

Date: 6 Av 5785 (July 31, 2025)

Torah Portion: Devarim

Topic: A Balanced Reproach

We learned previously that the Book of Devarim begins with Moshe gently rebuking the children of Yisrael. Generally speaking, Hashem does not take kindly to criticism of His children, for it calls attention to their faults. Thereby awakening the Gevurah (Attribute of Justice) and exposes them to punishment. On the other hand, they are only human and their failings often make it necessary to persuade them to repent. Therefore, a leader must be careful to strike a balance between these conflicting considerations.

As a model of how to strike that balance, R' Yehudah bar R' Simone holds up the approach taken by Moshe. When speaking to the people (behind Hashem's back, as it were), he would confront them about their misdeeds, intending to humble them and arouse in them the desire to repent. He was always careful not to declare them sinners, he would prod them to recognize the error of their own ways and inspire them to refresh their dedication to Hashem's service. When standing in His Presence, however, he would play down the nation's faults. He would act as Yisrael's advocate, emphasizing their good points, begging for mercy on their behalf, and even "reproving" Hashem, as it were, for being angry with them.

Be'er Moshe echoes this idea by citing an incident in which Moshe displayed his two-sided assessment of the people. In Chapter 1 verse 12, he reprimands them for being difficult and fractious, and for prompting him to appoint judges with whom to share his leadership duties, "How can I alone carry your contentiousness, your burdens, and your quarrels?" Yet when recruiting the judges for this purpose (v. 15), he draws them into service by pointing out how great a privilege it is for them to guide a nation of such eminence – descendants of the Patriarchs, the Creator's "brothers and friends," His "portion and inheritance," and so forth.

Sweetening the negative with the positive is necessary for any type of condemnation of Yisrael's sins. This is what set apart the zealotry of Pinchas, who slew a tribal prince and avenged Hashem's honor in the face of the people's shameful involvement with the daughters of Moab (Num. Ch. 25). At first, the ministering angels sought to attack Pinchas for his audacity. But Elohim waved them off, saying, "Leave him be. He is a zealot, the son of a zealot [Levi], and he is a deflector of wrath, the son of a deflector of Warth [Aharon]". Kedushas Levi explains that Pinchas did not expose the Yisraelites to negative scrutiny by condemning those who had succumbed to temptation; on the contrary, he immediately turned to defend his brethren: The Talmud relates that he threw the princely offender and paramour off his spear and said before Hashem, "Is it right that twenty-four thousand Yisrael should die on account of these two?" Through this blend of zealous denunciation and concerned advocacy, Pinchas atoned for the people and actually increased the flow of Divine kindness upon them.

Kedushas Levi writes that the best way to reprove a Yisraelite is by elevating the person, emphasizing the great kedushah (holiness) of his soul, his fine qualities, and his importance as a member of the Yisraelites. In this way, he will realize that he is above the baseness of sin, and that his life's calling is to be found in the exalted company of those who serve the Creator.

Shalom.