

Leveraging Love

Jhos Singer

Rabbi Shraga Simmons, educator and cofounder of the outreach sites aish.com and JewishPathways.com, poetically describes *tochecha* (rebuke) as "...the beauty of reality staring us squarely in the face." Like a mysterious mirror, a rebuke reveals how we negotiate our delusions and their proximity to the ever-unfolding truth. Meant to be a gift that inspires transformation, *tochecha*, when received well, demonstrates that our yearning for spiritual evolution is stronger than our fear of change. A *tochecha* asks us to listen so that we may fully absorb what we hear and then get busy clearing away the muck.

Literally, *tochecha* is a reproof or a rebuke, a spoken frankness that reveals a fixable flaw. The purpose of giving a *tochecha* is to point out an important truth that someone just seems to keep missing. It is one of halakha's most obviously spiritual practices, not to be dished out carelessly or in anger, but with genuine concern for another human being.

My friend Yael Goldblatt, ז"ל, was a master of the art. She would say, "Darling," followed by a pitch-perfect observation of some misstep or impoverished sentiment — without too much cushion or too much edge. And then she would seamlessly shift gears to another topic. No matter how deeply her observation cut, I felt seen, accepted, supported, and encouraged to become my best self. It was as if she had helped me to pull out a stubborn splinter that I, alone, couldn't quite reach.

Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov offers a story about two *shtetl* guys who get drunk one night and wake up the next morning hung over and behind bars. Shmuel says, "Oy, Dovid, this is a *shanda*, a humiliation! Do you still love me?" "Shmuel, of course I love you." "Then, Dovid, you must tell me what I lack." "Shmuel, how can I know what you lack?" "Oy, Dovid, if you don't know what I lack, how can you love me?" This nadir moment isn't lost on these two. Rather, they seize the opportunity of being broken open by embarrassment to face their weaknesses, leveraging love to move the stone blocking their growth.

The mitzvah of *tochecha* derives from the

verse, "Do not hate your brother in your heart; you are to persistently reprove (*hochei'ach tochi'ach*) your fellow, but not create wrongdoing upon him." (Leviticus 19:17)

According to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, the foremost living Talmud authority, the sages established three conditions by which one performs this positive mitzvah: to avoid publicly shaming the wrongdoer, to reprimand only someone who will accept the *tochecha*, and to avoid voicing the reprimand if the person has expressed an unwillingness to be confronted. (*Reference Guide to the Talmud*, 447)

But the sages also teach: "Everyone who can protest a wrong in one's midst and does not, is responsible for those people." (Shabbat 54b) We are admonished to know each other well enough to recognize when our reproof will be best received, and we are also liable for wrongdoing in our midst if we don't speak up.

Fundamentally, *tochecha* is a mitzvah of connection — a cornerstone of healthy relationships and strong community. If we can trust our neighbors to tell us the truth lovingly, and if we can hear a reprimand with calm consideration, then our path to one of Judaism's most sought after spiritual destinations, *shalom*/wholeness, is well paved.

Additionally, there are two sections of the Torah referred to as "the *tochecha*" (Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28:15-68). They contain clear warnings about the horrors of straying from the path of mitzvot — harsh curses such as cannibalism, infanticide, and hemorrhoids. Amid these very disturbing readings is, surprisingly, one verse that takes a hairpin turn: All this horror will befall you "because you did not serve the Source with gladness and goodness of heart when everything was abundant." (Deuteronomy 28:47)

This unusual verse inserts a tenderness that renders these warnings a rebuke and not just a harangue. It is not the curses that keep us in line, but rather the painful and beautiful exchange that coaxes us to become more whole, blessed, and glad.

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Jewish sensibilities are approaches to living and learning that permeate Jewish culture. The ideas, values, emotions, and behaviors they express — emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources — provide inspiration and guidance that help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities. Sensibilities are culturally informed senses or memes. In the aftermath of this acrimonious presidential campaign, we explore the notion of *tochecha*, or rebuke. Next month, we will address the nature of “*yetzar hara*,” the inclination to do evil.

The Art of Rebuke

Estelle Frankel

Tochecha — the art of giving and receiving honest feedback or rebuke — is part of the biblical formula for sustaining friendships and relationships. According to the talmudic rabbis, it is an integral part of love; without *tochecha*, love cannot endure. (Bereshit Raba 54:3) I see evidence of this every day in my psychotherapy practice and personal life. Those who are skilled at giving and receiving feedback are able to sustain healthy relationships over the long term, while those who lack such skills are ill-equipped to deal with relationship challenges when they arise.

Tochecha requires great integrity and impeccable communication skills. It also requires the use of an array of psychological capacities and virtues, including humility, empathy, mindfulness, courage, non-defensiveness, and integration. While highly evolved individuals welcome *tochecha* as an opportunity for self-improvement, most people defend against having their shortcomings pointed out to them, and they will employ a range of psychological defenses, including denial and projection, to protect themselves from the pain of reproof. We increase the likelihood that our words will be heard by paying attention to our timing, tone, and intention.

Timing: The rabbis teach that just as it is a mitzvah to offer words of *tochecha* when our words are likely to be heard, it is a mitzvah to stay silent when our words will not be heard. (Yevamot 65) Before speaking, we need to be mindful of our own emotional state as well as 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.

Tone: A voice that is angry, disdainful, blaming, or judgmental can undermine our message. It is better to communicate *tochecha* with humility and empathy. Remembering that we are all flawed and that we all possess the capacity for wrongdoing is key. When possible, offer feedback and insight as an equally imperfect individual — no better or worse than

anyone else. In *Pirkei Avot* (Chapter 2, Mishnah 5), we are instructed: “Do not judge your neighbors until you have stood in their place.” The Ba’al Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism (known as the BeShT), offers a novel, psychologically insightful interpretation of this Mishnah. He suggests that if we find ourselves judging others, it may be because we actually *do* stand in the exact same place! Their misdeeds bother us because they remind us of our own failings. Our judgments are often a sign that we are projecting our disavowed flaws onto others. The BeShT’s teaching admonishes us to fix ourselves before attempting to fix others and to give *tochecha* only after doing our own inner work of self-rectification.

Intention: *Tochecha* is not simply a matter of venting; rather, it involves a conscious effort to heal a 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 at the same time that we remember 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.

A short story about the Chofetz Chayim (the esteemed ethicist and rabbi, Israel Meir Ha-Kohen Kagan, who lived from 1839 to 1933) illustrates a novel, non-shaming way to give *tochecha*: A student at the yeshiva in Radin was caught smoking on the Sabbath. When he was called into the Chofetz Chayim’s office, he anticipated being harshly rebuked. Instead, the old rabbi took the young man’s hands into his own and gazed into his eyes with loving concern and sorrow. A tear fell from the rabbi’s eyes, landing on the student’s hand as he uttered three words: “*Shabbos, heilege (holy) Shabbos.*” The young man was deeply distressed to have caused his holy teacher such sorrow. On the spot, he repented and never broke the Sabbath again. The rabbi’s tears, an expression of his love and concern, left an indelible mark on the young man’s soul.

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Redemption Song

David Ingber

How do you give *tochecha* to someone you disdain, someone for whom you have no respect, someone you believe will never acknowledge it — and likely never change? Is such a thing possible, or even advisable? These were the questions I wrestled with three years ago, as I considered publicly rebuking Marc “Mordecai” Gafni. I leaned on the Talmud’s teaching that we should rebuke someone, even 100 times, but not say something if it would fall on “deaf” ears. (Baba Metzia, 31a)

In 2003, after a decade-long spiritual exile quenching my spiritual thirst on yoga, Zen Buddhism, philosophy, and a good helping of late-night New York City life, I met Gafni. I was a student at a prominent yeshiva in New York, struggling to find my way back after years of distancing myself from Judaism. I stood paralyzed by fear and anger toward the Judaism I thought I knew, on the one hand, and by love and longing, on the other.

Gafni was a charismatic and magnetic teacher; he was a rabbi drawn to the Hasidic masters and Eastern philosophy, as I was. But as I was drawn into his world, I came to believe that he could lie and live with absolute hypocrisy. I felt very used and abused by him. I didn’t stay long — only two years. After I left his circle, I learned that allegations had been leveled that he had sexually exploited a high school freshman. Later, his community in Israel, Bayit Chadash, imploded after other accusations about sexual misconduct surfaced. I personally witnessed many episodes of his flirting, caressing, and sexual innuendo directed at his students and colleagues.

EDITOR’S NOTE: Mordechai Gafni has denied wrongdoing. To read Rabbi Gafni’s account, as well as the comments of several experts, please see <http://jd.fo/gSOU>.

I cautioned people about Gafni, but always privately. As stories began to emerge, I decided to stay away from the drama of public reproach; mostly, I was afraid to re-enter his world. When Gafni heard that I had privately cautioned some communal leaders to limit his access to students, he yelled at me, saying I had “ruined” his image and he would do the same to me. I became afraid.

Eventually, elements of his behavior were exposed. In 2006 the *Jewish Week* reported that Gafni admitted he was “sick” and needed treatment. The Jewish communal world, where he had operated for more than a decade, stopped inviting him to teach and write.

Please visit jd.fo/shma1 to find “Consider and Converse: *Tochecha*,” a guide that walks you through this issue, inspires reflections, prompts questions, and provides ways to connect this reading with other meaningful experiences.

Over the decade since I left his circle, Gafni has rebuilt his name, his profile, and his “brand,” positioning himself as a great teacher of evolutionary wisdom. Various teachers — such as Ken Wilber, author of *A Brief History of Everything* — who had publicly rebuked Gafni and had warned others to stay away from him, reinstated their support, lending Gafni credibility and offering platforms for his teachings.

In October 2015, my own conscience finally moved me to publicly rebuke both Gafni and his supporters. I organized a public petition on change.org that asked all financial and institutional support be withdrawn from him. I believed that unless I spoke out, Gafni’s behavior would continue.

Though some people whispered, few shouted their support. Even though I believed that Gafni would not “hear” my rebuke — that he would not accept or absorb any rebuke — I decided not to remain silent. After speaking out, I felt empowered to return to how I most often encounter the world, with a fearless, truth-speaking sensibility. Irrespective of whether Gafni and his supporters heard me, rebuke felt redemptive.

Gafni has denied the many accusations of sexual impropriety, claiming they are exaggerated, or in some cases, false, which is why I believe that he could never receive any form of rebuke in a meaningful way. From a spiritual standpoint, I’ve wrestled with this question: Why even bother with a case like this?

But I will continue to rebuke Gafni, even 100 times. Simply speaking up for women who have felt hurt is revitalizing and liberating. And I believe my rebuke and testimony gave victims of Gafni’s abuse opportunities to speak their truth. I thank God that I finally found the strength to rebuke him courageously, compassionately, and consistently... even 100 times.

Rabbi **David A. Ingber** is the founder of Romemu in New York, the largest Jewish Renewal synagogue in the world. Trained in Orthodox yeshivot, Ingber received private ordination from Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi after years of studying yoga and various schools of meditation. He lives with his wife, Ariel, and their three boys, Baer, Tal, and Or.

The Dangers of Anonymity on the Internet

Ari Ezra Waldman

The Internet’s capacity to offer its users at least a modicum of anonymity (or pseudonymity) is, theoretically, one of its greatest strengths. Without it, dissident, marginalized, and otherwise ignored populations could not make their voices heard. Think of the LGBTQ

activist in Russia or the Sudan, or the woman fighting for girls’ education in Afghanistan, or an undocumented immigrant mother highlighting the risks she takes to make a better life for her son: Shields of anonymity online protect these voices, creating more and better contributions to the marketplace of ideas.

But at the same time, anonymity online empowers the worst among us. Anonymity allows Gamergate, the loose collection of gamers on Twitter, to threaten the lives of women technologists. It allows a mob to harass “Saturday Night Live” cast member Leslie Jones. It permits a group of misogynists to threaten the life of the 4-year-old daughter of a feminist writer. And it gives license to antisemitic mobs to attack *New York Times* editor Jonathan Weisman, forcing him off the platform.

Things we would never say to someone’s face are more easily said when all you have to do is type, and then hit “send.” As such, online anonymity erodes important norms of social interaction. It does this in at least three related ways. First, it reduces the risk of consequences. Although it may not protect the Internet’s criminals absolutely, most victims of online harassment do not have the time, tools, and resources to unmask their attackers. And many of them are attacked on platforms that protect harassers’ anonymity in the name of free speech.

Second, anonymous online platforms dehumanize victims. In the physical world, we interact with whole persons, richly constituted embodied beings with faces and emotions, the ability to express pain, and entire networks of friends and families. When interacting anonymously online, we interact with avatars, symbols, or screen names. This makes people online seem disembodied; they are “accounts” rather than whole persons.

Third, anonymity erases context. Online, we cannot hear tones of voice. Nor can we see smiles, winks, and signals that change the meanings of words. Anonymous interaction is even less contextual: It removes all background information about an interaction partner that could translate into social trust.

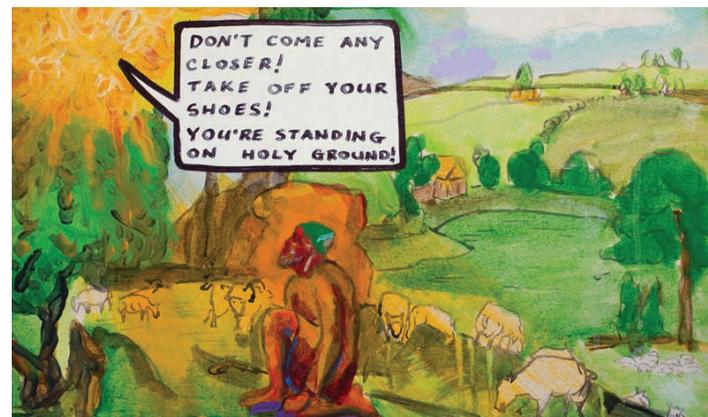
Ironically, then, online anonymity helps to silence the very speech it was supposed to protect. Because most victims of anonymous online attacks are from marginalized populations, protecting user anonymity opens them up to relentless attack, silencing them in the process. Some victims, like the feminist writer Jessica Valenti, have been forced to leave social media. Others, like video game developers Brianna Wu and Zoe Quinn — victims of the misogynistic Gamergate harassers — have had to move to another physical address to escape their attackers. And, in a world where

racist, sexist, and homophobic attacks have come to the center of our public discourse, anonymity online does little more than open the floodgates of hate. Internet users sometimes need the capacity to hide; dissident and marginalized voices need to protect themselves from governments and social surveillance. But that anonymity cannot be an absolute right. Federal and state laws can try to balance anonymity’s costs and benefits with narrowly tailored anti-harassment statutes.

Social actors on the ground have roles to play as well. Online platforms, from Twitter to Reddit to Pornhub, have to take responsibility and ban targeted harassment. All social websites need to re-evaluate whether anonymous commenting actually enhances discourse. And they need to invest in a combination of algorithmic and human monitors to identify harassing content on platforms and suspend the perpetrators.

Online interactions that personally attack, shame, or target another individual for who they are, whom they love, and what they believe should never be done anonymously. We can help to ensure a safer online environment by developing norms of social interaction, by setting examples for others, and by standing up to harassment when we see it. Only then, when powerful norms of reciprocity and kindness hold back our worst aggressive tendencies, can online anonymity truly help to foster a diverse Internet community.

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“Burning Bush” by Archie Rand, acrylic and marker on canvas, 18” x 24”

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NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on the verse from Proverbs that teaches us about the importance of rebuke and the role it plays in building healthy communities. Please visit jd.fo/shma2 and join the discussion about stepping up and being counted. Our online version is interactive and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



Zohar Atkins: Why rebuke “Adam”? Rav, the Jewish sage from the town of Sura (175–247 CE), taught: to exclude the angels — perfect beings have no need to receive rebuke and therefore no ability to give it. Only imperfect, mortal beings, such as Adam, can feel empathy, and there is no rebuke without empathy.



Elana Hope Sztokman: Many who learned the wisdom of the talmudic sage Shmuel became masters of rebuke. But they gave rebuke to the wrong people over the wrong issues. Some threw stones at cars on Shabbat; some threw chairs at women praying at the Kotel. Some threw breastfeeding mothers out of shul or gay couples out of

the community. Others threw angry glances at those whose ideas they did not comprehend. Some students of Shmuel made rebuke the central mitzvah of their lives, and it is hard to see how that kind of rebuke is an act of *chesed*, or lovingkindness.

One who rebukes an individual — an “adam” — shall, in the end, find more favor than one who flatters with the tongue.

מוכיח אדם אחרי חן ימצא
ממחליק לשון.

Proverbs 28:23

In one of the most painful ironies in God’s universe, the children of Israel failed to rebuke where it was most needed. A man discovered to be sexually abusing children was praised by his friends and family as a pillar of society rather than scorned. A rabbi who violated women at the mikvah was protected by his rabbinic peers, given senior positions in his community, and control over the most vulnerable women in his midst. In these instances, our rabbis flattered rather than rebuked.

Many Jews are confused about the mitzvah of rebuke. We should embrace — not judge — cultural differences, and we should feel compassion — not scorn — for behaviors that we don’t understand and maybe don’t even like. For we are taught, “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” But actions that hurt other people demand loud, resounding, public rebuke — even if we have no connection to the victims, even if the abuser is a person of status and prestige. For that we are taught to protect those most vulnerable in our society. Be kind to strangers, for we were once strangers, too.

Dr. **Elana Hope Sztokman** is an award-winning Jewish feminist author, educator, speaker, and consultant. The founder of the Center for Jewish Feminism, she blogs at jewfem.com.

While Rav taught that rebuke would exclude perfect beings, such as angels, Shmuel, Rav’s sparring partner, taught that rebuke excludes Satan. He explained that one cannot defeat evil with rebuke, because rebuke requires trust. But with evildoers, all trust has been destroyed. Therefore, until the trust is mended, one should not rebuke. That is why the text says מחליק (“*makhalik*”) — translated as “to flatter,” “to make slippery,” “to divide one’s heart,” or, more interpretively, “to crack open.” In the face of evil, language is powerless; all speech, even critical speech, is flattery, because the wicked thrive on criticism, and so disparaging them is only giving them what they want.

Shmuel’s students continue to explain their teacher’s words: When we don’t confront a person directly, but rather make slippery (*makhalik*) our words, we are admitting that we don’t believe in personal transformation. In making that calculation, we are turning that person into “Satan.” So, giving rebuke is an act of *chesed* (lovingkindness), a way of affirming our confidence in the person. The difference between Adam and Satan is *teshuvah* (repentance). Adam was given two wills, a “*yetzer ha-tov*” and a “*yetzer ha-ra*,” and the ability to choose between them. Satan, by contrast, was only given one will.

Giving rebuke is a tenuous art. Often, we have to balance complex calculations with unknown variables. Fundamentally, it is an act of vulnerability and a move toward relationship. When offering rebuke, the more transparent and vulnerable I am and the more I show concern for the one I’m rebuking, the more authentic and compelling my rebuke will be. And I need to know when not to give rebuke — when the *tochecha* is indifferent to the other person’s readiness to hear. In that situation, *tochecha* can be a form of manipulation or abuse. Sometimes, the best rebuke we can give is in the form of prayer: God, help this person hear what she needs to hear. Let her know that she is loved, that she can change, and that You are rooting for her.

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Joshua Ladon: When the Torah exclaims, “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your hearts — reprove (rebuke) your kinsman, but incur no guilt because of him,” (Leviticus 19:17) it offers a moral stance of deep care and love for the other. It is followed in the next line with, “...Love your fellow as yourself.” By linking *tochecha* with love, the text suggests how human psychology gravitates toward the vision of the wrongdoer as an almost non-human other. But the Torah tells us to rebuke as a way of freeing ourselves from the sin of seeing another as a burden, of falling into the trap of hating the other. Offering *tochecha* is a restorative act. As Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (a French medieval commentator known as the Rashbam) commented on this verse, “Rebuke him for what he has done and as a result you will restore harmonious relations.”

By understanding *tochecha* as life affirming, spite and anger are no longer an option. In translation, “*tochecha*” becomes “rebuke” or “reprove” or even “scold.” But yelling at someone is not *tochecha*. Lashing out at someone is not *tochecha*. *Tochecha* begins from a place of wanting others to be at their best. And this is why we must offer *tochecha* to combat the banality of evil. Praying for *teshuvah* cannot substitute for explicitly speaking with the person who is in the wrong. That would allow us to transcend the suspicion and loneliness that hatred breeds. These are the small acts that defy evil.

“There is only one way to avoid criticism: Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing.”

— Aristotle