

“AND MORDECHAI TOLD ESTHER ... ‘AND WHO KNOWS IF IT’S FOR THIS REASON THAT YOU BECAME THE QUEEN.’” (ESTHER 4:13-14)

“One should not push away the person being rebuked”

WHEN MORDECHAI ASKED Esther to approach Achashveirosh and plead with him to save her people from destruction, Esther hesitated. It was not yet her turn to see the king, and if she would enter the throne room uninvited she would deserve to be killed. It would be better, Esther reasoned, to wait until summoned to see the king, and then present her case. Mordechai responded harshly to this reasoning. “If you (Esther) are silent at this time,” Mordechai threatened, “(Hashem’s) salvation will come from other sources and you and your family will be destroyed.” Then Mordechai continued on a more encouraging note, “And who knows if it’s for this reason you became queen.” The Midrash (Shocheh Tov, Tehillim 22) cites this incident as a source-lesson in how to correct others: “One should not push away with both hands, but rather distance with the right hand, while bringing closer with the left.” In other words, although Mordechai had to use strong, threatening language, he softened the blow of his reprimand by concluding with a positive statement – maybe this is the reason Hashem caused Achashveirosh to choose you to be his queen!

She merely disagreed with Mordechai on the most effective approach

Our sages derived an important guideline in the laws of rebuke from this incident. They understood that Mordechai sensed that a two-handed rebuke would not be properly accepted by Esther. Had Mordechai not tempered his words, his rebuke would have been rejected to some degree. But we are talking about the great and righteous Esther! She was one of only seven female prophetesses mentioned in Tanach. She was surely a humble *tzadekes* untainted by personal ego. Her intentions were focused solely on the best way to save her nation from destruction. She merely disagreed with Mordechai on the most effective approach, and at worst had only a slight, subconscious bias that influenced her thinking. Could it be possible that she would have somehow rebuffed Mordechai’s request had he not have added those few mitigating words?

We all remain at least a little “allergic” to reprimand

The Midrash is teaching us the delicate sensitivity of the human personality. Even the greatest and most righteous among us can be challenged when confronted with criticism and correction. No one is immune from having some degree of hurt and insult when we are rebuked. Together with our noble essence, as beings created in the image of Hashem, we carry a sensitivity to any lowering of that dignity. Mordechai, the leader of his generation, was acutely aware of this delicate aspect of human nature. Had he not ended on that positive note, Esther might not have been able to fully absorb his message, and perhaps her actions might have reflected that difference.

There are two areas of practical application to this lesson: the delivery of rebuke and the acceptance. In both cases we must remember that we all remain at least a little “allergic” to reprimand. When criticizing others we must always soften the blow with a positive encouraging message. In receiving a reprimand, let us be aware that when we are criticized we are likely to put up defensive barriers to even the most imperative truths. If we focus on admonishing others out of love and concern for them, we will find ourselves being careful with the feelings of the recipient; if we anticipate our own sensitivity to reprimand, we will find it easier to accept it and improve ourselves to reach our true potential.