

“Compassionate Candor” and the Mitzvah to Rebuke

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An interesting question came up in our High Holiday prep class a couple weeks ago:

Can you forgive someone who doesn't *ask* for forgiveness?

We know Judaism teaches us that when we've wronged another person, it's *our* responsibility to apologize and ask for their forgiveness.

And when someone who's wronged *us* asks sincerely for *our* forgiveness, we're supposed to grant it.

But what if someone has hurt us and they *don't* apologize, or even say anything about it?

Do they not know we're hurt? Do they *know*, but think they didn't do anything wrong? Do they know and not *care*?

Our imaginations have no problem filling the silence.

We interpret, we weave grand narratives about them in our head, we awfulize, we badmouth them to other people.

And as time goes on, the anger and resentment compound, and the relationship becomes more strained and distant.

And our conversations—if there *are* any—become stilted, and we become more and more distrustful of them, and maybe one day we explode at them in anger.

Or we just seethe for years in silence.

This obviously isn't healthy. So, what do we do about it?

Some traditions would say: just go ahead and forgive them.

You don't need to talk to them about it. It's not about *them* anyway, it's about *you*—so forgive them in your heart and let it go.

But that's not the Jewish way.

See, in Judaism, it's all about the *relationship*.

Forgiveness is about *restoring the relationship to wholeness*.

And this can *only* happen between the two people who are *in* the relationship. *Both* have to be active participants in reconciliation. There's no way around it.

So, to prevent us from stewing in it when someone who's hurt us doesn't apologize, the Torah gives us Mitzvah #239 (which we'll read in the afternoon service):

The mitzvah to *rebuke*.

“Do not hate your kinsfolk in your heart,” it says. “You shall *rebuke* them. Do not bring guilt upon yourself because of them” (Lev. 19:17).

This is a tough one.

“Rebuke” sounds so harsh.

I looked it up on Thesaurus.com to see if there might be some way of putting it that sounds a little better, but no such luck. Here’s what it gave me.

Synonyms for “rebuke”:

“To chide.” “To give an earful.” “To lecture.” “To dress down.” “To chew out.”

Oy. Let me be clear: The Torah is *not* telling you to go and chew out people who haven’t apologized for wronging you.

The meaning of the Hebrew must be getting lost in translation.

After all, it *is* a mitzvah, so it *should* be something *helpful* to the relationship—which chewing out and lecturing definitely are *not*.

The classical commentators say rebuking is about giving the person the opportunity to share *their* side of the story.

Maybe they didn’t mean it the way you heard it. Maybe you “suspected them of something they didn’t do.”¹

And, our tradition says, it’s a conversation you should have *privately* so as not to cause them embarrassment.²

It’s not supposed to be an act of aggression; it’s meant to be an act of *respect*, because you’re taking the initiative to talk about what happened rather than letting it fester.

The idea is to show them you care about the relationship, and you want to help fix what’s broken between you.

So, rather than calling it the mitzvah to “*rebuke*,” we might better describe it as the mitzvah to “bring it up,” or to “have a heart-to-heart,” or to “be honest about how you’re feeling.”

That’s the theory anyway.

But if you’ve ever tried it, you know it can be very dangerous territory.

It has to be handled sensitively. If you miss the mark, it can make things worse.

So, you really have to think about some important questions:

What are my motivations here? Does the mitzvah apply to this situation or not? How do I have the conversation in a way that will be *helpful* and not *hurtful*?

Unfortunately, the Sages don’t offer much guidance on how to have 21st-century heart-to-heart conversations.

But it *is* a major topic of discussion in modern literature on relationships and communication.

And I have found one author in particular—a former executive at both Google and Apple named Kim Scott³—to be especially helpful to me in understanding how to do this mitzvah.

I’ve worked hard to put her insights into practice in my own life, and I’d like to share with you what I’ve learned from her.

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She says there are two essential ingredients to effective heart-to-hearts:

First, we have to show the other person that we *care* about them.

No matter how close we are, this can't be *assumed*. We have to *say* it and convince them that we *mean* it.

If we don't do this successfully, it doesn't matter *what* we say after that. They won't be able to hear it in the way we intend it, and the whole conversation will backfire.

Second, we have to speak *directly*. Be clear and straightforward about what we mean. No beating around the bush.

Otherwise, what we have to say won't help solve *anything*.

If and *only* if we have these two key elements—one: we show that we care; *and* two: we speak directly—then we are offering what she calls "Compassionate Candor." That's what we're going for.

But if we're missing *either* one of these two ingredients, we have something else entirely—and either way, it can be very damaging to our relationships.

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If we show the other person that we care about them, but we don't speak directly, we're offering them what Kim Scott calls "Ruinous Empathy."

This is something we all do, right?

Our friend or family member or colleague does something that upsets us, but we don't want to hurt their feelings or make them mad.

So, we decide just to keep quiet.

It's an easier path for sure, and we probably feel it's the kind and caring thing to do.

But over time, the resentment and bad feelings that will build up inside us could ruin the relationship.

The other person will have no clue about the drama taking place in our head or the feelings in our heart, and they may not understand why we're being cold to them or pulling away from them or complaining about them behind their back.

So, if our relationship falls apart as a result, *we* will be the one at fault for not being honest with them when we had the chance.

And that's not fair to *them*, even if they *were* the one who wronged *us* first.

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On the other hand, if we share our hurt feelings honestly and directly but we *don't* show that we genuinely care about them as a person, we're taking the path of "Obnoxious Aggression."

Chewing someone out just to stick it to them is obviously wrong.

But Obnoxious Aggression can also come from a place of caring and good intention. It's all in *how* we approach it.

Imagine we go to the person and say, "I have some feelings I just need to get off my chest." And then we just unload it on them. (Have you ever done that?)

We may *think* we're offering them Compassionate Candor because we're being honest and direct with them.

But if it's all about what *we* need to say, what *we're* feeling, what *we* want *them* to know, then our focus is on tending to our *self*, not on repairing our *relationship*.

And we're forgetting that to care about the other person means to care about how they *receive* what we have to say and how they *experience* our intentions.

If they experience us as being judgmental or critical or self-centered, we have failed at Compassionate Candor.

They have to *believe* that we're sharing our feedback because we care about *them*, and we care about our *relationship*. And it's on *us* to convince them of it.

So, before we initiate a conversation, we need to check our self.

—Are the feelings we're planning to share *really* about how this person has *hurt* us, or are they just frustrations over differences of opinion and different ways of doing things?

—Are we doing this because we want to get to forgiveness and reconciliation, or are we just getting stuff off our chest we want them to hear?

—And when we're talking, are we really *showing* them that we care about *them*, or are we coming across as too focused on our self?

One is Compassionate Candor; the other is Obnoxious Aggression.

And it can be a very fine line between them.

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So, back to the original question: Can we forgive someone who doesn't ask for forgiveness?

I think the answer Judaism gives us is: Well, do this first:

Have a heart-to-heart conversation with this person.

Don't blame. Don't lecture. Don't chew them out.

But don't avoid the conversation either, because that's just as bad.

Tell them how you feel about what they did and how it hurt you. Let them share *their* side of the story, too.

Show them you care about *them* and about your *relationship*. Speak honestly and directly. Offer them Compassionate Candor.

Because our relationships with the people we love are too precious to give up on just because we're too proud or too afraid or too conflict-avoidant to try to repair them.

Have the hard conversations *now*, while you still can.

No matter *who's* at fault, it's *your* responsibility to do what you can to help make the relationship whole again.

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So, as you spend time reflecting today, try to think of someone in your life *you* can offer Compassionate Candor to.

And then do it.

No more stewing. No more avoiding.

Reach out and have a heart-to-heart.

It's a mitzvah.

¹ Ibn Ezra, Lev. 19:17

² See Rashi, Lev. 19:17

³ See Kim Scott, *Radical Candor* (Fully revised and updated edition, 2019)