

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



## HOW TO IMPROVE; DON'T REPROVE

### K'doshim

I'll show that So-and-So. I'll make a bold sign describing their faults, and wave it in a crowd. Believe it or not, people think that they are fulfilling a command in this week's Torah reading by holding up placards or chanting at protests. The Mitzva appears in the verse: Reprove your colleague, so that you will not share in their guilt (Vayikra 19:17). Sadly, they ignore that next phrase: But don't incur sin on their account.

Let's further explore this precept. This rule is one of the laws in the section of our Torah which is often called the Book of Holiness, and as Prof. Everett Fox points out: they have become an exemplar and a cornerstone, at least in idealized form, in Western thinking about these issues.

What issues? This section, 'presents the longing for perfection and wholeness as properly expressed through a discipline of behavior in all areas of life, personal and communal.' It also contains, 'a moving positive plea for proper treatment of the elderly, the poor, and, in general, one's "neighbor" and extends to "sojourner".'

Our section therefore defines the moral

and 'holy' individual. Initially, and primarily, such an individual must be concerned for their own behavior, but our verse extends this responsibility to concern and responsibility towards others. If I am really a moral person then I should want to dwell in an ethical community. Then I must be interested in the behavior of those with whom I interact. How do I achieve that goal?

On this point the verse is very clear: Don't incur sin!!

How can I 'incur sin'? Well, basically in two ways. First we have the 'concerned citizen' approach (which could also be called the 'busy body' approach). This model is described by the Ramban: for you will bear sin because of his transgression if you do not rebuke him. In other words: I must do something when I see something. It sounds cool, but can very quickly lead to trouble, and conflict. Many of us don't take MUSAR or chastisement very calmly.

Let's check door number two. This is, perhaps, the Silence is Golden approach. As the Orchot Tzadikim says: 'You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and thus not bear sin because of his wrongful conduct', which means that first you must rebuke him gently, and in private, pleading with him that you are thinking only of his own good. And then sin will not accrue to you. But if you rebuke your companion right at the beginning, with an angry voice and with wrath, and you shame him, then you are sinning, for

your companion will not accept correction from you.

In other words, don't incur a sin by embarrassing or hurting a friend or neighbor. Rav Yaakov Medan of Yeshivat Har Etziyon clearly states: Keeping silent is of utmost importance! He says this both in our context, but also in the context of parenting. It's not always easy, but often holding your piece is the best advice.

The Malbim clarifies these ideas with three rules:

1. The person giving MUSAR or chastisement must be free of sin (especially the specific sin under discussion).
2. The other party must give some hint that they are prepared to accept chastisement. And then
3. Give the MUSAR gently without causing any embarrassment.

Now we can understand why Rabi Tarfon (who lived in the 2nd century CE) said that his whole generation should refrain from MUSAR because no one was free of sin, and the Talmud also states: Just as it is a Mitzva to say something that will be heeded, so it is a Mitzva not to say something that will not be heeded (Yevamot 65b).

As a Rabbi, teacher and parent, I relatively often found myself in a position where MUSAR was expected (or even requested) of me. I never found it easy or pleasant, and often shrank from

the responsibility, which made the requester unhappy. Generally, there was no winning option. Baruch Hashem I'm retired, and am rarely called upon for those chores anymore. Plus, now my kids have kids, so I get to watch them squirm, which is also uncomfortable.

So, is there really anyone who thinks that by holding up a sign on the Ayalon Expressway or in Paris Square, one is fulfilling the Mitzva of rendering MUSAR? Based on many websites and chat rooms the answer seems to be 'yes'. However, based on reality the answer is a resounding NO!

I am not against expressing opinions or demonstrating. I invested a lot of time in my youth demonstrating for Civil Rights, against the War in Viet Nam and for Soviet Jewry. I'm also very proud of my own kids who protested on hills in Efrat and squares in Yerushalayim. But those are exercises in concerned citizenship, not the Mitzva of MUSAR.

However, both activities should have one important factor in common. And that is: Be civil, even polite. Whether the offending party is a neighbor or a politician, they are human beings who deserve our care, concern and civility. No matter how rotten their behavior or policies! We must preserve our Menschlichkeit. 🤝