Torah Lessons for the Home

Rabbi Shimon Gruen

| Parshas Devarim |

Criticizing; When and How

How to Give Mussar

Our *parsha* starts off with Moshe Rabbeinu giving *mussar* to Klal Yisrael. When we study our *parsha*, we note how sensitive he was about doing it the right way. Moshe Rabbeinu, who took Klal Yisrael out of Mitzraim, led them in the *midbar* for forty years, and was like a father to them, was so careful about how he gave them *mussar*. Certainly we too need to think about how to do so in the right way.

Mussar certainly needs to be said; when something wrong is being done in the home, you have a responsibility to say something. Nonetheless there are quite a few things we can learn from Moshe Rabbeinu about *the way* to say *mussar*. Rashi mentions a number of points about Moshe Rabbeinu's *mussar* that can be a powerful lesson for us on giving *mussar* the right way.

Hinting and Waiting

Rashi explains that the places listed by Moshe Rabbeinu in the beginning of the *parsha* were really hints to the *aveiros* of the *dor hamidbar*. These were big *aveiros*, like rebelling against Hashem and the חטא העגל, everyone knew about them. Still, Moshe Rabbeinu was careful that the Yidden shouldn't feel ashamed and he didn't mention them openly.

We also note how Moshe Rabbeinu was careful to give the Yidden *mussar* just before his death. Rashi says he learned this from Yaakov Avinu, who waited until just before he died to give Reuven mussar. He was afraid that Reuven would hear the *mussar* and run away. "I have an uncle (Eisav) who will accept me the way I am; I'll just go to him", so Yaakov waited until the time it would be accepted.

Even Moshe Rabbeinu and Yaakov Avinu were worried about their *mussar* being taken the wrong way, doesn't that tell us something about how careful we have to be?

The Right Circumstances

The *possuk* also tells us that Moshe Rabbeinu waited until after the victories over Sichon and Og to give his *mussar*. Rashi explains that Moshe was worried the Yidden might reject the *mussar*. They might say, "We know why you're telling us this. You can't get us into Eretz Yisrael and you're trying to find an excuse." Now that he proved his prowess as a warrior, they could no longer give this argument.

They had already seen how he took them out of Mitzrayim, and led them miraculously for forty years in the desert. Hashem had spoken to him פה

אל פה, and stuck up for his honor again and again. As great as he was and after all the things he had done, there was still the concern that the people would take his *mussar* the wrong way.

You can be as big as Moshe Rabbeinu, as dedicated to the good of Klal Yisrael as Moshe Rabbeinu, and still your *mussar* can be taken the wrong way. This is something we need to learn. We need to think about the right way to say *mussar*, so that it can be accepted. Nobody had more of a right to say *mussar* than Moshe Rabbeinu. He was so perfect, and Klal Yisrael knew that. Still he needed to 'earn the right' to say *mussar*.

The Splinter and the Beam

There are so many things to watch out for when giving someone *mussar*.

Be careful not to give *mussar* in a way that makes them defensive "Who are you to give me *mussar*?" It's very important that the person shouldn't feel attacked. You need to be non-judgmental and absolve them of the blame, showing how you accept them and understand them. This way they'll be able to accept what you're saying. It's so easy for *mussar* to be misinterpreted.

Another point; before you start giving *mussar* make sure you are not guilty of the same offense. Chazal tell us מום שבך אל תאמר לחברך, *Don't criticize someone else about a problem you also have*. This sounds so obvious, how can you tell someone about getting up on time if you yourself sleep late? But people do this all the time. They make all types of excuses for themselves, but when it comes to the other person they feel comfortable giving them *mussar*.

The Gemara says: If some people are told – טול קורה מבין עיניך, "*Take out the splinter from between your eyes"* they respond טול קיסם מבין עיניך – "You *take out the beam from between* your *eyes"*. So this is really something to be careful about, even if you think you're different and different rules should apply to you.

Patience!

Chazal say, *"Just like it is a mitzvah to give mussar that will be accepted, so too is it a mitzvah to refrain from saying something that won't be accepted"*. Part of the *mitzvah* of saying something that will be accepted, is refraining from saying it in a way that it will not be accepted. Don't say, "If they won't accept it, I just won't say it". Say it, it's a *mitzvah*! But in the right way. Make sure that what you're saying is something that can be heard.

If you can't say it in a way that it will be heard right now, hold on to it. Both Yaakov Avinu and Moshe Rabbeinu waited a very long time before saying their *mussar*. You have to be patient and wait for the time when your *mussar* will be received in the right way.

There's a second type of patience in giving mussar which we learn from Noach (see Torah Lessons for the Home Parshas Noach). He spent 120 years building the *teivah* and reminding people to do *teshuvah*. He was very patient, repeating his message over and over for 120 years, waiting for people to listen. We need to give people a chance to change.

Chazal say that we learn from the possuk הוכח תוכיח that you need to give someone mussar even 100 times. Does that mean that you have to be on top of him, forcing the mussar down his throat repetitively? Maybe it means that you have to look for different ways of saying the *mussar* until it becomes a *davar hanishma* and he is able to hear it.

Balance the Negativity

Proper *mussar* is prefaced with a lot of compliments. You should be giving compliments all the time in your home. This adds positive energy and mitigates the *mussar* when it comes. Instead of feeling, "My husband just wants to put me down, all he does is ", a wife who has heard many compliments knows she is truly being cared for even when she hears *mussar*.

It isn't enough to give just as many compliments as criticisms. The fact is that people identify more with criticism, and they take it much harder. The right proportion is more

like ten compliments for every criticism. Your *mussar* is much more likely to be accepted when you say something like, "There are so many things that you are amazing at, and I really appreciate the things that you do for me. (And be specific about what those things are!) There's just something that I think should be corrected."

Are You Better?

When giving *mussar*, don't generalize. Don't say "You always …" or "You never …" That makes it difficult for a person to accept your *mussar*. Also, remember that you are not here to control anyone's *bechira*. There's no need to wait for them to agree that you're right. Tell them what you have to say, and then back off to give them a chance to accept it. Make it easy for them to hear the *mussar*.

Another thing, don't give *mussar* about something that's hard for the other person, but not for you. Sometimes both the husband and wife have *mussar* to say to each other. He is telling her about *tznius*, and she wants him to improve his Torah study. However, *tznius* is not an issue for him, while she has no difficulty with *kvius itim l'Torah*. Don't be condescending towards your spouse and his/her struggles.

Let's not forget about the other side of this. If you are the one getting the *mussar*, then your job is to listen. קבל את האמת ממי שאמרו - The truth should be accepted regardless of its source. Even if he didn't say it in the right way, and at the right time, try to accept it for what it is.

Chinuch: Say it Right

Obviously this all applies to giving mussar to children, as well. Moshe Rabbeinu was the Father of Klal Yisrael, and Yaakov Avinu was talking to Reuven, his son, and yet we see how careful they were.

A child should never think for a second "I'll run away and go to my uncle Esav". The *mussar* needs to be said in a way that he can take it, and he needs to hear many compliments as well. If you've already said many positive things and he's still not ready to listen, maybe increase the compliments.

-Q&A-

Please feel free to send any questions, on this topic or any topic to RabbiGruen@Lehair.org

Question: My wife wants me to go with her to an event, and I'm not so comfortable about the level of *tznius* there. Should I explain to her why it's not really right to go? Perhaps I should just go and not say anything?

Answer: If it is *assur* to go there because of the *tznius*, or any other reason, then you certainly shouldn't go. The only question is what to tell your wife. Arguing with her about it right now will probably only make her feel challenged and *mussar'd* and won't be too helpful.

It is probably best to explain that you would really like to go and spend time with her, but you are just not comfortable going to this particular event.

When you make it about yourself, and the way *you* feel, the confrontation and bad feelings are diminished. Even if they won't be so happy with your decision this time, it will make it easier for next time, because they will know that you are not comfortable with things like this.

*

To contact Rabbi Gruen please call 718.841.6557 or e-mail rabbigruen@lehair.org
To subscribe to receive the weekly essay, please email parshalessons@lehair.org