

On Call Out Culture and Human Dignity - Kol Nidre 5776

I don't know if this has ever happened to any of you or if it has only happened to me. Maybe it is because once I developed a sense of self, I became quite loud and lost all sense of volume control. What my classmates at Wellesley called "yelling all the time" is what I termed "New Jersey-inspired, effective communication." But there I am at a cafeteria table, on an Amtrak car, at a kosher deli -- wherever, having a private conversation on a touchy subject: race, Israel, gender, marriage, or another hot topic of the day. Then, someone I don't know or don't know well, who hasn't heard the entire conversation, who can't even reasonably gauge what my opinion is based on what she has heard, decides to "call me out." Now maybe, this has happened to you. If it has, thank you for your empathy. If it hasn't, well, I hope that you are entertained by my humiliation, and will listen to the rest of this sermon for simple intellectual enrichment.

"Call out culture" knows no political boundaries -- self-defined social justice activists, patriots, servants of God, all love to call out others. It isn't about a political or social or religious viewpoint, it is about tactics. How would Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook survive if it weren't for the

millions of individuals who comment on each other's statuses and articles, and who believe they are making the world a better place by humiliating others and highlighting another person's supposed idiocy or evil. In our country and our culture, calling out others has become a sport, a hobby, a vocation, and for some, a really unhealthy obsession.

The subject of rebuke, or in Hebrew, *tokhacha*, plays a central role in Jewish theology and law. If there were no *tokecha* in the Bible, about one third of it -- most of the Book of Prophets and 90 percent of Moses' conversations with the Israelites -- would simply not be included. Of course we know that the Israelites rarely, if ever, heeded the warnings or admonishments of Moses or the later prophets, but on the other hand, their clarion call for justice has inspired generations of Jews to live better lives and pursue justice. The first time that rebuke is discussed in the Bible is in the book of Leviticus:

יִזְלֹתְשָׂנְאָה אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא
עָלָיו חֲטָאֵה: יִחַ לֹא־תִקְסֶם וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאַהֲבַת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹד אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart. Reprove your fellow and incur no guilt because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countryman; love your neighbor as yourself – I am the Lord.
[Leviticus 19:17-18]

In the Jewish tradition we learn that you need to rebuke your brother so that you do not share in his guilt and sin. Let us pay close attention to the language -- you shall rebuke “*your brother*,” a phrase that conveys a relationship, a common provenance and kinship. This is important. We also learn that when you fail to call out the bad behavior of your family, you share in the guilt of their sin. *Tokhecha* in this verse is connected 1) to “not hating your brother,” 2) to not holding a grudge against him, and 3) to loving your neighbor as yourself. So what do we learn from this verse? We are required to rebuke our siblings, so that we don’t bear a grudge against them or begin to hate them. Not only do we rebuke to protect ourselves against the sins of those in our family, but also so that we can maintain a healthy, honest, and loving relationship with that person. In the Gemara, the obligation to rebuke is taken even further beyond family and community. We learn in Tractate Shabbat:

2. Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoing of his family and does not, is implicated in the wrongdoing of his family. Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoings of those who live in his city and does not, is implicated in the wrongdoing of his city. Whoever is able to protest against the wrongdoings of the entire world and does not, is implicated in the wrongdoings of the entire world.

[*Shabbat 54b*]

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.

When we possess power to speak out and choose not to use it -- whether the audience be our family, our community, or our work environment, we are literally *nitpas*, “caught up” in and implicated in that sin. When we are capable of protest, we must call out, or else we must bear the deep moral consequences of our silence and complicity.

But the business of rebuke is a complicated one. It is so much easier to unfriend, to speak *lashon harah*, or gossip, behind someone’s back, or to just quietly hate someone in your heart. And even if we have the courage to speak up and speak out, how do we channel our passion (and even sometimes our very real and legitimate anger) into something that can be heard, assimilated, and accepted by the people we are seeking to change? Are we obligated to package our rebuke in a way that can be heard? In Tractate Arachin on the Gemara, we learn about how complicated giving rebuke can be:

3. Rabbi Tarfon said: I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who can accept reproof. You say, "Remove the splinter from between your eyes," and they say "remove the two by four from between your own eyes!"

Rabbi Eleazar ben Azarya said: I would be surprised if there is anyone in this generation who can give reproof. [Arakhin16b]

תניא, א"רטרפון: תמיהני 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.

Yes, we are required to rebuke, but it can be quite difficult. When you point out a splinter between your fellow's eyes, they will respond, "what about the two by four stuck between your eyes!" The most famous Biblical example of this is when Moses rebukes a fellow Israelite for striking his fellow Israelite slave. At which point, the aggressor responds, "hey, weren't you the guy who killed an Egyptian taskmaster with your bare hands?" At which point, Moses runs away in fear and shame. Not exactly a profile in effective leadership. I am sure he wished he had said nothing, even though, obviously, it was good for Moses, as the new leader of the Israelite nation, to chastise intracommunal violence. But there are always risks and pitfalls to being a human being who criticizes others. None of us, by definition, are perfect. That does not excuse us, however, from speaking out against wrongdoing. Rather, we need to make sure our "front yard" is

clean before criticizing others, or at least be honest about the messes and shortcomings in our own lives. There is a famous *sugya* in the Gemara where a rabbi is told to confront someone in the community who has not taken care of overgrown shrubs in his yard. He tells the community, “Give me one day to prepare.” Before he speaks to that individual, he cut down all of the overgrown shrubs in his front yard. He could have said, “I am not the right person. I would be a hypocrite to say anything.” Instead, he prepares his yard so that he can provide the necessary *tokhecha* with integrity.

Regardless of one’s political, social, or religious background, there are few of us who think the world is in particularly good shape, and lacking the need for serious repair. As a result, conversations on difficult issues with deep moral implications are more necessary than ever. In this current state of affairs, there seems to be a large portion of people around our country who believe it is justified to caricature, stigmatize, shame those with whom they disagree in order to make the world a more just and righteous place. Our tradition could not be more clear that whatever the stakes, this mode of communication is ineffective and not befitting of a Jew. Two of the most important pieces of wisdom from our tradition are, “to

embarrass a person is equivalent to murdering them,” and also from the Talmud, “The embarrassed student can never learn.” Thousands of years ago the rabbis recognized that shame is not an effective long-term educational strategy. It is also bad for the health of a community, especially a religious minority that needs to remain healthy and strong enough to survive the daily humiliations and violence from the outside world.

So where does that leave us today? Rebuke is as necessary now as it ever was. I do not need to list the many moral shortcomings in our world today -- the media are happy to highlight and profit from the many problems that plague us. But -- there are better ways to rebuke than others, and those superior methods -- for better or worse -- require much more work than lashing out at those with whom we disagree. *Tokhecha* is only effective in the contexts of meaningful relationships, strong communal bonds, and with the intention of creating healthier, more just, and more loving community. It can only be relayed correctly and heard effectively if it is given in a way that is both direct but also allows the person receiving it to walk away with his or her dignity. *Tokhecha* needs to be given with humility

and awareness of our own shortcomings, and we must own up to them or fix our own problems before being an agent of rebuke.

If we, as a community and nation, do not find better ways to communicate criticism, we are heading for an even more polarized and paralyzed future. We may yell louder to reach the other side of that widening chasm as a result, but the result will be greater enmity, more hatred, more frustration, and fewer effective solutions to our common and worsening problems. So in the year to come, in those moments that any of us are preparing to “call someone out,” I would suggest focusing more on the ancient texts of our tradition than the latest self-aggrandizing and self-righteous article a person finds posted on social media. Ask yourself: Do I know this person well? Do they know that I respect them and value their dignity as much as my own? Am I about to convey this message to make our community more just and loving, or for less worthy reasons? Have I thought about the most effective way to express my discontent while still emphasizing the respect I have for this individual? Do I feel fully the weight of my responsibility to repair the world as I enter this encounter? And, am I willing to apologize if I cannot balance these difficult values in

what I am about to express? If and when we do this work, it is time for us to express our *tokhecha*.

As painful and difficult as this mitzvah is, we cannot stand idly by as the blood of so many are being shed. We cannot be silent as it has become more and more difficult to live a dignified life in this country – economically, socially, and politically. Our broken world is waiting anxiously for our courage and wisdom – our Common Creator cries at a world shattered by pain and sin. We must speak out, but in a way that brings greater dignity and understanding in the process. In order to do this, we must build and strengthen relationships, especially with those different from ourselves – not self-segregate and burn bridges. Our world is waiting, and God's expectations are as high as they have ever been.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – may we all be inscribed in the Book of Life, and let us say, Amen.