

WHERE DO WE DRAW THE LINE?

THE BOUNDARIES OF COLLECTIVE ACTION & THE MITZVAH OF REBUKE

During this session, you will consider two distinct but related questions:

- (1) When is it appropriate to collaborate with those with whom we may differ on certain core moral issues?
- (2) How should we “rebuke” someone whose behavior we find offensive?

But first, please review your “moral fieldwork,” assigned at the end of your last session:

DEBRIEFING ON YOUR “MORAL FIELDWORK”:

At the end of your last session, you were each invited to either: (a) attend an event, group, or program that is at odds with your general political beliefs; or (b) invite someone whose views differ substantially from yours to have a conversation in which you focused on listening.

You may want to break up into groups of 2 or 3, so that each person has ample time to talk.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Were you successful? If so, what did you learn about the person or group you encountered? What did you learn about yourself? If not, what stood in your way?
- (b) Describe your emotional reaction to this experience.
- (c) Is this something you would like to do again?

DISCUSSING THE ARTICLE:

In his article “Linda Sarsour and American Jewish Politics,” Yehuda Kurtzer asks:

How does our community, committed to Israel as well as a host of other social justice commitments, navigate collaboration with other faith and political leaders who not only oppose on critical piece of our community’s agenda but often even militate against it?

In order to answer this questions, Kurtzer first distinguishes between “moral imperatives,” “moral concerns,” and “political preferences.” He explains:

All of us carry around with us a short list of moral imperatives that reflect our central commitments, These are ordering principles in our political universe, and it would be difficult for us to inhabit communities – or to make personal life decisions – that did not

follow their mandates. Separately, however, we carry around a longer list of moral concerns – the issues we care about (often deeply) but which do not rise to the level of ordering our families, communities and life choices. Most of us can tolerate relatively easily living in a community with people who do not value the same full list of moral concerns, but we struggle to do so when it comes to moral imperatives.

Kurtzer argues against using a “litmus test” to decide who our partners will be, and advocates instead for a “two-thirds and 51 percent” rule. He explains that according to this rule, “We identify in political communities, or organize for particular causes, with people who share, or at least do not operate in contradistinction to, two-thirds of our core moral imperatives, and with whom we agree on a minimum of 51 of our moral concerns.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Do you agree with the distinction Kurtzer draws between “moral imperatives” and “moral concerns”?
- (b) Can you identify beliefs that you hold that fit into each of these categories?
- (c) What do you think of Kurtzer’s “two-thirds and 51 percent” rule? If you were to set the percentages, what would they be?
- (d) Would it make you uncomfortable to organize for a cause in partnership with people with whom you agreed only to this extent? If not, should that discomfort prevent you from doing so?

FROM OUR TRADITION – THE COMMANDMENT OF REBUKE¹:

In the book of Leviticus,² we read:

Do not hate your kinsman in your heart. Admonish [or “rebuke” or “reprove”] your neighbor, but [or “and”] incur no guilt because of him. Do not take vengeance or bear a grudge against one of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am Adonai.

For centuries, commentators have puzzled over what it means to “admonish your neighbor but incur no guilt because of him.” What does incurring guilt have to do with calling our neighbor to task for his misbehavior?

¹ The discussion materials in this section are drawn from the Pardes Rodef Shalom Communities Program’s curriculum, “Can’t we talk about this? *Tochacha: A Study Guide for Constructive Communication*,” which can be found here: <http://elmad.pardes.org/2016/11/can-we-talk-about-this-tochacha-a-study-guide-for-constructive-communication/>. Thanks to Rabbi Amy Eilberg for directing me to these materials.

² Lev. 19:17-18.

Consider the following two commentaries:

Text 1 – Rabbi Yosef Bekhor Shor (“The Bekhor Shor,” 12th c. France)

“Do not hate your kinsman in your heart” – If your sibling does something that upsets you, do not hate him in your heart. Rather, you should admonish him, and say to him, “Why did you do this to me?” Since it is possible that he never intended what you had thought, or he could not help himself, or he will give you some other explanation. And through this [i.e. by fulfilling the *mitzvah* of *tochacha* – “rebuke” or “admonishment], you will come to realize that he did nothing improper to you. [And in doing so] “You will not sin because of him” – for having baseless hatred towards him.

Text 2 – Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (“Ramban,” 13th c. Spain)

“You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart” – when he does something unpleasant to you. Rather, rebuke him (saying). “Why did you do this to me?”

“and do not incur guilt because of him” – to cover up the hatred of him in your heart and to not tell him, because in your rebuking him, he will apologize to you or will repent and admit his sin and find atonement.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) How would *you* interpret the verse from Leviticus? What is it telling us to do?
- (b) Why does Bekhor Shor believe we should engage in rebuke? How does this compare to the justification offered by Ramban?
- (c) Is either of these rationales more appealing to you? Why?

Our tradition is not sanguine about the obstacles to providing effective admonishment. Consider the following texts:

Text 3 – Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Arakhin 16b

Rabbi Tarfon said: “I wonder whether there is anyone in this generation who can accept reproof, for if one says to him: “Remove the mote from between your eyes,” he [the other] would answer: “Remove the beam from between your eyes.!” Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said: “I wonder if there is one in this generation who knows how to reprove!”

Text 4 – Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzato, *Mesillat Yesharim* ch. 20 (18th c. Italy)

The Torah has commanded us “Admonish your fellow” (Lev. 19:17). How often does a person rebuke sinners at a time or place in which one’s words will not be heard, so that they pay no attention to what is said, thereby causing them to multiply their wickedness and to desecrate the name [of the Eternal], adding rebellion to the sins [already committed]? In a case of this kind, it is the path of piety to remain silent. “As it is our duty to speak when we are likely to be heeded,” say our sages, “so is it our duty to be silent when we are not likely to be heeded.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) The first text suggests that we neither know how to give nor receive critique. How willing or able are you to give critical feedback? How willing or able are you to receive it? Which is more difficult for you?
- (b) Turning to the second text, why does Luzzato advocate silence?
- (c) Do you agree with Luzzato’s advice? How do we know when we will not be heard? Is there a benefit to speaking out even if our comments will not be heeded?

Finally, our tradition offers some advice on how and when we should admonish others:

**Text 5 – Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (“Rambam” or “Maimonides”),
Hilchot De’ot 6:7-8 (12th c. Spain)**

A person who rebukes a colleague -- whether because of a [wrong committed] against the person or because of a matter between their colleague and God – should rebuke the person privately. He should speak to the person patiently and gently, informing him that he is only making these statements for their colleague’s own welfare, to allow them to merit the life of the world to come . . .

At first, a person who admonishes a colleague should not speak to him harshly such that the other becomes embarrassed as [Leviticus 19:17] states: “You should . . . not bear a sin because of him.” This is what our sages said: “Should you rebuke him to the point that his face changes [color]? The Torah states: “[You should] . . . not bear a sin because of him”. [i.e. you should not be guilty of the sin of publicly shaming him].

Text 6 – Genesis Rabbah (6th c. midrash)

Rabbi Jose ben Rav. Chanina said: “Reproof leads to love, as it is said, “Reprove a wise person and he will love you.” (Proverbs 9:8). Such indeed is [this rabbi’s] view, for he said, “Love unaccompanied by reproof is not love. Reish Lakish said: “Reproof leads to peace,” . . . for he said “Peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- (a) Rambam suggests that when we offer challenging feedback to someone, we should inform them that we are “only making these statements for their welfare.” How often, when you offer rebuke or admonishment, is the other person’s wellbeing or potential a central concern? What would change for you, if you were to adopt this view?
- (b) In Genesis Rabbah, what do you make of the connection between “rebuke” or “admonishment” on one hand, and “love” and “peace” on the other? Do you agree that there can be no love without admonishment?
- (c) What does it mean that “peace unaccompanied by reproof is not peace”? How might admonishment lead to peace?
- (d) Consider Rambam’s instruction to rebuke our friends in private. Does this mean that we can never “call out” inappropriate behavior in public forums, as on social media? When might public, rather than private, rebuke be appropriate?
- (e) What broad themes do you see in the various texts above related to the commandment to rebuke one’s neighbor? How do they call us to behave?