in a loving manner that engenders peace, goodwill and a strengthening of our commitment to Torah and mitzvot.

[1] The Gemara also prohibits you from humiliating your friend while rebuking him, generally assumed to mean embarrassing him in public and the commentaries debate as to the limits of this prohibition. See Rambam, Hilchot Dei’ot, 6:8, who rules that this prohibition does not apply to sins between man and Hashem and the Magen Avraham (600:3), who rules that this prohibition does not apply to sins committed in public.

[2] Yevamot 21b, *b’dapei Ha’Rif*.

[3] Chiddushei Hameyuchas la’Ran, Shabbat 55a.