

# Let's Retire Shame...But Keep Constructive Criticism

Shana Tova. It's so wonderful to see each and every one of you. It's great to have my parents, Bruce and Laurie Herman, in to enjoy this holiday with us. For those I have not yet had the chance to meet in person, I look forward to getting to know you over the course of 5783. Please let me know what you'd like to see happen at Mosaic Law Congregation and we will do our best to make it so (no promises though).

I would love for each of us to devote these High Holy Days to turning over a new leaf, a desire to begin anew, as God is the one who "renews the acts of creation every day."<sup>1</sup> I also would love for us to have gratitude for the gift of life and for another year.

Yet there's another element to these Days of Awe" centered on three amorphous words: guilt, remorse and shame.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation for *Siddur Sim Shalom* Page 98.

One of those three words I want to retire this year: shame. Every month before Rosh Hodesh we pray for *חיים שאין להם בושה וכלימה*, “life which is free from shame and humiliation.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, our daily liturgy has four pivotal words: *ולא נבוש לעולם ועד*, “May we never be brought to shame.”<sup>3</sup> To understand this, we need to differentiate shame from remorse and guilt.

In Judaism remorse is a crucial step in the process of repentance, striving to become a better version of ourselves.<sup>4</sup> As a colleague on the Ravnet, the Rabbi Listserv, wrote, “We don't need more people who act badly to feel shame -- we need them to feel remorse.”<sup>5</sup>

Guilt, the feeling of wrongdoing, also necessary in repentance. As another colleague put it, “**Guilt says I did something bad. Shame says I am something bad. Guilt has a role in our lives but shame does not.**”<sup>6</sup> We know the destructiveness of causing shame to others. The Talmud teaches us, “Publicly shaming another is akin to murder, for the

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<sup>2</sup> Translation from Siddur Sim Shalom Page 418

<sup>3</sup> Translation from Siddur Sim Shalom Page 98.

<sup>4</sup> See [The Four Stages of Repentance: Remorse - Jewish Holidays](#)

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi David Kay Ravnet post

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Michael Gold Ravnet Post

red color of one's face disappears and becomes white.”<sup>7</sup> This is how the modern scholar Brene Brown views shame when she writes, “Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love, belonging, or connection.”<sup>8</sup> This is precisely the opposite of what we ask God for in the daily liturgy, that we should NEVER EVER BE PUT TO SHAME.

There's a story in the Talmud that illustrates the danger of shaming others.

*Our rabbis taught: A person should always be gentle as the reed and not unyielding as the cedar. Once Rabbi Eleazar son of Rabbi Shimon was coming from the house of his teacher, and he was riding leisurely on his donkey, feeling happy because he had studied much Torah. He happened upon an exceedingly ugly man who greeted him, “Peace be upon you sir.” He did not return the salutation but instead said, “Good for nothing, how ugly you are! Are all your fellow citizens*

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<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b

<sup>8</sup> Brene Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazleden Publishing, 2010), pg. 56.

*and ugly as you are?” The man replied, “I don’t know. Go ask the craftsman who made me, ‘How ugly is the vessel that you made!’”*

*When Rabbi Eleazar realized he did wrong, he dismounted from the donkey and prostrated himself before the man and said to him, “I submit myself to you. Forgive me. The man replied, “I will not forgive you until you go to the craftsman who made me and say to Him ‘How ugly is the vessel that You made.’”*

*Rabbi Eleazar walked behind him until he reached his native city. When the people of the city came out to meet him, greeting him with the words, “Peace be upon you, Teacher, Master,” the ugly man asked them, “Who are you addressing thus?” They replied, “The man who is walking behind you.” Thereupon he exclaimed, “If this man is a teacher, may there not be any more like him in Israel.” The people asked him, “Why?” He replied, “Such and such a thing he has done to me.” They said to him, “Nevertheless forgive him, for he is a man greatly learned in the Torah.” The man replied, “For your sakes I will forgive him, but*

*only on condition that he does not act in the same manner in the future.”<sup>9</sup>*

We must be extremely careful and sensitive as to when our comments towards others might lead to shame, embarrassment or humiliation. With that being said, there is a commandment to rebuke one’s fellow when s/he is doing something wrong: הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת עַמִּיתְךָ: “Reprove your kinsman and incur no sin on their account.”<sup>10</sup>

Rather than the term “reprove” I prefer to translate *Tohecha* as “constructive criticism.” My mentor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Bill Lebeau, taught me that criticism does not mean personal dislike but rather is a way to grow. We should be able to receive criticism-in fact withholding it could be a sin! Many commentators<sup>11</sup> indicate that the sin being referred to in the biblical verse is the hatred or resentment we harbor towards another in our

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<sup>9</sup> Babylonian Talmud Tractate Taanit 20 a-b. Translation in Carol Ingall, *Transmission and Transformation: A Jewish Perspective on Moral Education* (New York: The Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary, 1999), pgs. 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 19:17

<sup>11</sup> See Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Bechor Shor on Leviticus 19:17

hearts-that rather than hold it in we need to find the correct place to say “When you say \_\_\_\_\_ I feel \_\_\_\_\_” or as Maimonides indicates, ““Why did you do this to me? Why did you wrong me regarding that matter?”<sup>12</sup>

The challenge is how does one rebuke another without shaming him/her or how does one ensure that the criticism will be constructive rather than destructive? It is so delicate a balance that “Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said that nobody in his generation could do it correctly.”<sup>13</sup> Yet there is a process for constructively calling out one’s wrongdoing while avoiding shaming another. The goal of constructive or “sensitive *Tochecha*” is to encourage “*T’shuvah* (repentance) because it is grounded in the belief that the receiver is also created *B’tzelem Elohim*, in God’s image, and thus inherently capable of growth and change.”<sup>14</sup>

Estelle Frankel writes about 3 qualities necessary for effective *Tochecha*: Timing, tone and intention. The rabbis teach that just as it is a mitzvah to offer words of *tochecha* when our words are likely to be

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<sup>12</sup> Maimonides Mishneh Torah Hilchot Deot Chapter 6 Halachot 6-8

<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud Arachin 16b

<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Neal Loevinger Ravnet post

heard, it is a mitzvah to stay silent when our words will not be heard.<sup>15</sup> A great story of proper timing is told by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin in his book *Words that Hurt: Words That Heal*.

*Rabbi Israel of Vishnitz and his assistant stopped by a house of a certain wealthy bank manager...Rabbi Israel knocked on the door, and when a servant opened it, entered the house. The puzzled assistant, without asking a word, followed the rebbe inside. The bank manager received his distinguished guest respectfully and politely. The rebbe took the seat that was offered him, and sat for quite some time without saying a word...After a good while, the rebbe rose to leave, and bid his host farewell. The bank manager accompanied him to the door and, his understandable curiosity getting the better of him, asked: 'could you please explain to me, rebbe, why you honored me with a visit?'*

*'I went to your house in order to fulfill a mitzvah, the rebbe replied, 'and thank God I was able to fulfill it.'*

*'And which mitzvah was that?' asked the confused bank manager.*

*"Our Sages teach that 'Just as one is commanded to say that which will be listened to, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be listened to.' Now if I remain in my house and you remain in yours, what kind of mitzvah is it that I*

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<sup>15</sup> Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 65a

*refrain from telling you 'that which will not be listened to?' In order to fulfill the mitzvah properly, one obviously has to go to the house of the person who will not listen, and there refrain from speaking to him. And that is exactly what I did."*

*"Perhaps rebbe," said the bank manager, "you would be so good as to tell me what this thing is. Who knows, perhaps I will listen?"*

*"I am afraid you won't," said the rebbe.*

*The longer the rebbe refused, the greater the curiosity of the other to know the secret: he continued to press the rebbe to reveal 'that which would not be listened to.'*

*"Very well," said the rebbe finally. "A certain penniless widow owes your bank quite a sum for the mortgage of her house. Within a few days, your bank is going to dispose of her house by public sale, and she will be out on the street. I had wanted to ask you to overlook her debt, but didn't, because of the mitzvah of 'Not saying...'"*

*"But what do you expect me to do?" asked the bank manager in amazement. "Surely you realize that the debt is not owed to me personally, but to the bank, and I am only its manager, and not its owner, and the debt runs into several hundreds, and if..."*

*"It's exactly as I said all along," the rebbe interrupted, "that you would not want to hear."*

*With that he ended the conversation and walked away. The bank manager went into his house, but the rebbe's words found their way into his heart and gave him no rest until he paid the widow's debt out of his own pocket.*

*Knowing how to offer criticism and effect change even when you are not directly criticizing—that is a trait we should all strive to acquire.<sup>16</sup>*

Estelle Frankel also cautions us to be mindful of our tone as well as of our own emotional state and that of the listener. If we are emotionally triggered or angry, or notice that the listener is in a state of agitation, it is better to wait for a more opportune time — one that is mutually agreed upon and in private. It is best to communicate *tochecha* with humility and empathy. Remembering that we are all flawed and that we all possess the capacity for wrongdoing is crucial. As it teaches in *Pirkei Avot*, “Do not judge your neighbors until you have stood in their place.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition, we must be conscious of our intention: *Tochecha* is not simply a matter of venting; rather, it involves a conscious effort to heal a

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<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Words that Hurt Words that Heal: How the words You Choose Shape Your Destiny* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019 printing), pgs. 108-09. Rabbi Telushkin got the story from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *A Treasury of Hasidic Tales on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah Publications/Hillel Press, 1980), pgs. 189-91.

<sup>17</sup> Pirkei Avot Chapter 2 Mishnah 5

breach in a relationship or to help others to awaken to their spiritual and moral deficits. *Tochecha* is most effective when we make use of our psychological capacity for integration — the ability to see ourselves and others as **whole beings** with strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. With integration, we do not define people by their mistakes and flaws; rather, we point out specific criticisms while concurrently remembering the person’s essential goodness. When giving *tochecha*, it is helpful to express our loving concern, respect, and appreciation alongside any critique. Doing so reduces defensiveness and any sense that the criticism is an assault on the individual’s character.<sup>18</sup>

In our 5 part *Mahloket Matters* series with material from the PARDES Institute, we saw the importance of constructive disagreement, with the goal being to hear the other’s perspective and engage in a 49-49 conversation, code words for “I have some access to the truth and you have some access to the truth. Let’s listen to one another with the goal of understanding rather than changing each other’s perspective.”<sup>19</sup> It

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<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Eli Friedman, [Tochecha: How We Rebuke – Rodeph Shalom](#)

<sup>19</sup> Pardes Institute of North America, “Mahloket Matters: How to Disagree Constructively”

empowers us to hear different perspectives, even those with which we might strongly disagree, without reacting negatively but rather from a point of view of curiosity and mutual respect.

We began with three ambiguous terms: guilt, remorse and shame. At this time of year, we feel remorse for times we missed the mark. We might feel guilt over our behavior towards others, striving to do better in the coming year. However, what I hope we never do is translate our actions to our beliefs about ourselves-feeling shame for who we are. We can and should accept constructive criticism about specific issues as long as they never devolve or translate into *ad hominem* attacks.

In the year 5783, my goal for each and every one of us is that when we disagree we do so with humility and out of kindness and respect. There is a time and place for criticizing others, but we NEVER want to do so in a way that will cause shame or public embarrassment. Instead, let us connect out of the mutual respect that comes with recognizing and appreciating who the other truly is, rather than viewing them as a flawed version of ourselves.

As we prepare to hear Cantor Rosner chant Hineni, a powerful prayer written by an anonymous Hazzan, I want to first read you “A *Different Kind of Hineni*” by Rabbi Rami Shapiro, who began Congregation Beth Ohr, in walking distance from my last synagogue in Miami.

*Hineni. Here I am.*

*A little bit nervous, a little bit self-conscious.*

*After all, whom am I talking to?*

*And what have I done?*

*Am I a sinner in search of grace*

*or a saint seeking salvation?*

*Am I so evil*

*or so good*

*as to warrant this season of introspection?*

*And yet here it is, and here I am:*

*this time of change and correction.*

*this heart of confusion and contrition.*

*Oh, if I could change!*

*If I could be so sure of myself*

*that I no longer had to imagine the sights of others;*

*to be so loving of myself*

*that I no longer had to ration my loving of others;*

*to be so bold with myself*

*that I no longer had to fear the bravery of others.*

*Oh, if I could change*

*there is so much I would change.*

*Maybe I will, but it scares me so.*

*Maybe I won't and that should scare me more,*

*But it doesn't.*

*So let me pray just this:*

*Let no one be put to shame because of me.*

*Wouldn't that make this a wonderful year?*

*Hineni. Here I am.<sup>20</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Rabbi Rami Shapiro, "A Different Kind of Hineni"