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**"LET CRITICISM BE WELCOME"**

**A SERMON PREACHED BY  
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It may come as a surprise to some of us that criticism is not only regarded as a virtue by Judaism, but is included as a full biblical commandment, one of the 613 *mitzvot*. "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart, *hokheiaich tokhiach et amitekha* — thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbor, and not bear sin because of him" (Lev. 19:17). As long as a man is rational he will form opinions about his fellow men; and as long as his fellow men are human they will be imperfect. It is natural, therefore, that our judgment of each other sometimes be adverse. If we cannot and do not express these criticisms, then our neighbors 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 — *hokheiaich tokhiach* — and thus prevent all of society from falling into sin.

Indeed, not only is criticism one of the important commandments, but it is one of the main *functions* of all religion. Torah was meant to serve as the spiritual leaven in the life of man and society. It was meant to raise us higher and higher. This it does by serving as our critic, by focusing the spotlight of attention on the distance between the ideal and the real, by revealing to us our imperfections and thus urging us to strive for the perfect.

Moses and Balaam were both prophets. They lived at the same time and preached to the same people of Israel. Moses was incisive, merciless in his criticism of his people, and caused them great unhappiness by making them painfully aware of their inadequacy. Balaam, the gentile prophet, spoke only kind words to them. He hailed them, complimented them, blessed them, flattered them. While Moses berated them as stubborn and corrupt. Balaam greeted them with *Mah Tovu* — "how goodly are thy tents, O Jacob." Yet Moses is the archetype of the *nevi ha-emet*, the true prophet, while Balaam is the *nevi ha-sheker*, the prophet of falsehood. Moses who criticized is truly a prophet; Balaam who did not is merely a soothsayer — literally, he said soothing things calculated to put his happy listeners into moral slumber and spiritual stupor. At the time that Moses spoke our ancestors may have felt scandalized by his irritating remarks. Yet the judgment of history was reverence for the prophet and critic, and utter condemnation for the soothsayer and propagandist. Moses made of us a holy people. Balaam almost pushed us over the threshold of depraved immortality with the *benot Moav*, the daughters of Moab.

What Moses was to his generation, the Torah of Moses must be to every generation, including or even especially our own. When religion begins to do nothing more than tranquilize us, soothe us, and sanctify our status quo, it is no longer religion; it is then merely a shallow therapy for arm-chair psychiatrists. It is Balaam's trade-mark. It is when religion fails to criticize that it deserves to be criticized itself — just as Balaam who should have criticized and did not was himself the object of criticism by — his *chamor*, his donkey!

That is why the pulpit too must be not only a source of inspiration and education, but even more so: criticism. It may occasionally be annoying, even irritating. But if our imperfections are hidden behind a veil of innocuous platitudes, then the voice of Torah has been silenced. The great talmudic teacher Abaye once remarked (*Keutbot* 105b) that if a rabbi is very much liked by the townspeople it is often not so much because of his superiority as because of the fact that he tactfully refrains from every kind of criticism!

When we insist, time and again, that Orthodoxy today must not be silent, we do not mean merely that it avail itself of every channel of publicity just to mimic others and, so to speak, jump on the organizational bandwagon of other groups. Cooperate we must; but in all matters we must, on the basis of our Torah ideals, be critical and expose that which is non-Jewish and anti-Jewish. Whether it be a question of federal aid to Jewish day schools or a problem of synagogue architecture or a matter of kosher or non-kosher meals at the affairs of Jewish organizations, we must never be afraid to be respectfully critical. *Hokheiach tokhiach et amitekha*. As long as we regard our fellow Jew as *amitekha*, "thy friend," we must not abstain from the *mitzvah* of criticism.

What is true for religion is true for democracy. A democracy cannot survive if there is no right of criticism. The freedom to criticize the government is what determines whether the government is a democracy or a dictatorship. The difference between a good democracy and a poor one is the extent to which the citizens avail themselves of this right. No nation, society, or people can live on a high moral plane if criticism is either absent or suppressed. That is why we American Jews should not consider it an act of treachery when one of us is critical of the State of Israel, provided it is done in the proper spirit. Nor should we be hypersensitive to some of the very justified criticisms leveled at American Jewry by our Israeli brothers. The Rabbis rightly declared (*Shabbat* 119b) that Jerusalem was destroyed because its citizens failed to exercise their duty to criticize one another.

Our Rabbis even ventured the idea that criticism has a place in domestic life. *Kol ahavah she'ein imah tokhachah einah ahavah* — a love which does not contain the element of criticism is not really love (*Ber. R.* 54:3). Love between husband and wife in which there is no recognition of each other's faults is static and must soon fade away. When love is not blind but critical, when there is an attempt, in the spirit of love, to improve each other, then that *ahavah* is dynamic, it leads to growth and development.

But of course this is a tall order. The practice of *tokhachah* or criticism, in the spirit the Torah means it, is a most difficult art. It is so painful to be criticized, even for small things, especially when we realize that the reproach is justified! And it is even more difficult to reprove a friend in the proper manner, so that I cause him the least anguish and am most assured that the criticism will have a successful result: the correction of the mistake. How interesting that in an age far richer in greatness and nobility than ours, the sainted Rabbi Tarphon remarked *temihani im yesh ba-dor ha-zeh she-mekabel tokhachah* — "I wonder if there is anyone left in this generation who knows how to take criticism" — and Rabbi Alazar ben Azariah answered *temihani im yesh ba-dor ha-zeh she-yodeia le-hokhiach* — "I would be more surprised to find someone left in this generation who knows how to give criticism" (*Arakhin* 16b). If my purpose in criticizing you is only that I seem bigger in comparison, that I sadistically needle you, then I am captious, not critical; then my remarks are an *averah*, not a *mitzvah*; for then I do not observe *hokheiach tokhiach* but rather violate *ha-malbin pnei chavero*, insulting another human being. True criticism, said the philosopher poet Yehudah Halevi (*Kuzari* 5:20), is such that you must reprove with intent to improve — in other words: *teshuvah*, repentance, or religious and moral growth, must be the goal of criticism. And this noble aim of *hokheiach tokhiach* can be achieved only if it is given in a spirit of profound friendship, in love, in loyalty; the object of the reproof must be *amitekha*, your dear friend, and you must give it so that he remains your

friend. The Talmud (*San.* 101b) maintains that Jerobaam, the idol-worshipping king who split Jewry into two nations, was rewarded with the crown *mipnei she-hokhiach et Shelomoh*, because he had the courage to criticize King Solomon. And why was he ultimately punished? — *mipnei she-hokhicho be'rabbim*, because he reproached him publicly and thereby embarrassed him! Great is the man who can accept criticism. Greater yet is he who welcomes it. But greatest of all is he who knows how to administer it in a spirit of love and sensitivity, without causing pain and chagrin.

One last point, the most important, remains to be made. Until now we have spoken of the criticism of others. Yet this is only the prelude to the most difficult art — criticism of one's self. How does one go about reproaching himself? The great Baal Shem Tov taught that you arrive at self-criticism through your criticism of others. That is how he explains the well known Mishnah that *Eizehu chakham?* — *ha-lomed mi-kol adam*, "who is wise? — he who learns from every man." When you look into a mirror, the Baal Shem tells us, you see all your own faults and deficiencies — the shape of your nose, the complexion of your skin, the size of your teeth. So when you look at your fellow man and notice *his faults*, treat him as a mirror, and recognize in him *your own faults*. For it is a part of human nature that you see only those defects in a friend which you yourself possess to a greater or lesser degree. He who has a slight tendency to depart from the truth will be quick to detect the same characteristic in another. The same holds true for the inclination to take that which belongs to another, or immorality, or bragging, or any other vice. Our own faults sensitize us to them in others. The wise man is he who learns from every other man — he sees their failings and then knows he has them himself and proceeds to correct them. He holds up the personality of his friend as a mirror of his own. Criticism of others, if undertaken in the Torah spirit, leads to self-criticism. Perhaps that is why the Torah uses the double verb, for greater emphasis — not only *hokheiach*, criticism of others, but *tokhiach*, reproach of yourself. Interestingly, the word *hokhieach* is from the same root as the word *vikuach*, a debate or dialogue. For when I criticize my friend, even if he does not say a word, he is the mirror of my own faults, and I am automatically, through him, criticizing myself. *Hokheiach tokhiach* is a two-way street.

We Jews have had this quality of self-criticism in abundance. It is evident in our national sense of humor, so often turned inwards. It is evident in the writings of our Prophets, who stung us with their pointed barbs. It is evident in the thorough way in which the Talmud exposes the least error of a Moses or a David. It is evident in the remarkable fact that, after having been driven out of our homeland by people no better than us — probably far worse — we said "we deserved it" — *u-mipnei chateinu galinu me'artzenu* . . .

"Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord, and who shall stand in His holy place? — He that hath clean hands and a pure heart; who hath not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the G-d of his salvation" (Ps. 24:3-5).

How are hands cleaned and hearts purified? — With the soap of criticism and the scouring powder of self-criticism.

