

HOW TO TELL PEOPLE OFF AND WHEN TO HOLD YOUR PEACE

THE ART OF MORAL CRITICISM

text pages

by Noam Sachs Zion

THE TORAH / EXODUS 2

¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses,⁹ explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

¹¹Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their toil. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. ¹²He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. ¹³When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" ¹⁴He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! ¹⁵When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived^b in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well.

¹⁶Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; ¹⁷but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock. ¹⁸

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THE DUTY TO SPEAK OUT - THE TORAH, Leviticus 19:17-18

- 17 You shall not hate your kinsman in your heart.
Reprove your neighbor, but incur no guilt because of him
- 18 You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against
your kinsfolk.
Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord

HASSIDIC ADVICE

②

All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten

Robert Fulghum

A troubled man paid a visit to his Rabbi.

A wise and good old rabbi, as all rabbis try to be.

"Rabbi," said he, wringing his hands, "I am a failure.

More than half the time I do not succeed in doing what I must do."

"Oh?" said the rabbi.

"Please say something wise, rabbi", said the man.

After much pondering, the rabbi spoke as follows:

"Ah, my son, I give you this wisdom:

Go and look on page 930 of *The New York Times Almanac* for the year 1970,
and you will find peace of mind maybe."

"Ah," said the man, and he went away and did that thing.

Now this is what he found: The listing of the lifetime batting averages of all
the greatest baseball players. Ty Cobb, the greatest slugger of them all,
had a lifetime average of only .367. Even Babe Ruth didn't do so good.

So the man went back to the rabbi and said in a questioning tone:

"Ty Cobb - .367 - that's it?"

"Right," said the rabbi. "Ty Cobb - .367. He got a hit once out of every three times
at bat.

He didn't even bat .500 - so what can you expect already?"

"Ah," said the man, who thought he was a wretched failure
because only half the time he did not succeed at what he must do.

Theology is amazing, and holy books abound.

(5) Whoever entertains in his heart hatred of any Israelite, transgresses a prohibition, as it is said, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart" (Lev. 19:17).

(6) When a man sins against another, the injured party should not hate the offender and keep silent, as it is said concerning the wicked, "And Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor evil, for Absalom hated Amnon" (II Sam. 13:22). But it is his duty to inform the offender and say to him "Why did you do this to me? Why did you sin against me in this matter?" And thus it is said, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17). If the offender repents and pleads for forgiveness, he should be forgiven. The forgiver should not be obdurate, as it is said, "And Abraham prayed unto God (for Abimelech)" (Gen. 20:17).

(9) If one who has been wronged by another does not wish to rebuke or speak to the offender because the latter is a very common person or mentally defective, and if he has sincerely forgiven him, and neither bears him ill-will nor rebukes him—he acts according to the standard of saints. All that the Torah objects to is harboring ill-will.

(7) If one observes that a person committed a sin or walks in a way that is not good, it is a duty to bring the erring man back to the right path and point out to him that he is wronging himself by his evil courses, as it is said, "You shall surely rebuke your neighbor" (Lev. 19:17). He who rebukes another, whether for offenses against the rebuker himself or for sins against God, should administer the rebuke in private, speak to the offender gently and tenderly, and point out that he is only speaking for the wrongdoer's own good, to secure for him life in the world to come. If the latter accepts the rebuke, well and good. If not, he should be rebuked a second, and a third time. And so one is bound to continue the admonitions, till the sinner assaults the admonisher and says to him "I refuse to listen." Whoever is in a position to prevent wrongdoing and does not do so is responsible for the iniquity of all the wrongdoers whom he might have restrained.

(8) He who rebukes another must not at first speak to the offender harshly so as to put him to shame, as it is said, "And you shall not suffer sin because of him" (Lev. 19:17). Our rabbis explained this text as follows: "Since it might have been supposed that you are to rebuke the sinner till he changes color, therefore it is said 'And you shall not bear sin because of him.'" Hence, the inference that it is forbidden to put an Israelite to shame, especially in public. Although one who puts another to shame is not punished with flogging, still it is a grave offense. And thus the sages said, "He who shames another in public has no portion in the world to come." One ought, therefore, to beware of publicly shaming anyone, whether he be young or old. One should not call a person by a name of which he feels ashamed, nor relate anything in his presence which humiliates him. This applies to matters between man and man. But in regard to duties to God, if an individual, after having been privately rebuked, does not repent, he should be shamed in public; his sin should be openly declared; he is to be reviled, affronted, and cursed till he returns to the right course. This was the method followed by all the prophets of Israel.

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THE ART OF COMMUNICATION
KING DAVID AND THE PROPHET NATHAN
II SAMUEL, 12

But the Lord was displeased with what David had done (with Bathsheva) and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said:

"There were two men in the same city, one rich and one poor. The rich man had very large flocks and herds, but the poor man had only one little ewe lamb that he had bought. He tended it and it grew up together with him and his children: it used to share his morsel of bread, drink from his cup, and nestle in his bosom; it was like a daughter to him.

One day, a traveler came to the rich man, but he was loath to take anything from his own flocks or herds to prepare a meal for the guest who had come to him: so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."

David flew into a rage against the man, and said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and showed no pity". And Nathan said to David: "That man is you! Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: "It was I who anointed you king over Israel and it was I who rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house and possessions of your master's wives; and I gave you the House of Israel and Judah: and if that were not enough, I would give you twice as much more.

"Why then have you flouted the command of the Lord and done what displeases Him? You have put Uriah the Hittite to the sword; you took his wife and made her your wife and had him killed by the sword of the Ammonites. Therefore the sword shall never depart from your House - because you spurned Me by taking the wife of Uriah the Hittite and making her your wife."

Thus said the Lord: "I will make a calamity rise against you from within your own house; I will take your wives and give them to another man before your very eyes and he shall sleep with your wives under this very sun. You acted in secret, but I will make this happen in the sight of all Israel and in broad daylight."

David said to Nathan, "I stand guilty before the Lord". And Nathan replied to David, "The Lord has remitted your sin. You shall not die."

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LOVE MAKING AS A MODEL OF CRITICISM
REBBE AHARON LEIB of PRIMISHLAN

It is related that when Reb Aharon Leib of Primishlan saw from the face of a person that the latter had committed a wrong, he would ask the person to meet with him privately. Then, after kind and reassuring words to the person, Reb Aharon would begin his loving rebuke. When asked why he proceeded in such a manner, he replied: In Psalm 51 it is written:

A Psalm, a Song of David, composed after Nathan the prophet came into him just as he had come from Bathsheva"

What do the words mean? Note them well, for they convey an important teaching. Had Nathan come to David in a judgmental spirit, rebuking him angrily in public, it is possible that he would have failed to achieve his end. Perhaps David would have hardened his heart and closed his ears to the prophet's plea for repentance. But Nathan came to David lovingly and privately, just as David had come into Bathsheva. Thus the prophet's words entered David's heart and he immediately uttered this Psalm of Repentance.



THE STORY TELLER AND THE ART OF CRITICISM
MARTIN BUBER, Early Hassidic Masters

How did the Baal Shem Tov gain his Hassidic disciple, Rabbi Jacob Joseph, later the Rav of Polnoye, who subsequently set down the teachings of his master in many a book?

Scene 1: ON THE ROAD

When Rabbi Jacob Joseph was still a rav in Szarygrod and bitterly averse to the Hassidic way, a man whom no one knew came to his town one summer morning, at the hour when the cattle were taken to pasture, and stopped in the marketplace with his wagon. He called to the first man who came along leading his cow, and began to tell him a story, which pleased his listener so well that he could not break away. A second man caught a few words in passing; he wanted to go on and could not, so he stayed and listened. Soon a whole group of people were gathered about the story teller and still their number grew.

Right among them stood the servant of the House of Prayer who had been on his way to open the doors, for in summer the rav always prayed there at eight o'clock and the doors had to be opened well ahead of that time, around seven.

Scene 2: AT THE HOUSE OF PRAYER

Now at eight the rav came to the House of Prayer and found it locked. It is well known that he is very particular and quick to fly into a temper; now too he angrily set out to look for the servant. But there he was, right in front of him, for the Baal Shem - it was he who was telling the stories - had signed to him to go, and he had run to open the House of Prayer. The rav shouted at him and asked why he had failed in his duty and why the men, who were usually there by that time, had not come. The servant replied that, like himself, all those who had been on the way to the House of Prayer, had been irresistibly captivated by the great story.

The angry rav had to say the Morning Prayer alone. But then he told the servant to go to the market place and fetch the stranger. "I'll have him beaten!", he cried.

Scene 3: AT THE RABBI'S OFFICE

In the meantime, the Baal Shem had finished his story and gone to the inn. There the servant of the House of Prayer found him and delivered the message. The Baal Shem immediately followed him out, smoking his pipe, and in this manner came before the rav.

"What do you think you are doing!" shouted the rav. "Keeping people from prayer".

"Rabbi," said the Baal Shem calmly, "it does not become you to fly into a rage. Rather let me tell you a story."

"What do you think you are doing!" was what the rav wanted to repeat, and then he looked at the man closely for the first time. It is

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true that he immediately turned his eyes away, nevertheless the words he had been about to say stuck in his throat. The Baal Shem had begun his story, and the rav had to listen like all the others.

"Once I drove cross-country with three horses," said the Baal Shem, "a bay, a piebald and a white horse. And not one of the three could neigh. Then I met a peasant coming toward me and he called: "Slacken the reins!" So I slackened the reins and then all three horses began to neigh". The rav could say nothing for emotion. "Three," the Baal Shem repeated, "Bay, piebald and white could not neigh. The peasant knew what to do; slacken reins and they neighed with joy". The rav bowed his head in silence. "The peasant gave good advice," said the Baal Shem. "Do you understand?"

"I understand, rabbi," answered the rav and burst into tears. He wept and wept and knew that up to this time he had not known what it was to weep.

"You must be uplifted," said the Baal Shem. The rav looked up to him and saw that he was no longer there.

Scene 4: LOCKED IN HIS ROOM

Every month Rabbi Jacob Joseph fasted one week, from sabbath to sabbath. Since he always took his meals in his room, no one knew this except his niece who brought him his food. In the month which followed his meeting with the Baal Shem, he fasted as always, because it never occurred to him that the uplifting predicted for him could be attained without mortifying the flesh.

Scene 5: THE BAAL SHEM TOV'S TELEPATHY

The Baal Shem was on another one of his journeys when he suddenly felt: if the rav of Szarygrad continues as he is doing, he will lose his mind. He had the horses urged on so vehemently that one fell and broke a leg. When he entered the rav's room, he said: "My white horse fell because I was in such a hurry to get here. Things cannot go on in this way. Have some food brought for yourself." The rav had food brought and ate. "Your work," said the Baal Shem, "is one of sorrow and gloom. The Divine Presence does not hover over gloom but over joy in the commandments."

Scene 6: MAKING AMENDS

Soon afterward, Rabbi Jacob Joseph became rav in the city of Rashkov. He issued a proclamation far and wide that he would return all fines he had ever received and there had been many. He did not rest until he had distributed all the money he had. From that time on, he used to say: "Worry and gloom are the roots of all the powers of evil."



7. Failing to Communicate

Talmud Arakin 16b

- a. It was taught [in a Baraita]: R. Tarfon said, I wonder whether there is any one in this generation who accepts reproof, for if one says to him: Remove the mote from between your eyes, he would answer: Remove the beam from between your eyes! R. Eleazar b. Azariah said: I wonder if there is one in this generation who knows how to reprove! R. Johanan b. Nuri said: I call heaven and earth to witness for myself that often was Akiba punished through me because I used to complain against him before our Rabban, Gamaliel Benbbi, and all the more he showered love upon me, to make true what has been said: *Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee; reprove a wise man and he will love thee.*

Alternative Source:
SIFRA on LEV. 19

~~Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah:~~ I wonder whether there is anyone in this generation who is:

- (1) Knows how to give reproof (CR, A/E, Ea)
- (2) worthy to reprove others. (R. Tarfon) C
- (3) knows how to receive reproof

CR, Eleazar ben Azariah

b. "People in Glass Houses Shouldn't throw Stones"

Talmud Baba Metzia

Resh Lakish explained the verse in the prophet Tzefania 2:1 "Decorate yourself and decorate others" - mend your own ways first and then those of others. (107b)

Rabbi Natan: Don't remark on another's disability or blemish if you have the same one. (59b)

c. Baal Shem Tov - Iturei Soferim Anthology

Once the Baal Shem Tov challenged one of the great rabbis of his generation: "How can you preach to others when all your life you never knew what sin was and you are not sufficiently involved with people and sociable enough to know what their sins are. "Reprove your fellow" means reprove someone similar to you.

d. R. Yehuda Leib the Preacher of Poland

"Don't hate your brother in your heart, reprove your fellow man..." The critic must first examine himself to discover what he feels toward his fellow man. Only then when he is certain that there is no hate for his brother in his heart may he rebuke him.

e. Beruriah's Advice - Talmud Berachot 10a

There were once some lawless men in the neighborhood of Rabbi Meir who caused him a great deal of trouble. Rabbi Meir accordingly prayed that they should die. His wife Beruriah said to him: 'How can you think that such a prayer is permitted?... When sins will cease there will be no more wicked men! Rather pray for them that they turn from their ways, and there will be no more wicked.' He did pray on their behalf and they did turn from evil.

8. Building a Relationship Across a Moral Abyss

a. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev

There are two types of moral preacher. One preaches the good things of each person ... and the other preaches with harsh words that shame..... The preachers of good things elevates the soul of man.

b. THE FATHERS According to Rabb. Natan 12

Rabbi Me'ir says: Why does the verse say, *And did turn away many from iniquity?* For ⁴ when Aaron would walk along the road and meet an evil or wicked man, he would greet him. On the morrow if that man sought to commit a transgression, he would think: "Woe unto me! how shall I lift my eyes afterward and look upon Aaron? I should be ashamed before him, for he greeted me." And thus that man would refrain from transgression.

So, too, when two men had quarreled with each other, Aaron would go and sit down with one of them and say to him: "My son, mark what thy fellow is saying! He beats his breast and tears his clothing,"⁵ saying, 'Woe unto me! how shall I lift my eyes and look upon my fellow! I am ashamed before him, for I it is who treated him foully.'

He would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart, and then Aaron would go and sit with the other one and say to him: "My son, mark what thy fellow is saying! He beats his breast and tears his clothing,"⁵ saying, 'Woe unto me! how shall I lift my eyes and look upon my fellow! I am ashamed before him, for I it is who treated him foully.'

He would sit with him until he had removed all rancor from his heart. And when the two men met each other, they would embrace and kiss each other. That is why (of Aaron's death) it is said, *They wept for Aaron thirty days, even all the house of Israel* (Numbers 20).

c. Rav Isaac Abarbanel on Leviticus 19

It says, 'Thou shalt not hate thy brother...' By 'brother' it intends to say that even when a person transgresses, it is not appropriate to hate the person, but only to hate his/her deeds, and the rebuke should be administered in order that the person return to the good.

d. Maayana shel Torah - Anthology

"Reprove your fellow man" - If you reprove him treat him as a real "fellow" man, as a friend who has a value equal to your own. "Don't put a sin on him" - Don't treat him as a "sinner" otherwise he will turn away from you completely and you will achieve nothing.

e. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk

"Things that emerge from the heart may enter the heart", that means those things which emerge from the heart and return to enter the heart of the speaker. For example, the criticism rendered by a friend which affects the critic himself can also have an influence on his friend.

a. Between Parent and Child

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Maimonides, Laws of Rebellion

④
MORAL
PATHOS
and
SENSITIVITY
To
SHAME

11. A bastard is bound to honor and reverence his father, although he is not culpable if he strikes or curses him, unless the latter has repented. Even if one's father is a wicked man, a habitual transgressor, it is the duty of the son to honor and reverence him.

If the son sees his father violate a commandment, he should not say to him, "Father, you have disregarded a precept of the Torah." He should say to him, "Thus and thus is written in the Torah," speaking to him as though he were consulting him, instead of admonishing him.

12. If his father orders him to transgress a positive or a negative command set forth in the Bible or even a command which is of rabbinical origin, the son must disregard the order, for it is said: *Ye shall fear every man his mother, and his father; and ye shall keep my Sabbaths* (Lev. 19:3), that is, all of you are bound to honor Me.

b. Sefer Hassidim - Germany, 13th century. "To Each His Own"

A moral critic must shape his message according to the traits of the one being reprov'd. If he is easy going be easy going, if tough be tough.

c. Gaon of Vilna (Iturei Soferim) "Know Your Self"

One should not speak harshly in criticising another for he will not listen to harsh words. Speak gently, however, if one's nature is such that he is incapable of speaking gently, then he is exempt from the obligation to reprove others.

d. Sefardi: Anthology - Meam Loez in Leviticus 19:17 Indirection

If the wrongdoer is very easily shamed by even the smallest things that people remark, then do not make the critique explicit from the beginning. Enter into a conversation and in the middle talk about how a certain thing happened to you. He will understand by himself. If that fails talk directly about the problem. That is the point of "reprove and reprove" in the verse - first talk obliquely about the criticism, then the second time (if necessary) directly.....However some say you should never explicitly mention the wrong doing not even the third time, as limited by the rest of the verse, "reprove and reprovebut don't place the sin on him"

e. Zusya and the Sinner

Once Rabbi Zusya came to an inn, and on the forehead of the innkeeper he saw long years of sin. For a while he neither spoke nor moved. But when he was alone in the room which had been assigned to him, the shudder of vicarious experience overcame him in the midst of singing psalms and he cried aloud: "Zusya, Zusya, you wicked man! What have you done! There is no lie that failed to tempt you, and no crime you have not committed. Zusya, foolish, erring man, what will be the end of this?" Then he enumerated the sins of the innkeeper, giving the time and place of each, as his own, and sobbed. The innkeeper had quietly followed this strange man. He stood at the door and heard him. First he was seized with dull dismay, but then penitence and grace were lit within him, and he woke to God.

10 Beyond the Pale:

2 The Limits of a Moral Mission

65b YEBAMOTH

R. He'a further stated in the name of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon: As one is commanded to say that which will be obeyed,⁹ o is one commanded not to say that which will not be obeyed.¹⁰ R. Abba stated: It is a duty; for it is said in Scripture, *Reprove not a scoffer, lest he hate thee; reprove a wise man and he will love thee.*¹¹

R. He'a further stated in the name of R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon: One may modify a statement in the interests of peace; for it is said in Scripture, *Thy father did command etc. so shall ye say unto Joseph: Forgive, I pray thee now, etc.*¹² R. Nathan said: It is a commandment; for it is stated in Scripture. And Samuel said: 'How can I go? If Saul hear it, he will kill me', etc.¹⁴

At the School of R. Ishmael it was taught: Great is the cause of peace, seeing that for its sake even the Holy One, blessed be He, modified a statement; for at first it is written, *My lord being old,*¹ while afterwards it is written, *And I am old.*²

(b)

Better to Refrain from Rebuke

T.B. SHABBATH 148b

Raba son of R. Hanan also said to Abaye: We learnt, One must not clap [the hands], beat [the breast], or dance on Festivals. Yet we see that they do it, and do not rebuke them in any way? — Then on your reasoning, when Rabbah said: A man should not sit on the top of a stake, lest an article roll away from him and he come to fetch it,⁴ — yet we see [women] who carry pitchers and sit at the entrance of alleys, and we do not rebuke them? But leave Israel: better that they should [sin] in ignorance than deliberately. Now, he understood from this that that [principle] holds good only in respect of Rabbinical [enactments] but not Scriptural laws.⁶ Yet that is not so: there is no difference between a Rabbinical and a Scriptural law. For lo! the addition to the Day of Atonement is Scriptural,⁷ yet we see them [women] eat and drink until it is dark and do not rebuke them.

11 THE WRITINGS / PROVERBS 9

⁷ To correct a scoffer,
⁸ Or rebuke a wicked man for his blemish,
Is to call down abuse on oneself.⁹

¹⁰ Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you;

(c) Moshe Hayyim Luzzato Mesillat Yeshtarim 25

There is nothing better for a man than to seek friends who are morally upright. They can enlighten his eyes in those areas where he is blind and offer him criticism out of their love for him and thereby save him from all sorts of injury. For one cannot see his own guilt, but they can see and understand and warn him, so he may take care. That is the message of Proverbs 24:6 "One is saved by virtue of an abundance of advisors."

(d) Tana de be Eliahu

"Reprove your fellow man" - Could that obligate one to rebuke an evil man or one who hates him? No! Reprove only a "fellow man" - one who loves you and who shares the same Jewish values and practices. A morally corrupt person who feels enmity toward you need not be reproved and in fact one is not even permitted to reprove him

(e) Malbim - Commentary on Leviticus 19

Moral criticism is possible and legally obligatory only between equals sharing the same Torah values and commandments. For the secular Jew who rejects Torah cannot be appealed to and the morally corrupt person will not accept any criticism. There are three conditions for moral criticism:

- 1) the moral innocence of the critic
- 2) the willingness of the one criticised to listen
- 3) the quality of the critique which may not embarrass him.

Reprove a wise man, and he will love you.
⁹ Instruct a wise man, and he will grow wiser;
Teach a righteous man, and he will gain in learning
¹⁰ The beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord,
And knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

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11

BEYOND THE PALE THE LIMITS OF A MORAL MISSION

(a) Rabbi Ilia stated in the name of R. Elazar son of R. Simeon:
As one is commanded to say that which will be heard,
so is one commanded not to say that which will not be
heard.

R. Abba stated: It is a duty: for it is said in Scripture:
Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate you;
reprove a wise person and s/he will love you.

(Talmud Yevamot 65b)

(b) MARK TWAIN

DON'T GIVE ADVICE
WISE MEN DON'T NEED IT
FOOLS WON'T HEED IT

(c) A POPULAR POSTER:

SPEAK WHEN YOU ARE ANGRY
AND YOU WILL MAKE THE BEST SPEECH
YOU WILL EVER REGRET

(d) SHAKESPEARE *Hamlet's Mirror* - Breytenbach

The critic holds his words up to us like "mirrors" so we will judge
ourselves by our own standard.

Listen to Hamlet's criticism of his mother using a psychodrama (Hamlet's mother
Gertrude collaborated in the assassination of his father and married the assassin.
This secret scheme was the subject of Hamlet's play put on before her)

Hamlet: You go not until I set you up a glass where you may
see the inmost part of you

Gertrude: Thou turnst my eyes into my very soul

(Joseph did the same in putting his brothers through the ordeal of arresting
Benjamin)

WHEN TO SAY NOTHING

Just as one is commanded to say that which will be heeded, so is one commanded *not* to say that which will *not* be heeded.

—Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 65b

Rabbi Israel of Vishnitz was in the habit of strolling with his *gabbai* [assistant] for a half hour every evening. On one such occasion, they stopped in front of the house of a certain wealthy bank manager. The man was known to be a *maskil*, a follower of the "Enlightenment" movement, i.e., anything but a follower of the rebbe. Rabbi Israel knocked on the door and, when a servant opened it, entered the house. The puzzled *gabbai*, without asking a word, followed the rebbe inside.

The bank manager received his distinguished guest respectfully and politely. The rebbe took the seat that was offered him, and sat for quite some time without saying a word. Knowing that protocol would deem it impertinent to ask the rebbe directly the reason for his visit, the host whispered his question to the rebbe's assistant, but the *gabbai* simply shrugged his shoulders. After a good while, the rebbe rose to leave, and bade his host farewell. The bank manager accompanied him to the door and, his understandable curiosity getting the better of him, asked: "Could you please explain to me, rebbe, why you honored me with a visit?"

"I went to your house in order to fulfill a mitzvah," the rebbe replied, "and thank God I was able to fulfill it."

"And which mitzvah was that?" asked the confused bank manager.

"Our Sages teach that 'Just as one is commanded to say that which will be listened to, so is one commanded not to say that which will not be listened to.' Now if I remain in my house and you remain in yours, what kind of mitzvah is it that I refrain from telling you 'that which will not be listened to'? In order to fulfill the mitzvah prop-

The Obligation to Criticize, How to Do So, and When to Remain Silent

erty, one obviously has to go to the house of the person who will not listen, and *there* refrain from speaking to him. And that is exactly what I did."

"Perhaps, rebbe," said the bank manager, "you would be so good to tell me what this thing is? Who knows, perhaps I *will* listen?"

"I am afraid you won't," said the rebbe.

The longer the rebbe refused, the greater grew the curiosity of the other to know the secret: he continued to press the rebbe to reveal "that which would not be listened to."

"Very well," said the rebbe finally. "A certain penniless widow owes your bank quite a sum for the mortgage of her house. Within a few days, your bank is going to dispose of her house by public sale, and she will be out on the street. I had wanted to ask you to overlook her debt, but didn't, because of the mitzvah of 'not saying . . .'"

"But what do you expect me to do?" asked the bank manager in amazement. "Surely you realize that the debt is not owed to me personally, but to the bank, and I am only its manager, and not its owner, and the debt runs into several hundreds, and if . . ."

"It's exactly as I said all along," the rebbe interrupted, "that you would not want to hear."

With that he ended the conversation and walked away.

The bank manager went back into his house, but the rebbe's words found their way into his heart and gave him no rest until he paid the widow's debt out of his own pocket.

—Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, *A Treasury of Classic Tales on the Torah*, pages 189–191; I have based the above on Uri Kaploun's translation of Rabbi Zevin's rendering of the tale.

