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SPECIAL PIRKEI AVOT SERIES

Rav Kook on Pirkei Avot (2:15): The Bite of the Fox and the Sting of the Scorpion

“Warm yourself opposite the fire of the Sages, and be cautious not to be burned by their coals. For their bite is the bite of a fox, their sting is the sting of a scorpion...”
(Avot 2:15)

What is the symbolic meaning of the two metaphors of a fox’s bite and a scorpion’s sting?

Rav Kook suggested that the fox and the scorpion bite in two different manners:

A fox will choose whom and when to bite. For example, when the fox feels threatened or perhaps is hungry and attacks its prey, it will bite. A scorpion, on the other hand, stings indiscriminately. It simply bites as a natural instinct or in response to stimuli.

In a similar way, the stinging rebuke of a sage can come in two forms. A sage will

assess a situation and resolve to offer words of reproof. Alternatively, the sage may respond to a situation as a natural or visceral reaction. In the latter scenario, the sage is immediately aroused to admonish.

Rav Kook applied his unique interpretation of the Mishnah to a striking episode in which one of the great Talmudic sages rebuked two students. One received the “rebuke of the fox”; the other received the “rebuke of the scorpion.”

The following is what occurred. Two students were sitting at a meal together with their Rebbe, Bar Kappara. Two dishes were brought to the table: cooked cabbage, and cooked plums and pullets. One of the students quickly recited the blessing. He mistakenly made the blessing first on the item of food over which the blessing should have been recited later. The fellow student sitting next to him ridiculed him for making this mistake. Bar Kappara became angry with both of them. He told the first student that he should have paused to ask the rabbi which item to recite the blessing over first. The sage was also angry with the other student for berating his friend. This is why Bar Kappara offered both of his students words of *mussar*, rebuke, for their ill-advised actions. (Berachot 39a)

Rav Kook suggested that Bar Kappara’s expression of disapproval toward his students

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came in two forms. First, the sage's consternation toward the student who recited the blessing out of order stemmed from his determination that the student's lack of caution in carrying out the halacha required a forceful admonition. This was a teachable moment not to be overlooked. However, when the sage witnessed his student callously ridiculing his friend, this immediately elicited within him the need to respond with criticism. Seeing his student act uncaring toward his companion caused the sage instant pain, prompting an instinctive reaction of reproof. (Ain Aya, Berachot, vol. 2, chapter 5, #23, p. 179)

THE BENEFITS OF REBUKE

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (6:6) enumerates forty-eight characteristics that are found among those who successfully attain wisdom and thus live noble Jewish lives. One of these characteristics is a person who *ohav et hatochachot*, a lover of rebuke. Rav Chaim of Volozhin takes note of the fact that the term employed in the Mishnah—*tochachot* (rebuke)—is in the plural: “Tochachot is the plural and means ‘rebukes.’” Rav Chaim Volozhin writes: “He should love to hear rebuke - and to rebuke others.” (Ruach Chaim 6:6).

Rav Chaim Volozhin is teaching that a person should have an open heart and mind toward receiving rebuke. One who sincerely desires to grow as a Jew will be inclined to hear from his colleagues and friends how to improve and what needs to be rectified. Conversely, a person who cares for others does not simply allow a friend or companion to pursue a path that is less than optimal or

perhaps even hazardous. Offering constructive criticism and helping to guide a friend should be pursued lovingly. Thus, “loving rebuke” is true both for the one who receives reproof as well as for the one who offers sound spiritual advice in order to help others.

A REBUKE, ONLY AFTER THE SHABBAT DINNER

The following incident highlights the beautiful way Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook chose



Rav Abraham Isaac Kook zt"l

to give *tochacha*. Once, on a Shabbat night, a group of young men from a prominent Jerusalem yeshiva congregated in front of Rav Kook's home in the center of the city. When the Rav concluded the Shabbat evening prayers, he sent his attendant to find out what the young men wanted. The young men began to explain that Shabbat desecration was taking place at that very moment,

as a Jew had opened his café and begun serving customers on King George Street.

They therefore requested that the Chief Rabbi accompany them to the café in order to protest the Shabbat desecration. The attendant then relayed the message to the Rav. The Rav heard this and remained silent; he then insisted that his family gather around

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the table and begin the Shabbat meal. The eager group of about ten to fifteen young men outside began yelling that they now understood that Rav Kook did not really care about the spiritual situation in the holy city of Jerusalem.

Once the young men had dispersed, the Rav told his attendant to come with him to the café. The attendant then inquired, “Why does the Rav wish to go there?” The Rav replied, “What does that mean? A Jew is desecrating the Shabbat in the heart of the holy city of Jerusalem, the King’s palace, and I should not go and rebuke him and try to convince him to stop?!”

The bewildered attendant then asked the Rav, “If the Rav felt that it was necessary to rebuke this individual, why did the Rav not accompany the group of yeshiva boys that were here earlier? Why did the Rav give them an opportunity to tell everyone that Rav Kook does not care about religious life in Jerusalem?” The wise Rav answered, “Indeed, I did wish to go along with them. However, I then thought that if we all go together, this would transform the cafe owner from being merely a ‘Shabbat desecrator’ to a ‘public Shabbat desecrator’ since we would have been more than ten Jews together, which is a much more severe transgression of the laws of Shabbat.

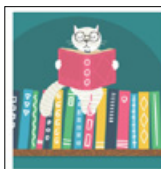
It is for this reason that I did not wish to go until now!”

The Rav then went and rebuked the café owner pleasantly, in the true manner of the Torah. (Halacha Yomit, *The Mitzvah Of Rebuking One’s Fellow Nowadays*, Rav Ovadia Yosef, website).

In his fierce love for his fellow Jew and Am Yisrael, Rav Kook was determined to find a way to bring his brothers and sisters closer to Torah observance. The way of a *talmid chacham*, and of every Jew for that matter, also requires that one not shirk the responsibility of offering helpful criticism and sincerely engaging in the Torah command of *tochacha*. Encouraging our brethren to do what is right and showing them a path that is beneficial for them is an expression of the utmost concern and love for our fellow Jew. ■



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