

For פרשת שמיני, I want to share a thought from one of my favorite columnists, R' Chaim Yosef Kofman זצ"ל. He used to write for R' Hoffman's Torah Tavlin, and though he has since passed away, his columns continue to be reprinted. He has a very interesting take on פרשת שמיני (from the Torah Tavlin 5778, the מחשבת הלב section), one that most people would never have arrived at on their own. It's based on a פסוק regarding kosher and non-kosher animals. The פסוק he focuses on is (10:4): אֵת הַגִּמְלָל כִּי מַעֲלָה גֵרָה הוּא וּפְרָסָה. He makes an interesting observation: Most animals don't have any סימנים of כשרות at all. Out of all the animals in the world, only four have one סימן of כשרות while lacking the other. חז"ל teach us that the תורה emphasizes this detail for a reason - it's meant to teach us an important lesson. A lesson in חינוך.

When rebuking or criticizing, one must first acknowledge the positive before pointing out the negative. If a father needs to discipline his child for misbehavior, he should not begin with immediate criticism. Instead, he should first highlight something good about the child and only then address the issue at hand.

We see this lesson in the way the תורה describes these four animals. In each case - except for the חזיר - the תורה first presents the animal's positive trait by stating that the animal is מעלה גרה, it chews its cud, before mentioning that it is not kosher because it lacks split hooves. When it comes to the חזיר, the order is reversed, the תורה first states that it has split hooves, but it's not מעלה גרה, and therefore, not kosher.

R' Avraham Pam זצ"ל recalls a very great story that illustrates this lesson. Once, R' Pam had to speak with the father of one of his תלמידים, a prominent rav in his own right. He needed to inform the father that despite his son's significant intellectual capabilities, he was not reaching his full potential. When the father heard this, he asked to call in his son so they could discuss it together. R' Pam immediately regretted agreeing to this and nervously awaited the father's reaction. When the boy arrived, his father called him over and said, "Your Rebbi just told me how well you're doing, but if you try harder, you could become an excellent student." The boy's face lit up. Following that meeting, there was a noticeable improvement. He indeed developed into an excellent student. Had the father sharply criticized his son in front of the Rebbi, it would have served no useful purpose, and little, if anything, would have been accomplished. However, by using a wise and positive approach, he built up his son's self-esteem, strengthened his relationship with the Rebbi, and still managed to communicate the need for improvement.

This is a fundamental lesson in effective criticism. It is an art that can be learned and applied. Harsh criticism rarely works and often has the opposite effect. However, when rebuke is given in a positive and encouraging manner, it becomes a powerful tool for growth - in מידות, in עבודת השם, and in all areas of life. May הקדוש ברוך הוא give us the זכות to always be mindful of others' feelings when offering criticism, just as the תורה first presents a positive aspect before addressing the negative. A wise lesson for each and every one of us in aspects of our lives, whether it's our kids, our colleagues, co-workers, spouses, and all of our relatives. Have a wonderful שבת!

