

# Dvarim

You are Good – Now Change!

*These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel.*

Dvarim 1:1

The time had come for Moshe to give rebuke to the Jewish nation. The words that Moshe spoke to them were words of chastisement, enumerating the times that they had disappointed Hashem. But our Sages teach us that Moshe was very careful not to mention those sins by name; rather, he hinted to them in a way that they could understand, for Moshe was very concerned about preserving the dignity of the Jewish people.

“All Jews have a portion in the World to Come, as it says, ‘And your nation is entirely righteous...’<sup>94</sup>” teaches the Mishnah.<sup>95</sup> This Mishnah, which is not part of Pirkei Avos, is nevertheless traditionally recited before the study of Pirkei Avos.<sup>96</sup> One wonders why this is. What connection does the Jew’s portion in the World to Come have to do with the content of Avos, and what is it that makes it the most appropriate introduction?

Shlomo wrote in Mishlei,<sup>97</sup> “Do not rebuke a *letz* [scoffer], lest he hate you; instead, rebuke a wise man and he will love you.” The Sheloh<sup>98</sup> explains, “‘You are to give rebuke to your friend, but not hold his sin over him,’ says the *passuk*. This means that you are to tell him, ‘You are such a good man, it is beneath you to do that!’ This is what the verse means when it says, ‘Do not rebuke a *letz*’; it means, do not rebuke a person and say, ‘*letz*.’ Rather, rebuke him and say, ‘*chacham*’ [wise one], and he will love you, and listen to you.” When you tell a person that he is wise, and he has something to live up to, and you actually build him up through the rebuke, the odds are that he will listen to you.

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94 Isaiah 60:21

95 Sanhedrin ch. 10, as it is printed in the Mishnah. Others have it as ch. 11, and this is how it is printed in the Talmud. See *Melech Shlomo* to Mishnayos for a comprehensive survey of the opinions.

96 *Kol Bo*, *siman* 40, tells of this custom, and explains that it is “in order to appease the minds of the simpletons.” See *Machzor Vitri*. Midrash Shmuel (introduction, s.v. *viod ani omer*) writes that we begin with “*kol Yisrael*” so that people will not grow discouraged if they find the prospect of fulfilling everything in this *mesechta* daunting. See also *Sfas Emes* to Avos, who explains that we begin Avos with “*kol Yisrael*” so that we not grow discouraged, and ends with “R. Chananya ben Akashya *omer*” so that we not feel like the mitzvos are burdensome. See also Maharal’s *Derech Chaim* (vol. 1, p. 73, in Machon Yerushalayim ed.) and *Pirkei Moshe* of R. Moshe Almoshino (s.v. *amnam*) for other reasons.

97 9:8

98 *Shnei Luchoy Habris* (R. Yeshaya Hurwitz, sixteenth century) to Parshas Kedoshim. See also *Musari HaSheloh* to Dvarim 3. See the introduction to *Kli Yakar* on Yehoshua (of R. Shmuel Laniado, the Baal Hakelim; p. 56 in Helevy ed.), where he quotes this Sheloh, though not by name, and then explains that perhaps this was the intent of the verse (Vayikra 19:17), “You shall surely rebuke *your friend*,” when it used the word “*amisecha*” (your friend).

The Rambam<sup>99</sup> tells us how to practically go about this:

If one sees a friend who has sinned, or who is traveling a path that is not good for him [i.e., even if it is not a sin per se, but it is something that will hurt him in the long run], one has a mitzvah to bring him back to being good, and to inform him that he is hurting himself with his poor behavior. When one gives another person rebuke, whether it is something personal or something that the person has done to violate a commandment of the Torah, he must do it in private, speak to him softly, in a gentle voice, and inform him that he is only telling him this for his own good, to bring him to the World to Come. If he accepts this, that is best! If not, there will be times for more extreme measures.

The Rambam teaches that rebuke needs to come from a love for the person, otherwise, it cannot work.

Perhaps we can suggest, therefore, that Pirkei Avos, which is entirely about *mussar*, and is an attempt to teach us to accept *mussar* and be better people, is introduced by telling us that we all have a portion in the World to Come (for we all – *all* Jews – start out as righteous people, and have a portion in the World to Come).

All change must come from a place of knowing that we are worthwhile, and we can accomplish – then we can change. A person who is depressed and thinks that he is worthless will rarely manage to change himself. It is only when a person has some feeling of his inherent worth that he can then truly change for the better. But that is not all. We often think that change for the better can only come because we see flaws in ourselves. But that is not so! We do, and should, try to change our flaws – that much is true – but the actual fuel for change comes from knowing our strengths. We can only muster up the strength to correct our failings and become better if it is clear to us how great we are. “If there is no love, there can be no fear,” teach our Sages. What this means is that the intense fear that is generated by a person’s measuring himself up to his Creator, and knowing that he often falls short, can only be real when he has a true awareness of the loving relationship that exists between him or her and Hashem. When we know that we are good, we can make ourselves into truly good people.

Never stop telling your children how much good you see in them, and how good they are. If you suspect that they are lying, never tell them, “You are a liar!” or that prophecy will likely fulfill itself. Tell them instead, “I know that you would never lie, since you are such a good child”; that prophecy is likely to come true as well. And do the same for yourself. Never stop telling yourself how good you are.

*Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach, in his earlier years, ran the “House of Love and Prayer” in the San Francisco area.<sup>100</sup> It was a place where people of all backgrounds and persuasions could come*

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99 *Hilchos Deos*, 6:7

100 This amazing story is found in the book *Holy Brother*, p. 16.

*and stay, and eat, and be loved. Many had nowhere else to go. A young Gentile girl named Chrissie was once staying there. She was a lost and pained person. How she had arrived there was a question that nobody knew the answer to. She told horrible stories of her father, and frequently characterized him as a “terrifying man.” After a few months of living in the house, she revealed the truth about her father. He was a Grand Dragon in the Ku Klux Klan. She would often remark, “If my father discovered that I’ve found refuge with a group of Jews, oh man, I don’t know what he would do!”*

*One day, Chrissie was on the phone talking to her mother, when her mother said, “Chrissie, I have to tell you something. Your father hired a detective to track you down, and a couple of hours ago, he discovered where you’ve been living. Dad’s on his way right now to the House of Love and Prayer to bring you back home.” Chrissie hung up the phone white as a sheet and began to scream! Rabbi Carlebach came running, “What’s happening, what is going on?” he asked. “My father is coming to get me! He could be here any minute. You don’t understand what he is capable of doing!” Rabbi Carlebach and the rest of those in the house were at a loss. They did not know what to do! And just as they began to think of a plan, there was a loud pounding at the door. “Oy gevalt!” Rabbi Carlebach shouted, and everyone, completely terrified, ran to various hiding places for cover. People took refuge in closets and showers, and some even climbed out of windows. In an instant, everyone had vanished. Everyone, that is, except for Rabbi Carlebach and Chrissie. The pounding was growing increasingly louder, and reluctantly, Rabbi Carlebach opened the door.*

*Chrissie’s father was a large, powerful man with a ruddy face and mean eyes. Rabbi Carlebach, with his yarmulke, beard and tzitzis, extended his hand, which the man completely ignored, instead barking, “Where’s my daughter, where’s Chrissie?” Rabbi Carlebach did not react at all to this question, but instead told him, in a tone of wonderment, “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting to meet you?” The man was taken aback. And suspiciously replied, “Oh yeah? Why is that?” “Because your daughter says the most unbelievable things about you!” An expression of bewilderment and confusion appeared on his face. “She does? What does she say exactly?” Shlomo answered, “Your daughter loves you so much, it’s incredible how much she loves you.” Chrissie’s father began to blink, but nevertheless, replied sarcastically, “Yeah. Sure. She loves me so much that she ran away from home.”*

*“Listen to me,” said Rabbi Carlebach, “Maybe it’s a little hard for her to express it, but brother, her love for you is so deep, so deep! You must believe it and you must accept it!” Suddenly, the Klan member began to cry. When Chrissie saw the tears flowing from her father’s eyes, she emerged from her hiding place and embraced him. They spent several hours in the living room of the House of Love and Prayer laughing and talking and catching up. As he left the house, he told Rabbi Carlebach, “You are the only Rabbi I give my permission to spend time with Chrissie. I don’t want any of the other Rabbis near my daughter.” Several weeks later, Chrissie went back and never kept in touch. Nobody knows what happened to that Grand Dragon. But it’s a pretty safe bet that after that meeting with Rabbi Carlebach, he was a changed man.*

Someone may be ready to smash heads, but if you can just see the good in him, and bring out whatever good and true feelings he may have inside, you have a good chance of changing his behavior, even if just for a few moments.

See the good in yourself, and then realize what you can live up to!