

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
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*Criticizing Obama & Israel*

There is a story told of a minister who was opening his mail one morning. Drawing a single sheet of paper from an envelope, he found written on it only word: JERK. The next Sunday he stood before his congregation and announced, "I have known many people who have written letters and forgot to sign their name. But this week I received a letter from someone who signed his name, but forgot to write a letter!"

This story relates to what must be considered one of the – if not THE most difficult – mitzvot in the entire Torah. If I were to ask you what is the most difficult mitzvah, some might say keeping kosher, some might say observing Shabbos. But no, from our sages' perspective what might be considered the most difficult mitzvah in the entire Torah is found in today's Torah portion, found in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 19. There, in verse 18, we find the immortal words: "*V'ahavtah l'reiacha kamocho* – you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Everyone would agree that that is not an easy mitzvah to keep, especially if you've got neighbors like some of mine! But that's not the one our sages underscored for its difficulty. That was reserved for a mitzvah in the sentence before that where we are told, "*Hochai'ach tochiach et amitecha* – you shall surely rebuke your friend." Yes, there is a commandment ... we are obligated to express our criticism, to express our disapproval, to rebuke our fellow man, when they do wrong! If we don't express these criticisms then our friends will never know their own faults, and we shall grow to dislike them more and more – in our hearts. It is better for them – and for us – that we express these criticisms and articulate the rebuke. But that, as most of you are aware of, is easier said than done. In fact, in the Talmud we are told that Rabbi Tarphon said: "*Temihani im yesh bador hazeh shemekabel tochachah* – I wonder if there is anyone left in this generation who knows how to take criticism." But Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah responded: "*Temihani im yesh bador hazeh sheyodeya l'hochiach* - I would be more surprised to find someone left in this generation who knows how to *give* criticism!" Thousands of years ago our sages understood that it's not so easy for a person to accept criticism. But it is even more difficult for one to criticize properly! Which leads me to do something today that I'm not sure I know when I will do again. Today I rise to the defense of President Barack Obama.

When Barack Obama ran for President I felt the country needed a change. When Barack Obama ran for President I felt that the election of a black man would be a monumental event for our country, and would send a positive message throughout the world. When Barack Obama ran for President, as many of you know, I didn't vote for him. The bottom line was: I found myself more in agreement with the policies of Sen. McCain than I did with the policies of Barack Obama. And I still feel that way! And yet, when Barack Obama was elected President I said from this pulpit: "The election of Barack Obama as President of the U.S. is one of the most remarkable events I have experienced as an American. Let us pray for his success. Barack Obama is not just to be President of black Americans or Democrat Americans or liberal Americans ... he is to be my President ... and yours" And I still feel that way!

But while I wished him well in his Presidency, well did I know that he would be espousing policies and taking positions with which I – and many others – would disagree, and that it was our right as Americans, indeed, as we’ve seen, our obligation as Jews, to criticize and rebuke when we feel an elected official is making a mistake. But I’ve got to tell you, nothing prepared me for the kind of criticism that Obama has been getting. Chuck Norris, the karate-machine, writes in a conservative blog, “How much more will Americans take? When will enough be enough, and when that times comes, will our leaders finally listen or will history need to record a second American revolution?” How much more will Americans take? Obama’s only been President for 3 months and it’s already time for a second American revolution? Revolution? Against whom? The majority who voted for him? That sounds more like a civil war! Obama is being called everything from a “second Charles Manson,” to a “closet Mussolini!” Fox News’ new star, Glenn Beck, apologized to his viewers for saying Mr. Obama’s America is on the path to “socialism” when it’s really on the march to “fascism.” Really? Did you know that? Did you know that Rep. Michelle Bachmann of Minnesota has urged her fellow Minnesotans to be “armed and dangerous.” I disagree with much of what Obama has proposed, but nothing he has proposed is as dangerous as people calling for a revolution and for Americans to be “armed and dangerous.”

Critics of Obama should take to heart the words written by David Horowitz, himself a conservative thinker writing in Front Page Magazine: “My fellow right-wingers, calm down! The new President is not the anti-Christ, Stalin or even a radical ... neither our support nor our opposition should be based on hysterical responses to policies that we just don’t like. Let’s leave that kind of behavior to the liberals who invented it.” Yes, it was the liberals who used to – and still do – call George Bush “another Hitler.” Did that serve any purpose? Did that change anyone’s minds?

Liberals and conservatives, critics of Bush and critics of Obama should take to heart the words of the great Jewish philosopher, Yehudah Halevi, who wrote in his magnum opus, the Kuzari, that if you *reprove* your intent must be to *improve*. The purpose of criticism must be to help encourage the person to change their ways. The Torah tells us: “*Hocheyach tochiach et amitecho* – you should criticize your friend.” Criticism should be given in a way that the person will remain your friend ... that the person will hear you, listen to you and learn from you. Calling Obama “a fascist” and calling Obama “the next Mussolini,” is not criticism in the spirit of friendship. It is not criticism that encourages change. It is criticism that breeds resentment.

The critics of Israel should keep this in mind. There is no country in this world that receives more criticism than the state of Israel. And the fact of the matter is, Israel – like every other country – has its flaws and makes mistakes, and is open to criticism. In fact, there are few countries in the world where the people are more critical of themselves than are the Israelis. But criticism must be given in a spirit of friendship. I tell you right now that I have every reason to believe that in the coming months and years I will find reason to criticize some of the Obama administration’s policies in regard to Israel, although, truth to tell, there really hasn’t been much to criticize to date.

But the time will come! The time will come when I will raise my voice in criticism of Obama’s approach toward Israel; whether it is in regard to Iran, or negotiations with the Palestinians or settlements ... it will come. But I tell you right now, when it comes, I am not going to accuse Barack Obama of being an anti-Semite, as some people do. I am never going to accuse Barack Obama and his administration of being anti-Israel, as some people do. I will criticize in a spirit of friendship and in a manner that will encourage the administration to re-think its policies.

Sad to say, this is not true of many of the critics of Israel. Being an anti-Zionist does not necessarily make one an anti-Semite. But it helps. One can be a critic of the Jewish state without necessarily being a Jew-hater. After all, there are – sadly – some Jews who are Israel’s severest critics. But there is a way of differentiating between those who criticize Israel and yet mean it no harm, and those who criticize Israel because they mean all of us no good. In the Torah’s telling us the commandment to criticize it says: “*Hocheiyach tochiach*” ... the doubling of the word can be read to teach us that criticism is illegitimate if it only goes in one direction. Those who criticize Israel for what it does, but remain silent when other countries do the same, I would not trust with my life. Seemingly, the whole world criticized Israel for the deaths and destruction it caused in Gaza. It was front page news when it was reported that several Israeli soldiers claimed that innocent Palestinian civilians were intentionally killed in Gaza. When it was discovered that there was no basis for that report, it was not front page news. And neither was it front page news when last week Human Rights Watch reported that it had discovered that before, during and after the war Hamas in Gaza killed, tortured, wounded and imprisoned hundreds of their own people; some of whom they called “collaborators,” others of whom were killed and tortured simply because they support Palestinian Fatah instead of Hamas. Where was the world’s outrage? If you criticize Israel and not them ... you’re criticism is not given in a spirit of friendship.

And it certainly is not given in a spirit of friendship when it is Israel – and Israel alone – which is accused of “Auschwitz-like executions,” having a “Zionist SS,” building “concentration camps.” Is it really true that Israelis are the last remaining Nazis in this world? “*Hocheiyach tochiach*” ... in criticizing others you should first take a good look at yourself and see what is really motivating you. And there is a simple way for you to tell what’s motivating you. If, at times, you criticize Israel but at times you also praise it ... then you have a right to claim to be a friend. But if all you ever do is criticize Israel, if you can never find anything good to say about Israel, even if you’re a Jew – a Jew like Tony Judt or a Roger Cohen ... then one thing’s for sure: you’re no friend of mine ... or of my people. If you claim that you are criticizing Israel for its own good, then how about once in a while complimenting Israel for its own good? That country is so beleaguered, that country faces threats to its annihilation ... a nice word would be so good to hear once in a while.

That is a lesson we should all take to heart. All of us are pretty good critics ... in our own homes. And certainly, criticism has a place in our homes. The Midrash tells us: “*Kol ahavah she’ein imah tochacha eyna ahavah* – any love which does not contain the element of criticism is not really love.” Yes, love is not blind, and in love there should be an attempt to improve one another. But when we criticize our loved ones and say, “We’re doing it for your own good ...” we have to honestly ask ourselves: is that the only reason why we’re doing it? It’s an easy question to answer. If you are criticizing for their own good, then there must be times when you are complimenting for their own good as well.

One of those formative experiences in the rabbinate took place many years ago when a lovely woman came to see me and showed me a book and asked that I look at the handwritten inscription. It read: “To \_\_\_ because I love you, because you’re a wonderful wife, because you’ve given me so many happy years.” I immediately asked her, “How come your husband didn’t sign his name?” “Rabbi,” she replied, “You’re going to think I’m crazy but I have to tell you ... I wrote it to myself. I needed to hear the words ... I needed someone to say it to me. I haven’t heard a decent word for so long that I had to write it to myself. Rabbi, tell me, am I crazy?” No, she is not crazy ... she’s human! We all are. So when we must criticize – and criticize we must – let us do it as human beings should: in a genuine spirit of friendship. And in a genuine spirit of love and friendship, let us also find something good to say. Let that be the way critics of Obama, critics of Israel, critics in our own home give their rebukes in a true spirit of

friendship so that we will be able to see the fulfillment of that other difficult mitzvah in our Torah portion: “*V’ahavta l’reacha k’mocho* – all of us will be closer to the dream of being able to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.” Amen.

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