

A LESSON FROM THE PARASHA

Productive Criticism

RABBI YITZCHOK PREIS

Mournful tones will be heard in synagogues around the world this Shabbos.

When reading how Moshe *Rabbeinu* reflects on the burdensome nature of his flock, “*Eicha esah levadi*” – “How am I, alone, to bear ...,” the custom is to shift into the dirgeful chant that is used for the similarly worded opening phrase of *Eichah/Lamentations*. If we are mindful of the intense sorrow that Moshe felt and expressed, we can imagine the intensity of the frustration and angst he must have been projecting in this criticism of our ancestors.

How surprising, therefore, to note that in the immediately preceding verse, Moshe blesses these very people, asking that Hashem radically boost their numbers! And even more surprising, Moshe asks that there be more “*kachem*” – “just like you!”

Why would he want more of the same!?

Apparently, Moshe recognized that his audience was comprised of essentially great people. Their mistakes, including severe mistakes that demanded harsh criticism, were deviations from a standard—a very lofty standard that was the truer measure of their essence.

Not only did Moshe recognize this, but he wanted to make sure that the very people he was criticizing recognized this as well. And he didn’t wait to indicate this after knocking them down with harsh criticism. Moshe preceded the criticism with a powerful indication of his appreciation of their essential

value.

We find a parallel to this much earlier in Torah. When Yaakov encounters a group of shepherds idling near the watering well, he feels it necessary to challenge what appears to be a poor work ethic. But he adds one crucial word prior to the critique: “*Achai!*” – “My brothers!” No, he had never met these men before. But he projected a sense of warmth and care. “I’m about to criticize you, not out of hatred or animosity, but out of brotherly care and concern.”

Such criticism is much more likely to be effective. But there is something else of much greater relevance than effective leadership training.

Criticism can cause friction, even hatred. “Brotherly” criticism can generate closeness and love. Arguably, even the most loving critique can sting at first. But, when the recipient feels that he is valued and appreciated, the hurt can quickly heal. When the party who is criticized senses a true care and concern, the overall outcome can be one of closeness and love.

Tisha B’Av is the ultimate day of reflection on the tragic outcomes of *sinah* (hatred).

Hearing the mournful tones this Shabbos can jolt us into paying attention to the sequence of the verses and to Moshe’s initiating his criticism with warm words of blessing. Hopefully this can inspire us to see the inner good—and project our recognition of that good—in those with whom we interact.

This in turn can lead to a reversal of the destructive *sinah* and help build closeness and love that will allow for all future chanting to be upbeat and joyous. 🥂

Note: This d’var Torah is an adaptation of a piece presented this week on Rabbi Preis’s new Kollel podcast *TachlisTalks*, now available on iTunes, Spotify, and Stitcher.



Mazel Tov to the Kollel fellows on passing another test towards Semicha with Rabbi Moshe Heinemann [via Skype]!

THE RABBI WAS ASKED

ADAPTED BY RABBI DOVID TZVI MEISSNER FROM ME’AH SHE’ARIM BY RABBI YITZCHOK ZILBERSTEIN

In the tragic situation where a Jew is killed due to his refusal to submit to certain prohibited practices [e.g. idolatry], the death is described as “*al Kiddush Hashem*” - the *mitzvah* of sanctifying Hashem’s Name.

Q In such circumstances, once there is no escape, is it better to try to stall the inevitable, or might it be appropriate to perform even this most difficult *mitzvah* without hesitation?

A The story is told that when the *ger tzedek*, righteous convert, Avraham ben Avraham was being led to his death, he was marched through the streets of Vilna. The Jews of Vilna, afraid of Christian riots, hid in their homes, locking their doors and windows. When he passed by the street on which the Vilna *Gaon* lived, the *Gaon* opened his window and called out, “Avraham, go with *zerizus* [alacrity]!”

Some explain that R’ Avraham was thinking of this question and unsure what to do. Did the Torah require him to walk slowly and prolong his life for a few precious minutes, or should he show his love for the *mitzvah* of *Kiddush Hashem* and hurry. The Vilna *Gaon* answered his question by ruling that he should hurry to sanctify Hashem’s name.

Among the liturgies of Yom Kippur and Tisha b’Av, the incident of the *Asara Harugei Malchus*, the ten Torah giants and leaders brutally murdered by the Romans, is recounted. Rabbi Yishmael Kohen *Gadol* took Rabbi

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THE RABBI WAS ASKED

CONTINUED

Shimon ben Gamliel's head after he was decapitated and cried over it. The commentaries ask how Rabbi Yishmael, who was a *Kohen*, was allowed to come in contact with a dead person, thereby becoming ritually impure?

I heard in the name of Rav S.Z. Auerbach that by requesting to eulogize Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Yishmael gained himself a few extra minutes of life, and even Torah prohibitions may be overridden to gain minutes of life. Therefore, he was allowed to cause himself impurity.

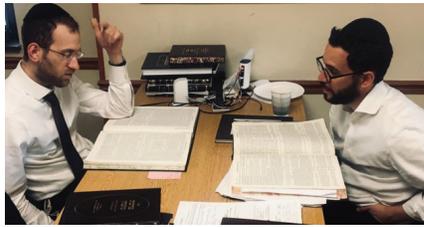
From Rav Auerbach's answer it seems that one getting killed *al Kiddush Hashem* should indeed try to delay his death as much as possible.

However, we may suggest that Rav Auerbach considered Rabbi Yishmael as dying based on governmental decree (*harugei malchus*), rather than dying *al Kiddush Hashem*, for we never find him requested to transgress any *mitzvah* to save his life, a criterion for dying *al Kiddush Hashem*. In such an instance, extending his life was preferable. However, one who has no choice other than dying *al Kiddush Hashem*, should actually not hesitate in performing this holy *mitzvah*. 🕊

GREAT ACTS OF ORDINARY PEOPLE

AT THE END OF A SEMINAR IN ISRAEL RUN BY Arachim, an organization that works on reconnecting Jews with their heritage, a man was asked to tell of his own family's journey back to Torah observance. "We were living in a suburb of Tel-Aviv and one day my son eleven-year-old son came home with a kippah on his head. I told him we don't wear these things. That was

GLIMPSES OF THE KOLLEL



a mistake. It challenged my son. He had only found it on the street and didn't think so much of it until I had made a big deal out of it. Now he wanted to know why it bothered me. So he went down the street where there was a religious family and asked them about it. The kippah did not come off after that. But his questions did not stop there. Everything that he had ever wondered about the religious in Israel he would ask. He was learning more and more about Torah. Then one day it came to a head. My wife had made his favorite food, a spicy chili stew, and he would not eat it. He said that our pots are not kosher and that he wanted us to change our pots and start keeping kosher. All the anger that had been boiling up in me spilled out. I grabbed him and began spanking him relentlessly but unlike usual, this time he was not crying. I stopped and I asked him, 'Doesn't this hurt?' His answer moved me beyond words. 'It hurts

Abba, but not as much as it hurts me when I see you doing something that G-d does not approve of.' I was stunned. I began to cry. I told my son that I would come learn about Torah too, and that sent me off on my journey." 🕊

A PARASHA Q 4 U

RABBI DOVID SPETNER

In his reproof, Moshe *Rabbeinu* lists one sin for which none of the perpetrators (even those under 20 years old) was alive anymore. What is it?

Bring this question to the Shabbos table and see who knows the answer! 🕊



The Kollel will be on break from the 12th through the 27th

BEYOND ELLIS ISLAND

THE TRAILBLAZERS, TRIALS, & TRIUMPHS OF AMERICAN JEWRY

RABBI MOSHE TZVI CRYSTAL

Although the Jews of New York City did not accord Rabbi Yaakov Yosef great authority in his tenure as Chief Rabbi, they came out en masse to mourn his passing when he died at the age of fifty-two. Estimates of the funeral turnout start at 50,000 people, in addition to 200 carriages following the hearse. The day was further marred by an incident that occurred while accompanying the body to the cemetery. As the procession passed the printing press of R. Hoe & Co., employees began dumping water and throwing items out of the upper windows of the factory onto the crowds of Jews passing below. As things continued to rain down, people in the crowd retaliated, leaving hardly a lower windowpane intact. A riot call was sent out. Two hundred officers responded and began to disperse the crowd with brute force, indiscriminately swinging their clubs and hurting many women and children as well. In the aftermath, massive protests against police treatment were organized and Mayor Seth Low responded by launching an investigation into police practice in New York City. 🕊

SOURCES: "Riot Mars Funeral of Rabbi Joseph." New York Times. PP.1. Jul 31, 1902.

Cincinnati Community Kollel

2241 Losantiville Avenue, Cincinnati OH 45237 • 513-631-1118 • kollel@shul.net • cincykollel.org

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