

Bite Your Tongue: Rabbinic Perspectives on When Not to Criticize

Aharei Mot-Kedoshim 5785 (2025)

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Hebrew texts from Bar Ilan Responsa version 24. Links go to texts on Sefaria (which may vary from the texts here). Translations my own. [Video of a class on this topic as well as this source sheet can be accessed here](#). A somewhat related d'var Torah, [Kedoshim: Why We Need to Criticize Our Allies is available here](#).

Introduction**ויקרא פרק יט פסוק יז - Leviticus 19:17**

לֹא־תִשָּׂא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֶטְאִי:

Do not hate your fellow (lit. brother) in your heart, admonish your fellow and do not bear iniquity on his account.

משלי פרק ט - Proverbs 9

(ז) יִגְּרוּ לֵץ לִקְחָ לֹו קִלְוֹן וּמוֹכִיחַ לְרָשָׁע מוֹמִי:

(ח) אֶל־תּוֹכַח לֵץ פֶּן־יִשְׁנֹאֲךָ הוֹכַח לְחָכָם וַיֵּאָהֳרָב:

(7) One who **chastises a scoffer gets abuse** as does one who **admonishes an evildoer** for his **blemishes**.

(8) **Do not admonish the scoffer lest he hate you, admonish a wise person and he will love you.**

Friends and Enemies

אליהו רבה (איש שלום) פרשה יח¹ - Eliyahu Rabbah (Ish Shalom Edition) Chapter 18 - הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך (ויקרא שם י"ט/ט), יכול אם יודע אתה שאין שונאך הוכיחהו, ואם לאו אל תוכיחהו, ת"ל הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך. ד"א את עמיתך, שעמך במצוות אתה מוכיח, ואי אתה מוכיח לרשע ששונאך, שנאמר יוסר לץ לוקח לו קלון (משלי ט' ז) ...

Admonish your fellow – It is possible to think that the verse means that if you know that the wrongdoer doesn't hate you, admonish him, but otherwise do not admonish him. Therefore, **the teaching states הוכח תוכיח** (lit. "admonish you shall admonish", Lev. 9:17) **your fellow**, the double language implying that it applies to friend and foe alike. **An alternative understanding** (lit. "item"): **"your fellow,"** (which begins with the letters עמ) means a person **who is with you** (Hebrew עִמָּךְ) **in mitzvot** is the person **you admonish, but you don't admonish an evildoer who hates you, as is stated** (Proverbs 9:7) "One who **chastises a scoffer gets abuse.**"

¹ This text is from the Meir Ish Shalom edition which is on my Bar Ilan Responsa CD. The same text on [Sefaria](#) only presents the interpretation that exempts one from admonishing an enemy:

יכול אפילו אם אתה יודע שהוא רשע ושונאך אע"פ כן אתה חייב להוכיח אותו ת"ל הוכח תוכיח את עמיתך לעמיתך שהוא אוהבך ושהוא עמך בתורה ומצוות אתה חייב להוכיח אותו אבל לרשע שהוא שונאך אין אתה חייב להוכיח אותו וגם אי אתה רשאי להוכיח אותו **שנאמך** (משלי ט) יוסר לץ לוקח לו קלון ומוכיח לרשע מומו אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאבהבך.

Why might it be appropriate not to admonish one's enemies?

- To avoid backlash?
- Because admonitions of enemies is not likely to be effective? If this is part of the consideration, the disagreement between the opinion that says הוכח תוכיח includes enemies and the opinion that says that הוכח תוכיח does not include enemies dovetails with the tension in the sources in the next section.

Likelihood of Success

Babylonian Talmud Yevamot 65b – תלמוד בבלי מסכת יבמות דף סה עמוד ב

ואמר רבי אילעא משום ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון: כשם שמצוה על אדם לומר דבר הנשמע, כך מצוה על אדם שלא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע. רבי אבא אומר: חובה, שנאמר: אל תוכח לץ פן ישנאך הוכח לחכם ויאהבך. **Rabbi Ila'a said in the name of Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon: Just as it is incumbent on a person to say a thing that will be heard, so, too, it is incumbent on a person to not say a thing that will not be heard. Rabbi Aba said: It is an obligation, as it is stated (Proverbs 9:7): "Do not admonish the scoffer lest he hate you, admonish a wise person and he will love you."**

Babylonian Talmud Betzah 30a – תלמוד בבלי מסכת ביצה דף ל עמוד א

אמר ליה רבא בר רב חנין לאביי: תנן, אין מטפחין ואין מספקין ואין מרקדין, והאידיגא דקא חזין דעבדן הכי, ולא אמרינן להו ולא מידי? - אמר ליה: ... הנח להם לישראל, מוטב שיהיו שוגגין ואל יהיו מזידין. **Rava bar Rav Hanin said to Abaye: It is stated in the Mishnah: "We do not clap, nor do we strike, indicating striking the chest or possibly the thigh, nor do we stomp on Yom Tov, because it creates sounds," but nowadays we see that people do thusly and the sages do not say anything to them, which must indicate that such activities are permitted. Abaye said to him, i.e. to Rava Hanin: ... Leave Israel alone, better they should be unwitting in their transgression and not be intentional, i.e. these activities are in fact forbidden, but the sages do not protest the violations of these rules because they know they will not be listened to.**

Why not say something even if it might be futile?

- So as not to make the violator more culpable?
- So as not to diminish your ability to influence a person/people in situations where they might listen (i.e. don't habituate people to ignoring you)?

Note the calculus might be a bit different here, as the misdeeds contemplated here might be more out of ignorance than in other situations where admonition might be appropriate.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ערכין דף טז עמוד ב - Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 16b

מנין לרואה בחבירו דבר מגונה שחייב להוכיחו? שנאמר: הוכח תוכיח, הוכיחו ולא קבל מנין שיחזור ויוכיחנו? תלמוד לומר: תוכיח, מכל מקום; ... עד היכן תוכיחה? רב אמר: עד הכאה, ושמאל אמר: עד קללה, ורבי יוחנן אמר: עד נזיפה. כתנאי, רבי אליעזר אומר: עד הכאה, רבי יהושע אומר: עד קללה, בן עזאי אומר: עד נזיפה.

From where do we know that one who sees something untoward about his friend is obligated to admonish him? As it says: הוכח תוכיח (lit. “admonish you shall admonish”, Lev. 9:17). **If he admonished** his friend and the friend **did not accept** the criticism, **from where do we know that he should go back and admonish** his friend once again? **The teaching states הוכח תוכיח** the double language suggesting admonition **in any case**. ... **Up to what point** is one expected to admonish? **Rav said: up to the point of striking**, i.e. until the one being admonished strikes the person doing the admonishing. **Shmuel says: up to cursing**, i.e. until the one being admonished curses the person doing the admonishing. **Rabbi Yohanan says: up to reprimand**, i.e. until the one being admonished curses the person doing the admonishing. This disagreement among Rav, Shmuel, and Rabbi Yohanan is **like the dispute among Tanaim**, i.e. the rabbis contemporary to the Mishnah, **Rabbi Eliezer says: up to striking, Rabbi Joshua says: up to cursing, Ben Azai says up to reprimand**.

This text seems to suggest that admonition should be engaged in even if it is fairly unlikely to succeed. This obligation is limited by the potential for backlash, which is similar to one of the reasons we saw above regarding not admonishing an enemy.

Not Ritba and Rav Moshe Isserles (among others) suggest that the rule in Yevamot 65a that one need/should not issue criticism (at least more than once) that will not be accepted applies only to criticizing a group of people but not to criticizing an individual.² In the Mosad Harav Kook printing of Ritba's commentary, הרב רפאל אהרן יפה'ן has a lengthy footnote (188) offering different perspectives on this.

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חידושי הריטב"א מסכת יבמות דף סה עמוד ב

כך מצוה לא לומר דבר שאינו נשמע. פי' לרבים אבל לחבירו עד הכאה כדאמרין בערכין (ט"ז ב'), והא דאמרין בפ' במה בהמה יוצאה (נ"ה א') לוכחינהו מר להני דבי ריש גלותא א"ל לא שמעי מנאי א"ל אפ"ה לוכחינהו, התם כשלא הוכיחם כלל אלא שמכיר בהם שלא ישמעו כי אולי ישמעו ועוד כדי שלא יהא להם פתחון פה, אבל אחר שהוכיחם פעם אחת ולא שמעו ומכיר בהם שלא ישמעו עוד מצוה שלא לומר להם כלום.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות יום הכפורים סימן תרח סעיף ב

הגה ... ואם יודע שאין דבריו נשמעין, לא יאמר ברבים להוכיח, (ט) רק פעם אחת, אבל לא ירבה בתוכחות מאחר שיודע שלא ישמעו אליו; אבל ביחיד * (י) חייב להוכיחו * עד שיכנו או (יא) יקללנו. (ר"ן ס"פ הבע"י).

תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף נד עמוד ב - נה עמוד א – Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b

רב ורבי חנינא ורבי יוחנן ורב חביבא מתנו, בכוליה דסדר מועד, כל כי האי זוגא חלופי רבי יוחנן ומעיל רבי יונתן. 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. ...

Rav, Rabbi Haninah, Rabbi Yohanan, and Rav Haviva taught (in all of Order Moed, whenever this set of sages is mentioned switch out Rabbi Yohanan and add Rabbi Yonatan): Anyone who can protest the sinful conduct of the people of his house and does not protest is made responsible for his household, anyone who can protest the sinful conduct of the people of his city and fails to do so is made responsible for the people of his city, anyone who can protest the sinful conduct of the entire world and fails to do so is made responsible for the entire world.

I assume the term “protest” here means an ability to protest effectively, as I would think that a person is always capable of protesting at least ineffectively, and if that were the meaning of the term, the text could simply say “Anyone who fails to protest the conduct of ...”. Therefore, this part of the text implies that one is only held responsible for one’s silence if speaking up might have had an effect and probably implies that one need not protest if the protest would be ineffective. However, the Talmud states a few lines down:

... (דף נה עמוד א) ... אמר ליה רבי זירא לרבי סימון: לוכחינהו מר להני דבי ריש גלותא. אמר ליה: לא מקבלי מינאי. אמר ליה: אף על גב דלא מקבלי - לוכחינהו מר, דאמר רבי אחא ברבי חנינא: מעולם לא יצתה מדה טובה מפי הקדוש ברוך הוא וחזר בה לרעה חוץ מדבר זה, ... אמרה מדת הדין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: רבונו של עולם, מה נשתנו אלו מאלו? אמר לה: הללו צדיקים גמורים, והללו רשעים גמורים. אמרה לפניו: רבונו של עולם, היה בידם למחות ולא מיחו! אמר לה: גלוי וידוע לפני, שאם מיחו בהם - לא יקבלו מהם. (אמר) +מסורת הש"ס: [אמרה] +לפניו: רבונו של עולם, אם לפניך גלוי - להם מי גלוי?

Rabbi Zeira said to Rabbi Simon: Let the Master admonish the people of the house of the Exilarch (the text does not specify what the people of the house of the Exilarch were doing wrong). Rabi Simon **said to him**, i.e. to Rabbi Zeira, they **would not accept it from me** i.e. heed my criticism. Rabbi Zeira **said to him**, i.e. to Rabbi Simon, **even though they would not accept** the criticism, **let the Master admonish** them, **For Rabbi Ahah son of Rabbi Haninah taught: No positive decision left the mouth of the Blessed Holy One** that God **retracted** and made it a **negative** decision **except for this matter** ... where God decided to protect certain people from destruction and ... **the attribute of justice said before the Blessed Holy One: Master of the Universe, what is the difference between these**, i.e. those condemned to death, **and these**, i.e. those who would be protected? God **said to her**, i.e. to the attribute of justice: **these are completely righteous people and these are completely wicked people**. The attribute of justice **said before God: Master of the Universe: They could have protested and did not protest**. God **said to her**, i.e. to the attribute of justice, **it is revealed and known before me that had** the righteous people **protested to them**, i.e. to the wicked people, the wicked people would **not have accepted** the criticism **from them**, i.e. from the righteous people. The attribute of justice **said before Him**, i.e. before God: **Master of the Universe: if this was revealed to you** that the admonition of the righteous people would not be effective, **was it revealed to them** that their admonition would not be effective?

Does this text call into question whether one can ever decide that admonition will not be effective?

Tosafot Shabbat 55a - דף נה עמוד א

ואף על גב דלא מקבלי לוכחינהו מר - היינו היכא דספק אי מקבלי כדאמר בסמוך לפנייהם מי גלוי אבל היכא דודאי לא מקבלי הנח להם מוטב שיהו שוגגין ואל יהיו מזידין כדאמרינן בהמביא כדי יין (ביצה דף ל. ושם) ובפרק שואל (לקמן דף קמח:) גבי תוספת יוה"כ.

Even though they would not accept the criticism, let the Master admonish them – That is, Rabbi Zeira argues to Rabbi Simon that one should issue admonishment when it is doubtful whether they will accept the admonition, as is said in the adjacent text, “was it revealed to them that their admonition would not be effective?” but where it is certain they will not accept the admonition, “leave them alone ... better they should be unwitting in their transgression and not be intentional,” as is stated in chapter “One Who Brings Jugs of Wine” (Betzah page 30a and there) and in chapter “Borrows” (below, i.e. Tractate Shabbat page 148b) regarding adding time to the Yom Kippur fast.

Does Tosafot's interpretation really hold up? Isn't the point of להם מי גלוי that human beings can never be so certain? Or am I reading in? Otherwise, perhaps the distinction in הנח להם is that people are acting out of pure ignorance. Or, maybe the texts don't entirely agree.

Considerations For Public Admonition**Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 16b - דף טז עמוד ב**

יכול אפי' משתנים פניו? ת"ל: לא תשא עליו חטא.

It is possible to think that one should admonish a person even if his face changes, i.e. changes color as a result of embarrassment, c.f. below texts, therefore, the teaching states “do not bear iniquity on his account.”

Sifra Kedoshim Part II 4:8 – פרק ד אות ח

יכול אפי' את מוכיחו ופניו משתנות תלמוד לומר ולא תשא עליו חטא.

It is possible to think that a person should admonish someone even if you admonish him and his face changes, therefore, the teaching states “do not bear iniquity on his account.”

Rashi on Leviticus 19:17 - פרק יט פסוק יז

(יז) ולא תשא עליו חטא - לא תלבין את פניו ברבים:

And do not bear iniquity on his account – do not whiten his face, i.e. embarrass the person in public.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נח עמוד ב – Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia 58b

תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן בר יצחק: כל המלבין פני חבריו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים. - אמר ליה: שפיר קא אמרת, דחזינא ליה דאזיל סומקא ואתי חוורא.

A tanna, i.e. one who was trained to memorize and recite teachings from the era of the Mishnah, **taught before Rav Nahman son of Yitzhak: Anyone who whitens the face, of his fellow**, i.e. embarrasses his fellow, **in public, is as if he spills blood.** Rav Nahman **said to him**, i.e. to the tanna: **You have spoken well, for we see that** when a person is embarrassed the **red** color of the person's face **leaves** and a **white** color **arrives**.

A Jeopardy Clue (Show #9080 - Friday, April 12, 2024)³

**FROM THE LATIN FOR
"DEATH",
IT CAN INDEED MEAN
TO RENDER NECROTIC
BUT IT'S MORE
ASSOCIATED AS A WORD
MEANING TO EMBARRASS**

Response: What is mortify?

³ https://www.j-archive.com/showgame.php?game_id=8886

תלמוד בבלי מסכת גיטין דף נה עמוד ב – נו עמוד א – Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56a

אקמצא ובר קמצא חרוב ירושלים, דההוא גברא דרחמיה קמצא ובעל דבביה בר קמצא, עבד סעודתא, אמר ליה לשמעיה: זיל אייתי לי קמצא, אזל אייתי ליה בר קמצא. אתא אשכחיה דהוה יתיב, אמר ליה: מכדי ההוא גברא בעל דבבא דההוא גברא הוא, מאי בעית הכא? קום פוק! אמר ליה: הואיל ואתאי שבקן, ויהיבנא לך דמי מה דאכילנא ושתינא, (דף נו עמוד א) אמר ליה: לא. אמר ליה: יהיבנא לך דמי פלגא דסעודתי! אמר ליה: לא. אמר ליה: יהיבנא לך דמי כולה סעודתי! א"ל: לא. נקטיה בידיה ואוקמיה ואפקיה. אמר: הואיל והווי יתבי רבנן ולא מחו ביה, ש"מ קא ניחא להו, איזיל איכול בהו קורצא בי מלכא.

Due to Kamtza and Bar Kamtza Jerusalem was destroyed. A certain person whose friend was Kamtza and enemy was Bar Kamtza made a feast. He told his servant: Go bring Kamtza to me. The servant went and brought him Bar Kamtza. The host saw that Bar Kamtza was sitting at the feast and said to him, i.e. to Bar Kamtza: Now, that person, is the enemy of that person, i.e. you and I are enemies, what do you want here, i.e. why are you here? Get up and leave. Bar Kamtza said to him: Since I came, i.e. I am already here, leave me, i.e. let me stay and I will pay you the cost of what I eat and drink (56a). The host said to him, i.e. to Bar Kamtza, No. Bar Kamtza said to him: let me stay and I will pay you the cost of half of the feast. The host said to him, i.e. to Bar Kamtza, No. Bar Kamtza said to him: let me stay and I will pay you the cost of the entire feast. The host said to him, i.e. to Bar Kamtza, No. The host took him by the hand and stood him up and removed him. Bar Kamtza said: Since the rabbis were sitting there and did not protest to him, i.e. did not complain to the host about the host's actions, learn (lit. hear) from it that the host's behavior was pleasing to them, i.e. to the rabbis. I will go inform⁴ against them at the palace (Bar Kamtza then sets a plot into action that results in the destruction of Jerusalem by Rome).

There is an understandable reticence to providing corrective criticism in public so as to avoid embarrassing a person. However, when a person takes actions in public (especially, although I would argue not exclusively, actions that hurt others), speaking out publicly may be necessary to avoid leaving the impression that one views such actions as acceptable. On the other hand, speaking out publicly does require extreme care so as to avoid unnecessary embarrassment (especially if the wrongdoer is at least somewhat innocent).

⁴ Translated per [Jastrow dictionary](#), which explains the literal meaning of the phrase קורצא בהו איכול as "to eat (the bread of) destruction, eat the informer's bread, hence to inform against."

⁵ **תלמוד בבלי מסכת ערכין דף טז עמוד ב - Babylonian Talmud Arakhin 16b**

תניא, א"ר טרפון: (תמיהני) +מסורת הש"ס: [תמה] +אני 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.

It is taught in a baraita Rabbi Tarfon said: I would be shocked if in this generation there were a person who received admonition well, for if a person said to him, i.e. if one person were to admonish another, saying, "remove the splinter from between your eyes," the person being admonished would say to him, i.e. to the person issuing the corrective criticism, "remove the beam from between your eyes," i.e. your sins are greater (whataboutism at its finest!).⁶ Rabbi Elazar ben Azaria said: I would be shocked if in this generation there were a person who knew how to properly admonish.

These issues highlight the importance of Torah study analyzing these issues. When these situations arise, it is often at the spur of the moment. Advanced study puts us in the best place to hopefully make the best and most nuanced choices as to how to act in that moment. In the merit of our study of these issues, may God inspire us with the wisdom and compassion to speak out when we should, to hold our tongues when we must, and to help guide ourselves and others toward fulfilling God's will.

⁵ Thank you to my teacher, Rabbi Ronald Price for emphasizing the importance of this text when I sent out an early version of this source sheet to my colleagues in Morashah, the rabbinic fellowship of UTJ.

⁶ The similarity between this metaphor and one found in [Matthew 7:4-5](#) caught the eye of my colleague Rabbi Steve Golden (the pun is his as well). Similarly, Google also pointed me to [Luke 6:41-42](#).