



R'EI

How Am I Doing?

If your child, employee, or colleague asks you that question, you can be sure that he or she is sincere, wishes to learn, and will succeed.

The person who asks, "How am I doing?" is asking for constructive feedback. That person is expressing a need to know whether or not he is doing a good job, and if not, what he can do to correct his work.

The art of giving effective feedback is a very important one. In all human relationships, where there is mutual feedback, a relationship pattern is established which can self-adjust, advance, and thrive.

For feedback to truly be effective, it needs to be solicited. That is, the recipient of the feedback must ask the observer to tell him how he is doing. This signals a readiness to receive criticism, to modify one's behavior, and to change. Without that readiness, feedback is doomed to failure.

Feedback also needs to be specific. It is not helpful to say, "That was

stupid", "You'll never be good at that", or even, "Great job!" It is helpful to say, "You turned left when you should have turned right", or, "When you softened your voice and smiled, it was easier to listen to you." The description of behavior is what is necessary, not evaluation.

Human nature is such that it is the rare person who asks for feedback, and that few of us are comfortable in delivering criticism. However constructive and well-intended, it is hard to give feedback to another person. We are afraid of confrontation, of possibly embarrassing the other, and so we avoid giving feedback even at the cost of assisting the other to change in a positive way.

And yet, there is nothing more helpful to anyone learning a new task than to have feedback delivered to him or her in a useful, non-judgmental, constructive manner. As the Talmud puts it, "No one has ever mastered Torah study without having first erred and made mistakes." Mastery is only achieved when mistakes are pointed out to the student so that he can correct them.

In this week's Torah portion, Parshat R'ei, we read at length about false prophets. We often mistake the nature of the mission of the prophet, assuming that it is to predict the future. But that is certainly not the mission of the great biblical proph-

ets. Rather, their mission was, in our terms, to give constructive feedback to the people, pointing out their faults and guiding them in a more positive direction.

The false prophet not only gives false guarantees about the future, complacently predicting peace and tranquility, but assures the people that they are doing nothing wrong, that they need not change their behavior. The false prophet gives no feedback.

These words of Megilat Eich'a (the Book of Lamentations), which we read so recently on Tish'a b'Av, are incomparably instructive here:

"Your seers prophesied to you
Delusion and folly.
They did not expose your iniquity
So as to restore your fortunes,
But prophesied to you oracles
Of delusion and deception."

The false prophet cannot give proper feedback. He avoids telling the truth if he thinks it will offend. He is unaware of the positive value of effective feedback.

Those who follow him will never benefit from words of correction and guidance. They cannot change, they will not grow.

I encourage the reader to reflect upon his or her own experience and

to recall those occasions when a few words of corrective feedback were of immense benefit. I personally remember my own first days as a teacher, when a crusty veteran colleague sat in my classroom and gave me the benefits of his experience by pointing out the numerous things that I did which were ineffective and suggested alternatives to me. I cannot say that I enjoyed his deflating critique at that moment, but I know that I and a lifetime of students are profoundly indebted to him.

All the more do we cherish those occasions upon which we receive positive feedback from an observer. I can never forget the times when a mentor or senior rabbi approached me after a sermon with a warm hand-shake, and a whispered, "Yasher koach - job well done." That was enough to teach me that I was on the right track and could confidently continue on my path.

An old Spanish proverb has it, "Self-knowledge is the beginning of self-improvement." And an old Chinese proverb says it even more incisively: "A man who knows he is a fool is not a great fool."

One of the lessons of this week's Torah portion is that the true prophet gives feedback, sometimes in a way which is hard to hear. But that prophet is extending a hand to

us to bring us back to a better way of life and has instructed us in an improved set of behaviors.

As we will read this Shabbat, if we attend to the feedback of the Lord your God and doing what is right in His sight."

I have been writing this column for many years now. Still, in view of the foregoing remarks about the importance of giving and receiving feedback, I take this occasion to ask you, dear reader, "How am I doing?" 📌