

THE RIGHT WAY TO CRITICIZE

Category: Bereishis, Lech Lecha

For 120 years, Noach failed to bring a single person to repentance. How did Avraham pull it off?

Avraham vs. Noach

The other day, I was talking to someone who supports raising taxes. I asked him, “Aren’t you worried that your own taxes will go up?” He replied, “No, I actually want that to happen....” Interesting, isn’t it? Here was someone who knew that his taxes would go up but was ready to gladly pay more!

Every rabbi I know has tried to convince people to donate just a little more to all sorts of positive causes—and I never heard of anyone being happy to give more. So what exactly is the secret?

In this week’s Torah portion, Lecha Lecha, the Torah begins by telling us about the “souls made in Charan,” which Rashi explains to mean the non-Jews whom Avraham “brought in under the wings of the Shechina,” the Divine Presence—“Avraham converted the men and Sarah converted the women.”

Our Patriarch Avraham didn’t keep his faith in G-d to himself. Rather, he busied himself in making faith in G-d popular, and he was very successful at it—“to the point that thousands and myriads gathered around him, and they were Avraham’s men,” as Maimonides tells us.

On the other hand, we read about Noach last week. There, the Torah tells us that Noach built the Ark over the course of 120 years so that everyone would see that there would be a flood. Still, Noach failed to convince even one person to repent.

Not only that, but the Torah tells us that G-d commanded him to build a giant boat: 450 feet long, 75 feet high and 45 feet wide—and with three decks: the bottom for garbage, the middle for animals and the top for people. (This, by the way, teaches us that animals and people should not live together on the same floor, unlike today when the family dog sleeps with its masters in the same bed.)

The Man in the Bathhouse

Now, we can understand why the Ark needed a full floor for the animals: There were a lot of animals brought on board. But why an entire floor for just a handful of humans?

It wasn't a penthouse, that's for sure—otherwise Noach could not have possibly afforded the rent. The answer, my friends, is that the original plan was that a lot of people would get on board the Ark and live on that floor—so G-d told Noach to reserve the entire floor just for humans. But what actually happened? Only Noach and his family got on the Ark: In 120 years, Noach did not succeed in convincing even one person to repent and get on board with him. Amazing!

Around 1940, a young chosid named Rabbi Sholom Ber Gordon was appointed as a rabbi in Newark, New Jersey. After a time he had a private audience with the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchok Schneerson (who passed away in 1950), at which he told the Rebbe that his congregants don't like his sermons because they don't like hearing rebuke.

“Have you ever been to a ‘Shvitz’?” the Rebbe asked him. The Rebbe then began to describe to Rabbi Gordon what goes on at a traditional European bathhouse. Men would go to the bathhouse to scrub themselves clean—but more than that, they'd go there to sweat. There would be a special room in the bathhouse in which special furnaces generated tremendous heat. Along the walls of this room would be steps. When you'd step up to the first step, you'd warm up and get used to the heat. Once you got used to the heat on the first step, you'd start sweating. Then you'd go up to the second step, where it was even hotter. By the third step, it would be quite hot indeed.

Once you got up to the third step, you'd find an attendant of sorts whose entire job was to beat visitors on the back with a special stiff brush. This beating was considered very relaxing and therapeutic and the attendant would be paid just to stand there and basically hit people.

The Rebbe continued to Rabbi Gordon: “Imagine if this beater would meet people as soon as they entered the bathhouse, before they warmed up, and started beating them over the back. Not only would they not pay him, but they'd get mad and probably beat him up too! They might even take him to court.”

“What’s the difference?” asked the Rebbe. “Why is it that they would ask to get beaten on the third step and would even pay for it, but not when they enter? The answer is obvious: When the person is still cold, he has no interest in getting beaten up by anyone. But once he warms up and goes from level to level, then once he’s at the top step and nice and sweaty then on the contrary: he enjoys it.

The Rebbe concluded: “It’s the same thing in Judaism. If you meet a person and immediately begin attacking him with criticism when he’s still cold to you, he will certainly not appreciate it. What first needs to be done is to warm him up and bring him up from level to level. And then, once he’s nice and warm, then it’s possible to hit him—not only will he not get angry at you but just the opposite: he’ll thank you for it.”

Start With Warmth

This, my friends, is the difference between Noach and Avraham.

Noach started off with criticism. He scared everyone off with his message of gloom and doom: A great flood is coming, everyone’s going to die, and so on. Obviously, no one wanted to hear that! Not only that, but they got angry at him.

Avraham, on the other hand, first invited everyone to eat something, drink a little l’chaim, sing a Chasidic nigun, and warm up a bit. Then he lifted them from level to level, and once they were ready to take it, then he gave them criticism—and not only did they not get angry but just the opposite: they became his followers.

This is a lesson for us. We often find ourselves very busy criticizing others: “Why didn’t you come to shul on Shabbos?” “I can’t believe that you didn’t such-and-such!” We find ourselves acting the same way towards our own kids, and then we complain that our kids never listen when we tell them to do something.

But the solution is obvious: Of course people don’t want criticism and attacks out of the blue—so first warm them up, soften them, talk with them, and raise them up. And then, not only will they not get angry when you criticize them, but they just might even pay you for it.