

Date: 5 Av 5785 (July 30, 2025)

Torah Portion: Devarim

Topic: For the Sake of Heaven

The Midrash teaches that Moshe began to rebuke the children of Yisrael before they entered the Promised Land. It is written (Deut. 1:1), “These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Yisrael beyond the Yarden in the wilderness...” This is to be understood in light of what Scripture stated, “One who reproves a person, later he will find favor, more than one with a flattering tongue” (Prov. 28:23).

“One who reproves” refers to Moshe, and “a person” refers to Yisrael, as it is stated, “Now, you (Yisrael) are My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are Man” (Ezek. 34:31). “Later,” literally in Hebrew is “after.” Thus, the Kadosh Barchu is the speaker of this verse, and He was saying, “Moshe’s reproof of Yisrael was for the purpose of bringing Yisrael ‘after’ Me,” i.e., to follow My ways. “He will find favor” refers to Moshe, of whom it is written, “And you have also found favor in My eyes” (Exod. 33:12), “more than one with a flattering tongue” – this is a reference to Bilaam, who “flattered” Yisrael with his favorable prophecies and thereby caused them to become haughty and complacent, and as a result they fell in Shittim by sinning with the Moabite women.

The Midrash explains that the “one who rebukes” is Moshe. The “person” he rebukes is Yisrael. Simply understood, the Midrash is saying that Moshe’s rebuke found favor in the eyes of Hashem. However, Ksav Sofer interprets it to mean that his rebuke found favor in Yisrael’s eyes, for they accepted his admonishments.

Ksav Sofer explains: The Midrash states that Yisrael would never have accepted rebuke from a person who was compensated financially for his services to the public, for they would have suspected him of insincerity, of offering reproof out of obligation rather than conviction. Moshe, by contrast, was entirely free of ulterior motive, for he never received financial compensation (Num. 16:15), and was thus under no obligation to admonish the people. Why then did he trouble himself to do so? Clearly, he acted solely for the sake of Heaven. His reproof had a single purpose: to protect the people from sin and bring them to repentance. Because his motives were so evidently above reproach, his rebuke was not rejected, but welcomed.

This idea is alluded to in the Midrash’s exposition. The verse states, “one who rebukes a person [to follow] after Me.” If one offers reproof without the slightest hope of gain, but only so that the listeners will follow after Hashem, then he may expect his words to find favor in their eyes. Not so the “the one who speaks with a smooth tongue,” who is dependent on the generosity of his listeners, who recognize that he seeks only to win their favor with smooth talk, but does not act for the sake of Heaven.

Ksav Sofer offers yet another approach based on the theme of sincere rebuke. Moshe was not renowned for fluency in speech. Yet, his sincere words found their mark in the hearts of his listeners. In the words of the well-known saying, “Words that come from the heart enter the heart.” This is the point of the Midrash’s teaching. One who offers reproof to others should not attempt to gain their favor with oratory and artful speech, for success will elude him. Rather, let him speak straightforwardly, with righteous purpose, and without concern that he himself be lauded and admired, and he will win hearts to his cause. The verse states, “One who rebukes a person [to follow] after Me.” If one’s purpose in offering rebuke is not to burnish his own reputation, but to encourage others to cleave to Hashem, his sincerity will surely find favor in the eyes of the people, far more than the practiced speech of smooth blandishments and honeyed words have only a single, self-serving, purpose: to find favor in the eyes of his listeners.

Shalom.