

I want to talk with you this morning about *tochechah*. What is *tochechah*? The Talmud says: “As long as there is *tochechah* in the world, peace of mind comes into the world, good and blessing comes into the world, and evil departs from the world.” [B. Tamid 28a]. But elsewhere the Talmud tells us that Rabbi Akiva despairs: “I wonder if there is anyone in this generation capable of giving *tochechah*.” [B. Arachin 16b]

So what is *tochechah*? The Torah tells us in Leviticus 19, a passage which we chant this afternoon: “You shall not hate your brother in your heart; *hoche’ach tochiach et amitecha* – you shall surely *rebuke* your fellow and not bear sin on his account.” *Hoche’ach tochiach*, that phrase perhaps best rendered in English, “you shall rebukingly rebuke” – is the basis for the concept of *tochechah*. *Tochechah* calls us to respond whenever we see inappropriate behavior in the world and charges us not to stand idly by.

*Tochechah*, rebuke, is such a central concept to what it means to try to realize our full human potential. It’s incredibly important, incredibly easy to do wrong, and incredibly hard to do right. At one level the verse is telling us if we see somebody doing something wrong and we don’t say anything, if we don’t respond, we bear some culpability for the misdeed: “rebuke your fellow and do not bear sin on his account.” But that’s too easy. After all, we live in a society full of self-appointed bullies and loudmouths – from cable news pundits to talk radio hosts to the denizens of the twitterverse – who love nothing better than to climb daily onto the soapbox we’ve provided them and loudly decry and denounce anyone they disagree with, gleefully calling out all the folks they think are doing something wrong. This kind of rebuke doesn’t serve the goal of making our society better – just the opposite! The problem is that rebuking can feed right into that delicious sense of righteous indignation that makes us feel oh-so-much-better than everyone else. We are right, they are wrong, and it feels really *good* to just lash out and let someone have it – *especially if it’s one of those people that really deserve it*. This sort of rebuking, the rabbis tell us, is worse than doing nothing at all because it’s not going to make the person we’re rebuking change his or her behavior – it’s just going to make them angry, defensive, and all the more likely to keep doing whatever they were doing in the first place. This sort of rebuking doesn’t *lessen* the amount of wrongdoing in the world, it *increases* it because our self-righteousness has now created more anger and resentment through our own poorly executed rebuke. Which is why the rabbis understand the phrase “do not bear sin on his account” very differently: only rebuke if you think you can do so without arousing anger, resentment, or embarrassment; that is, don’t incur sin *through* your rebuke. On this day when we stand conscious more than any other of all the ways we’ve done wrong, it’s probably very easy for a lot of us – I know it is for me – to think of times that our words have caused hurt or embarrassment to other people, even if we spoke them with the best of intentions. No wonder Rabbi Akiva said giving *tochechah* properly is so hard!

And yet, *tochechah* is an obligation: part of what it means to be in relationship with someone is to let them know when they are behaving poorly and to attempt to get them to change their behavior. R. Yossi bar Hanina, one of the earliest sages, observed: “All love that contains no *tochechah* is not true love.” [Bereshit Rabbah 54.3] This is a tremendously wise observation: love that overlooks or is blind to another person’s faults isn’t truly love, because it permits that person to keep acting in potentially harmful ways, with no checks and with no concern for the consequences to themselves or others. That’s not love, that’s enabling! Loving someone and trying to help them reach their fullest potential as a human being can be a very complicated affair.

Last February I spent the morning at Tzvi and Yael's school for visiting day. Tzvi was in fifth grade at the time and Yael was in second (Adir was still in preschool but this year started kindergarten!). I split the time between the two of them, visiting Yael's class first and watching the children write cards for a girl who was celebrating her birthday. There were a number of other second-grade parents in the room and we all grinned at one another as the children earnestly interviewed the birthday girl: "What's your favorite food?" "What's your favorite TV show?" When I moved over to the fifth grade later that morning, there were many fewer parents on hand for their science class, which was really a shame because they were making a great model of the respiratory system. After science, the kids headed off to computer, where they were finishing PowerPoint presentations on famous people they admired.

The computer lab was small – it was tight as the teacher circulated to check in on the kids working on their assignments, and there wasn't really a good place for me to stand. All the other fifth grade parents had already left: maybe they'd seen enough or maybe by fifth grade they didn't really feel a need to visit their kids at school in the first place; or maybe their fifth graders were getting to the point that having their parents trailing them at school was more embarrassing than fun.

Not *my* fifth grader, who had looked shocked when I had asked him a few days earlier if he wanted me to come to visiting day. *Of course he did*, he told me and, having asked, I was now resigned to spending the morning at school, all the while keeping a mental tally of all the things I needed to be doing during that time. Frankly, the computer class was boring, I was thinking about all the tasks that needed my attention, and I felt self-conscious sitting there as the only parent in this small computer lab. So I worked my way over to Tzvi's seat and asked him, "Do you really want me to stay with you for this next period?" Tzvi looked up at me curiously and asked, "Why wouldn't you stay?" "I don't know," I replied. "None of the other kids have parents here and I thought you might feel funny that I am."

It's awful revisiting this conversation now: in the guise of giving Tzvi a choice and empowering him to decide whether I should stay or go, I was actually pushing my own agenda on him – after all, *he* hadn't expressed any wish not to have me there, just the opposite. And worse still, I was posing the question in a way that encouraged him to be insecure, to care about what other kids thought – "None of the other kids have parents here and I thought you might feel funny that I am" – rather than think what he wanted for himself. At some level, Tzvi must have sensed this because he responded, completely guilelessly, "Why should that matter?" Right: why should it? Yet shamelessly I pressed on: "You're right. I just thought you might prefer if I weren't here but I'm happy to do whatever. So do you want me to go? Or stay?" Again, it wasn't, in retrospect, a sincere question. And again Tzvi, bless his heart, didn't guess at my ulterior motives, took the question at face value. He looked up at me with the most incredibly open expression on his face and asked, "Why would I ever want you not to be with me?"

That interaction, that question from Tzvi is, to me, the most perfect moment of *tochechah* that I have ever encountered, and it is in that spirit that I wanted to share this story with you today. When Tzvi asked, "Why would I ever want you not to be with me?" he not only melted my heart and gave me a gift that I will surely need to hold onto in his teenage years when I imagine I'll be hearing the opposite message quite a lot; he also gently, lovingly, moved me in a fraction of a second from a place of 'I don't want to be here' to 'I *want* to be here,' with him in the computer lab. You know, he could have simply answered my question, "So do you want me to go? Or stay?" by saying, "I want you to stay." And I would have stayed. I would have done my parental duty and stayed for the rest of the class. But I would have been bored *and* resentful because I didn't want to be there and I *had* to be. Before Tzvi's

question, I was eager to get away; now wild horses couldn't have dragged me from that computer lab. Tzvi's tender and vulnerable response didn't make me feel guilty by blaming me for my shortcomings but, on the contrary, gave me a reason and a way to want to change them. This is *tochechah* at its purest and most redemptive: not just *getting* somebody to change their behavior, but making them *want* to change their heart.

I wish I could say that since that morning in February I've never been impatient with my children, never been less than fully present to them and whatever they're doing, and always thrilled to attend all of their school events – but that wouldn't be true. That exchange with Tzvi, however, has stayed with me and lives in my heart – that perfect moment of *tochechah* – and it has helped me come closer to achieving those goals. As a parent, I have always believed an important part of my job is to give *tochechah* to my children, to help guide them toward becoming better, more generous, and more loving people by reproofing them when they act or speak inappropriately and helping them see how they could have acted differently. Now I know that *tochechah* is not only a fundamental part of parenting when we *give* it, but also when we need to *receive* it, need to be open to recognizing where we have come up short as parents, where *we* have been wrong, and acknowledging where we need to do better.

And so we are here on Yom Kippur, holiest day of the year. And, if we're doing it right, we are keenly aware of our faults and imperfections, our shortcomings and our failings, and crave absolution for the many slights and hurts we have committed against those we love and against ourselves in the year gone by. Just as I think back on the way I behaved that day with Tzvi and cringe, we all have many examples of ways we have acted for which we are ashamed, and that guilt and shame are a heavy burden. Instead of beating ourselves up for our shortcomings – rebuking ourselves and giving ourselves righteous *tochechah* 'til we're blue in the face – I'd like to suggest another path forward this year. Let's imagine ourselves fully and completely loved: by God, however we may envision Him or Her, by those we have hurt, and even by ourselves. Imagine a love that doesn't condemn or blame, that doesn't berate and point fingers, but only wants us to be better, understands how much happier and more whole we will be if we weren't carrying so much guilt and shame on our shoulders. Imagine a pure and trusting love that lifts us up and makes us long to be the people we know we could be; that asks, "Why would I ever want you not to be with me?" and means it. Imagine what an opening, what an invitation *tochechah* might be, coming from that love: an opportunity to see ourselves as we might be and the longing to strive to be there.

This is the promise of Yom Kippur: to be lifted up by our mistakes, not beaten down by them, to be washed clean of our wrongdoings and realize we have been given the gift of a new beginning. To let go of our past failings so we have a chance to rise even higher, to feel ourselves loved, embraced, cradled and infinitely precious. "You shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely rebuke your fellow and not bear sin on his account": let us feel that rebuke wash over us today, without rancor, without anger, without disappointment, and let our sin be taken from our account by the power and strength of redemptive love.

*G'mar chatimah tovah* – may we all be loving sealed for goodness on this Yom Kippur.