

5. “Reprove Your Neighbor”: Mutual Responsibility

Midrash Tanchuma, Mishpatim 7



Synagogue2000

The Golden Rule

One of the Torah’s most famous passages is the Jewish version of “the Golden Rule” in Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Rarely, however, is this verse cited in its full context. This verse is the final conclusion to a longer, detailed group of *mitzvot* about interpersonal relationships and justice.

Leviticus 19:15-18

לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ עוֹל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פְּנֵי־דָל וְלֹא תִהְיֶה פְּנֵי גָדוֹל
 בְּצַדֵּק תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ: לֹא־תִלְךָ רֶכִיל בְּעַמֶּיךָ לֹא תִעֲמֹד עַל־יָדַיִם
 רָעָךְ אֲנִי יְהוָה: לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ
 אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא: לֹא־תִקָּם וְלֹא־תִטֹּר אֶת־בְּנֵי
 עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָ לְרָעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

¹⁵ You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly. ¹⁶ Do not go about as a talebearer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the ETERNAL. ¹⁷ You shall not hate any of your kinsfolk in your heart. You shall surely reprove your neighbor, but incur no guilt because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people. Love your neighbor as yourself: I am the ETERNAL.

Leviticus 19:15-18

The tradition sees verses 17 and 18 as a unified set of instructions about the importance of reproof. Reproof is a respectful verbal correction or caution of another person, which cannot be mixed up with our own ego, or with anger or other emotions. Reproof, *tokachah*, demands a balance between awareness of the injury, awareness of the inner quality of one’s own heart when offering reproof, empathetic awareness of the capacity of the other to hear the reproof, and the conscientious awareness of how to speak reproof. This is not easy! The Rabbis were not sure that it could ever be done correctly, as we learn:

Rabbi Tarfon said: “(I swear) by the sacrifices if there is in this generation one [i.e., I swear that there is no one] who qualifies to reprove.” Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah said: “(I swear) by the sacrifices if there is one [i.e., I swear that there is no one] in this generation who knows how to receive reproof.” Rabbi Akiva said, “(I swear) by the sacrifices if there is one [i.e., I swear that there is no one] in this generation who knows how to reprove.”

Sifra, Kedoshim 4:8-9

The passage below comes from *Midrash Tanchuma*, a compilation of midrashic sources edited no earlier than the 8th century C.E. Since the Rabbis assume that every word in the Torah is significant, they conclude that apparent repetitions in the Torah's text are intended to expand the scope of who is responsible for engaging in reproof. The *mitzvah* of reproof, they conclude, is not a private matter between two individuals; rather, refraining from speaking out when we witness injustice threatens the community as a whole.

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ת"ר: לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ.
 יָכוֹל לֹא תִסְטְרֶנּוּ לֹא תִקְלְלֶנּוּ
 ת"ל בְּלִבְּךָ בְּשִׁנְאָה שְׂבִלֵב
 הַכְּתוּב מִדְּבַר מִנִּין לְרוּאֵה דְּבַר מְגוּנָה בַּחֲבֵרוֹ שְׂחִיב לְהוֹכִיחוֹ
 ת"ל הוֹכַח תוֹכִיחַ הוֹכִיחוֹ וְלֹא קָבַל
 מִנִּין שְׂיִחֹזֵר וְיוֹכִיחוֹ ת"ל תוֹכִיחַ יָכוֹל אֶפִּילוּ פָּנָיו מִשְׁתַּנּוֹת
 ת"ל לֹא תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטָא וְתִנָּיֵא הוֹכַח תוֹכִיחַ.

Leviticus 19:17

The Torah doubles the verb, *hoche'ach tochi'ach*, to demonstrate its intensity; since the verb is repeated twice, the reproof should be delivered even twice.

Leviticus 19:17

Our rabbis taught regarding the verse, “You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart”— perhaps this means that one should not hit them or curse them? No, the Torah teaches “in your heart;” we are speaking here even of hatred in the heart. From where do we learn that if we see something ugly in another, we are required to reprove him? [Because] the Torah says: “Reprove your neighbor.” If we reprove and she does not respond to our reproof: how do we know if we should reprove again? [We deduce this from when] the Torah says, “You shall surely reprove your neighbor.” Shall we do so if our reproof causes his face to change (i.e., embarrasses him)? The Torah says: “Incur no guilt because of him.”



אֵין לִי אֶלָּא הָרַב לְתַלְמִיד
 תַּלְמִיד לְרַב מִנֵּין ת"ל הוֹכַח תּוֹכִיחַ מִכָּל מְקוֹם
 וּמֵאֵן דְּלֹא מוֹכַח מִתְּפִיס בְּהֵוּא עוֹן
 דְּאָמַר מָר כֹּל מִי שְׂאֶפְשֵׁר לוֹ
 לְמַחוֹת בְּאַנְשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ וְאִינוּ מוֹחָה נְתַפֵּס עַל אַנְשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ
 בְּאַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ נְתַפֵּס עַל אַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ
 בְּכָל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ נְתַפֵּס עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ
 דֹא ר' חֲנִינָא מְאִי דְכָתִיב ה' בְּמִשְׁפָּט יָבוֹא עִם־זְקֵנֵי עַמּוֹ
 אִם שָׂרִים חָטְאוּ זְקֵנִים מָה חָטְאוּ
 אֶלָּא זְקֵנִים שְׁלֵא מַחוּ בְּשָׂרִים:

Further, our rabbis taught [about the verse]: "Reprove your kinsfolk." I might take this to mean only that a teacher is obligated to reprove a student. From where do we learn that it is also incumbent on a student to reprove the teacher? The Torah says, "You shall surely reprove your kinsfolk," regardless of the circumstances or who it is. Moreover, one who refrains from reprovving others ultimately is caught up in their transgression, as we learn in the Talmud: One who has the capacity to reprove the members of his household and does not do so suffers for the actions of his household—the people of his city, he suffers for the actions of his city; the whole world, he suffers for the actions of the whole world. This is what Rabbi Hanina taught: What is the meaning of the verse, "The ETERNAL will bring this charge against the elders of the people and the officers"? If the officers transgressed, what was the sin of the elders [since the officers have ultimate authority]? The elders are charged for not having reprovved the officers.

Babylonian Talmud,
Avodah Zarah 18a

Isaiah 3:14



Probing the Text

1. Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah and Rabbi Akiva each allude to an instruction in the Torah's text. What passage from the Leviticus text corresponds to each of their statements?
2. What should be considered an "ugly" action? Does this list depend on whether or not it is something for which you might consider reproofing another?
3. What do you think would be the characteristics of a community in which it is possible and acceptable to reprove and in which reproof would be well received?

Ourselves and Our Congregations

1. Is there someone in your life from whom you accept reproof? Do you welcome it? Is this a reciprocal relationship?
2. The second paragraph teaches us that reproof is non-hierarchical. Is this a value in your congregation? Are there mechanisms by which the clergy and other staff members receive reproof? In what ways can the clergy express reproof that will be both effective and acceptable?
3. The end of the *Tanchuma* passage challenges us to speak out about injustice with in our family, our city and the world. In the biblical tradition, this was the role of the prophets. How and when do you express reproof in these spheres?
4. Would you want to make this a character trait of your congregation? Why or why not?
5. Do you know anyone who really is qualified to reprove anyone else? Who is truly able to receive reproof? Who is able to reprove in an acceptable manner? How do you feel around each of these people? Would you like to be more like them in any way?
6. In our society, who is subject to reproof in public? Does the limit expressed in the first paragraph apply here? Is it counterbalanced at all by the concern of the second paragraph? How do we work out this balance?

