

ASSERTIVENESS TRAINING



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAS KEDOSHIM
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

Imagine for a moment that someone you loved or cared about harmed you in some way. Hopefully it wasn't too easy to conjure up a scenario, but we all at some point are let down by those we are close to. How do you generally react in such a situation? While the context obviously matters, is there a recommended framework for how we should respond to being damaged by others? There is one verse in this week's parsha, as elucidated by the Rambam, that encapsulates an entire therapeutic approach to handling such circumstances.

Albert Ellis, the founder of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT), distinguished between three types of behaviors in such contexts; unassertive, assertive, and aggressive behaviors. To be unassertive when someone does something we don't like, would mean that we react passively, keeping our feelings inside without expressing them at all. While this may seem like a good approach to avoid conflict, one of the problems associated with being unassertive is that it often leads to internal resentment and hostility. On the other extreme is when we are aggressive. Instead of keeping it inside, we let it out in a harmful, often retaliative fashion. This could be in the form of insulting, offending, denigrating, or yelling at the other person. This may feel good in the moment, but hardly leads to positive long-term consequences. The behavior of choice is to be assertive. This is when we express what we are thinking and feeling in a non-aggressive, yet straightforward fashion.

In the beginning of Parshas Kedoshim the Torah lumps together in the same pasuk three concepts that don't immediately seem to fit together; (1) don't hate your brother in your heart, (2) reprove your fellow, and (3) don't incur a sin on his behalf (Vayikra 19:17). The Rambam in the sixth chapter of Hilchos De'os connects each piece of the verse, providing a similar therapeutic framework. If someone does something to hurt us, don't let the feelings fester inside, which will lead to resentment and hatred (unassertive behavior). Rather, the appropriate action is to approach the person and reprove him by initiating a conversation about his actions (assertive behavior). However, upon doing so, we must be careful not to incur our own sin by embarrassing the person (aggressive behavior).

The Rambam adds two important criteria that help ensure the effectiveness of the reproof and the avoidance of aggressiveness. First, the conversation should be conducted in private. This helps prevent embarrassing the other person. Second, it should be done in a gentle and soft manner. Tone of voice and word choice are essential to keeping the conversation productive and non-hostile. Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg adds that we should try to speak in a way that is not blatantly accusatory. Ask clarification questions about what happened so that the person doesn't become defensive.

If we generally react to being hurt with either an unassertive or an aggressive behavior, it may be time to revisit our approach. Not only are these approaches not helpful in resolving conflicts with those we care about, they may also be violations of two Torah principles. While taking an assertive approach may require training and practice, it is a worthy investment that pays dividends in psychological and spiritual growth.

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