

SICHA ESSAY

Tazria: Fix Me Don't Break Me

Submitted by Lazer Gurkow

A Typical Exchange

With more than twenty years in the rabbinate I have seen my share of painful human interactions and have become an observer of human nature. I find that two things often happen when people berate each other. First, the berator comes on too strong to be heard. Second, the berated rarely ever listens. I have thus come up with my own golden rule: "Fix me, don't break me."

For our purposes let's suppose we are talking about two men, Alex and Daniel, involved in an altercation. Alex behaves insensitively and Daniel gets mad. Daniel yells at Alex and called him nasty, insensitive and self centered. For good measure, Daniel adds that everyone hates Alex, no one respects him and that he feels sorry for Alex's children and wife.

How does Alex respond? In almost every instance, Alex denies the allegation and grows angry with Daniel. They will bring their argument to the Rabbi and both will be right. Alex will say that Daniel verbally attacked and shamed him in public with unfair and exaggerated allegations. Alex will be right. Daniel will claim that Alex is guilty of these things. Daniel will also be right.

Daniel is essentially denying the message and vilifying the messenger, but he does so because rather than help him, the messenger vilified him. What Alex is saying without saying is, "fix me don't break me." Tear down my behavior, don't tear me down. Make your point in a way that empowers me. Don't make the truth so painful for me that I am left with no choice, but to deny it.

Don't Cut It Off

The Torah speaks of a skin condition called Tzara'at that caused a person to become spiritually impure.[1] During the period of contamination, the afflicted were quarantined. This presented a major inconvenience to the afflicted, who might have been tempted to cut off the lesions. The

Torah goes out of its way to prohibit cutting off the lesion to avoid the inconvenience of impurity.[2]

We no longer practice the laws of Tzara'at because such lesions no longer appear on our skin. Although we cannot practice these laws in their literal sense, we can still practice them in a symbolic sense. When the Torah tells us not to cut away the lesion to deny our condition, it is effectively telling Alex not to cut into Daniel to deny his own painful condition.

Confronting an inconvenient truth about our character is painful and it is easier to deny it. When someone accuses us of gossiping, dishonesty, addiction or the like, it is difficult to accept. It is far easier to take insult at the suggestion and to turn against the accuser.

But to do so would be to deny the truth of the accusation. Don't cut away the lesion to hide the condition. If we hide the truth of our condition, we stand to lose more than anyone. How can we grow out of it, when we deny it? Better to face the truth of the accusation and deal with it head-on. It will be painful and time consuming, but in the end we will heal.

Only With Love

There is another rule about Tzara'at that speaks to the accuser, in our case that would be Daniel. Not everyone was permitted to diagnose the Tzara'at condition. Only a Kohen was permitted to do so. In fact, even if the Kohen was not versed in the laws of Tzara'at and the case had to be referred to a non Kohen, the non Kohen had to relay the diagnosis to the Kohen, who in turn informed the Tzarua.[3]

One of the reasons is that Kohanim were generally of kind and loving disposition.[4] If we are going to tell someone about their impurities, we must do so kindly. We can't berate and denigrate them and then expect them to be accepting.

Sometimes we want to drive the point home and to do so we exaggerate the extent of the condition. Sometimes we belabor the point by offering too many cutting examples of the corruption. We want to shed light on the person's flaws, but we wind up shutting the person down. How can we expect Alex to stand up and fix his faults, when we just shattered his self confidence and very perception of self?

The only thing Alex can do, is fall back on denial. He can turn the accusation against us by telling everyone that we are cruel and he is innocent. Not only are our words ineffective, we end up suffering for them. If we want to help Alex accept his condition, we must be like the Kohen and speak kindly. Obey the rule of Fix me, don't break me.

Fix Me Don't Break Me

If this is true for adults, it is even truer for children. All too often, we parents, make the mistake of disciplining our children with excessive force. I am not referring to corporal discipline, just to verbal excess.

We make use of lines like, “when I was a child, I never even thought of behaving this way” or “can’t you see how unbecoming your behavior is?” We hope to impress upon our children that their behavior is unacceptable, but we actually impress upon them that they are unacceptable. If we do this often enough, they will eventually come to believe it.

One day they will tell us that they are worthless and meaningless and we will wonder who taught them to think this way. One day they will act out in anger and rebellion and we won’t know what motivated it. Their reaction will be a plea for “Fix me, don’t break me.” Tell me that I am precious even though there is room for improvement. Tell me that you love me even when I misbehave.

We can’t carve a chunk out of our child, time and time again, and expect to have a child left over by the end of their childhood. I don’t know a single parent that sets out to destroy their child, but I know many parents that do so unwittingly. They think they are helping, they think they are teaching, but they are in fact destroying.

In the short run it feels as if we have achieved our goal. The child has backed off and mended their ways. But under the surface, a poisonous message has taken hold. The message tells the child that they are unworthy of their parent’s approval. This poison will ruin the child. Our children are much better off with deplorable behavior and healthy personalities than the reverse. Behaviors can easily improve, self esteem, once crushed, doesn’t recover easily.

We must temper our discipline with love. The message must be, change your behavior, not yourself. The most important rule is to speak kindly. If our children deserve kindness for good behavior, then they need even more kindness for bad behavior. Never speak from anger. Always let anger pass before opening your mouth because our children are not punching bags.

Above all, remember the golden rule. Fix me, don’t break me.

[1] Leviticus 13.

[2] Deuteronomy 24 8. See Rashi ibid. See also Babylonian Talmud, Makot 22a.

[3] Leviticus 13 2. See Toras Kohanim and Rashi ibid. See also Maimonides TumaT Tzora’at 9:3.

[4] Likutei Sichos v. 27 p. 89. The priests bless the Jewish nation with love. See also Deuteronomy 33: 8.
