

CRITICISM: CONSTRUCTIVE OR COUNTER PRODUCTIVE?

PARSHAT DEVARIM

27 Tammuz – 4 Av, 5786

12 – 18 July, 2026

Torah Reading:

Devarim: Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:22

Haftarah: Isaiah 1:1-27

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

What's the best way to influence people to modify their behavior?

The Book of Deuteronomy begins:

These are the words which Moses spoke to all of Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain opposite Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Di Zahav.

"These are words of reproof," explains Rashi. The verse lists the places where the Israelites sinned, without specifying the details. Moses only alluded to their misdeeds, without elaborating on all the gory details, so as not to humiliate them.

Rashi adds that Moses waited to rebuke the people until shortly before his passing for two important reasons: Firstly, so he wouldn't become a nudnik having to rebuke them repeatedly; and secondly, so that they wouldn't keep seeing him and being embarrassed every time.

Clearly, even if we must criticize someone, we should take care to do it delicately, in a way that maintains their dignity.

Moses did not say, "You lousy idolaters! How could you do such a thing?! You saw G-d at Sinai and now you prance in front of a Golden Calf?!"

No. Not at all. Moses said but two words, and even those two words were ever so subtle.

Di zahav.

It sounds like a place, but Rashi tells us it is actually a subtle reference to the Israelites' sin of the Golden Calf. Di can be understood as dai ("it is enough" - as in Dayeinu), and zahav means gold. Even in his rebuke, Moshe was defending his people. Why did they sin? Because of an overabundance of gold.

Or, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it, "Moses' criticism of his people was accepted by them because they knew that he was also their greatest defender." Having argued their case before G-d Almighty Himself, Moses had credibility. They knew he loved them, and they trusted him.

He was always extremely careful not to humiliate the people when he rebuked them.

A few weeks ago, I wrote about "fire and brimstone" sermons not being the most effective way to reach people today. Well, it seems that even at the beginning of our history, over 3,000 years back, Moses had already adopted that position.

I am grateful to Rav Asher Weiss for bringing to my attention the Talmudic passage where Rabbi Eliezer ben Azariah asks, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to rebuke?"

It's easy to criticize. Some people seem to do it quite naturally. But being critical of others requires deep wisdom, sensitivity, respect, and consideration. We cannot just "fly off the

handle" and let rip. G-d forbid! Embarrassing and putting people to shame publicly is not only a grave offense in its own right, but it will more than likely fail to achieve the desired purpose. On the contrary, after such a royal dressing-down, the offended offender will probably only go back to his old ways with a vengeance.

To be effective, criticism must be constructive. If we allow it to become a personal attack or vendetta it will only fan the fires of dissension. It may not be done in public and must be dispensed very gently. The Torah teaches us that while it is a mitzvah to admonish someone who behaves inappropriately, it must be done with tremendous respect and understanding, lest it cause the rebuker to himself commit a sin by embarrassing the person he is rebuking.

On the other hand, the same section in the Talmud also quotes Rabbi Tarfon who asked, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to accept rebuke."

We need to be wise and sensitive to give rebuke, and we also need to be intelligent and humble to accept rebuke.

My late mother, of blessed memory, had a genuine, natural talent. She was able to tell it like it was, and she could criticize people without causing them to become defensive or angry. How? Because she did it with such genuine sincerity and love. The recipients knew that she was right, and that she meant it for their own good. She always remained the best of friends with the people she had reprimanded.

How I wish I had her gift!

These are the words which Moses spoke to all of Israel.

The Seer of Lublin said that Moshe speaks to all of Israel, then and now. Each of us can learn from Moshe. In all our criticisms, to be constructive, gentle, subtle, and sensitive.

As to knowing how to receive and accept criticism with wisdom, humility, and even-temperedness, the Previous Rebbe said in the name of his father, the Rebbe Rashab, "Cherish criticism because it will raise you up to new heights." At the end of the day, did anyone sum it up better than King Solomon?

Do not chastise a fool, lest he hate you. Chastise a wise man, and he will love you.

By Yossy Goldman

Devarim: Gad & Reuven — Going Ahead of the Jewish People

At the conclusion of the Torah portion of Devarim, Moshe relates how he told the tribes of Reuven and Gad that their warriors were to "go forth ahead of their Jewish brethren"¹ and lead them in battle. Rashi explains:² "Since they were mighty, they would go forth ahead of the Jewish people in battle and the enemies would succumb to them, as is written: 'he tears as prey the arm and head.'"

The tribes of Reuven and Gad went "ahead" of the Jewish people in two ways: a) they forged ahead of the other Jews as a separate and distinct entity; b) they also placed themselves at the head of the Jewish army.

In terms of man's spiritual service, these two methods of doing battle represent two ways of vanquishing the enemy — the evil inclination:⁴

By "going forth ahead of their Jewish brethren" the warriors of Reuven and Gad placed themselves at much greater risk than the rest of the nation — evidence of mesirus nefesh, total self-sacrifice. In spiritual terms, this translates into divine service

Sacred material please do not desecrate

Aleph Institute

Hyman & Martha Rogal Center

5804 Beacon Street

Pittsburgh, PA 15217

412-421-0111

Fax: 412-521-5948

www.alephne.org

info@alephne.org



**ALEPH
INSTITUTE**

No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

that transcends intellect — a manner of service that emanates from the soul's core.

The other tribes, however, did not place themselves at particular risk. In spiritual terms this relates to a lesser degree of divine service — service limited to one's comprehension, and which reflects the soul's more extrinsic levels.

This explains why the children of Gad would “tear as prey the arm and head,” i.e., with one blow they would sever the enemy's arm and head. When logic is one's only weapon in the battle against evil, it is impossible to nullify all the forces of darkness with one blow, for a particular manner of service is required in order to defeat each evil power.

But when one calls upon the all-encompassing spiritual power of self-sacrifice, a power so great that it obliterates every aspect of evil, then it is possible to vanquish all the evil — the “arm and head” — at one blow.

Ultimately, even mesirus nefesh alone does not suffice; it is necessary for mesirus nefesh (i.e. the tribes of Gad and Reuven) to influence the intellect, emotion, speech and action (i.e. the other tribes) as well. This is accomplished in two ways:

a) Mesirus nefesh clothes itself in intellect, emotion, etc., so that one's performance of Torah and mitzvos is fueled by it.⁵ The main aspect of an individual's spiritual service remains the day-to-day study of Torah and performance of mitzvos ; mesirus nefesh is invoked merely as a means to enhance this service, and not as an end in itself.⁶

b) Mesirus nefesh becomes an end unto itself: be it in a situation that requires actual self-sacrifice, or one that requires mesirus nefesh in potentia , such as during the Ne'ilah prayer of Yom Kippur.

This aspect of mesirus nefesh too, although not clothed in intellect and emotion, has the ability to affect them. For, as explained in Tanya,⁷ when the power of mesirus nefesh is aroused, it automatically affects one's intellect, emotions, speech and action.

These, then, are the two manners in which the tribes of Gad and Reuven went to war: At the outset of spiritual service they placed themselves at the head of the Jewish army, i.e., mesirus nefesh merely served as the “head” and conductor of the intellect and emotions, etc.

Thereafter came the higher degree of mesirus nefesh , wherein these two tribes would forge ahead on their own. That is, mesirus nefesh was aroused as an entity unto itself.

PIRKEI AVOT

Rabbi [Judah HaNassi] would say: Which is the right path for man to choose for himself? Whatever is harmonious for the one who does it, and harmonious for mankind.

Be as careful with a minor mitzvah as with a major one, for you do not know the rewards of the mitzvot. Consider the cost of a mitzvah against its rewards, and the rewards of a transgression against its cost.

Contemplate three things, and you will not come to the hands of transgression: Know what is above from you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all your deeds being inscribed in a book.

Ethics of Our Fathers 2:1

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, July 12, 2026

27 Tammuz, 5786

Third expulsion from France (1322)

After having been allowed back into France in the year 1315 (after the expulsion in 1306 by Philip IV), the Jews were once again expelled from France by Charles IV, who thus broke the pledge made by his predecessors in 1315 that the Jews would be able to stay in France for at least 12 years.

Monday, July 13, 2026

28 Tammuz, 5786

Passing of "Yismach Moshe" (1841)

Tammuz 28 is the yearzeit of Rabbi Moshe Teitelbaum (1759-1841) of Uhely, Hungary, author of Yismach Moshe and patriarch of the Hungarian Chassidic dynasties.

Tuesday, July 14, 2026

29 Tammuz, 5786

Passing of Rashi (1105)

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known as "Rashi", passed away on the 29th of Tammuz of the year 4865 from creation (1105 CE).

Rashi was born in Troyes, France, in 1040. His commentaries on the Torah, Prophets and Talmud are universally accepted as the most basic tool for the understanding of these texts for schoolchild and scholar alike. Numerous commentaries have been authored on his commentary. In his famed "Rashi talks", the Lubavitcher Rebbe repeatedly demonstrated how Rashi's "simple meaning of the text" style enfolds many layers of meaning, often resolving profound difficulties in the text and presenting new, innovative interpretations with a simple word choice or rephrasing of a Midrashic passage.

Wednesday, July 15, 2026

1 Av, 5786

Passing of Aaron (1274 BCE)

Aaron the first High Priest, brother of Moses and Miriam, passed away at age 123 on the 1st of Av of the year 2487 from creation (1274 BCE). This is the only yearzeit (date of passing) explicitly mentioned in the Torah (Numbers 33:38).

Thursday, July 16, 2026

2 Av, 5786

Vel' d'Hiv Roundup (1942)

On the 2nd and 3rd of Av in the year 5702 from creation (1942 CE), more than 13,000 Jews were rounded up by French police and interred in the Vel' d'Hiv, an indoor bicycle stadium in the center of Paris. They were later transported to Auschwitz to be killed. Within days, the Vel' d'Hiv was cleaned up and ready for recreation.

Friday, July 17, 2026

3 Av, 5786

Passing of R. Shimshon of Ostropolle (1648)

R. Shimshon of Ostropolle was a saintly individual who was greatly revered both in his lifetime and beyond. It is told that an angel called a maggid would come and reveal secrets of Torah to him, and that he merited revelations from Elijah the Prophet. He himself records kabbalistic insights that were revealed to him in dreams.

R. Shimshon authored Dan Yadin, a kabbalistic commentary, as well as numerous other unpreserved works. Additionally, many of his interpretations that were preserved orally have been collected and published.

R. Shimshon died a martyr's death at the hands of a Cossack mob during the Chmielnicki Massacres, while wrapped in his tallit and tefillin.