



Rebuke

Topic

Rebuke and Reproof: Correcting Behavior without Shame

Grade Level(s)

5th and Up

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Learn both the dictionary definition and Jewish texts and attitudes on the concept of תוכחה (rebuke)
- Think about how it feels when someone tells them they've done something wrong
- Practice rebuking peers and elders in a responsible, respectful manner
- Reflect on when it might be risky or ill-advised to practice rebuke, even if it seems warranted

Materials needed

- Copies of scenarios and text sheets
- Access to a whiteboard and/or large sheets of newsprint
- Smile to frown scale (if you choose, you can also make a larger copy to post on the board at the front of the room).
- Small items to use as place markers such as pennies, buttons, or plastic bingo chips
- Post-it notes in two colors
- Pens or markers

Prepare in Advance

- Review scenarios and decide which ones you will use with your students
- Pin up four to five pieces of newsprint around the room, each with the title of one of the scenarios you have chosen written across the top
- Photocopy all materials listed above

Background for Teachers

What to do when you see a friend, family member, or authority figure doing something that seems wrong is often a difficult decision to make. Many schools—both public and private—have anti-bullying curricula, teaching students about the power of their words



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and actions. Students are taught to be inclusive, and not to call names. For older students, the material is often broadened to include the power of posts and comments on social media. There are fewer programs focused on assisting students in respectfully calling out bad behavior without involving an authority figure.

Ideas of helping someone find a more appropriate path can be at odds with how one thinks the person will react to hearing input about their actions. However, classic Jewish thought is very clear about what one should do when seeing others engaged in inappropriate behavior.

The concept of תוכחה (helpful rebuke) goes back to the Torah (*Vaykira/Leviticus 19:17*), where it states that you should “rebuke your kinsman.” This is usually understood to mean that you should speak directly to the person that has wronged you. Later sources teach that we have a responsibility to rebuke not only those who have wronged us directly, but anyone whom we see committing a wrong.

The Talmudic sage Rava suggests that one should rebuke someone up to 100 times (Tractate *Baba Metzia* 31a). Other sages debate whether one must do so until the receiver of the rebuke strikes back, curses the one rebuking, or reprimands the person (Tractate *Arakhin* 16b). The 13th century scholar Rambam (aka Maimonides) advises that people giving rebuke should make it clear that they are doing so for the benefit of the one being rebuked (Mishnah Torah, Laws of Human Dispositions 6:7). The 11th century commentator Rashi posits that, although one has the obligation to rebuke, one should not do so if it will cause the one rebuking to incur guilt by shaming or embarrassing someone (Rashi on *Vaykira 19:17*).

The Talmud also teaches that if one is able to influence someone who is making a wrong choice and does nothing, it is as if they committed the wrong themselves (Tractate *Shabbat* 54b/55a).

It's important to specifically note student safety around the issue of rebuke. Please let students know that, though rebuke is noted as an obligation in both the Torah and Talmud, they should not put themselves in harm's way in order to bring someone's negative actions to light. Though the rabbis suggested we rebuke someone even if they might not take our words kindly, today's societal realities require that we use more caution. The value of פיקוח נפש (in this case, valuing one's safety) takes priority over that of תוכחה.

Depending on the amount of time you have with your students and/or their maturity level, you may choose to split this lesson into two or three parts to be taught over the course of multiple weeks.



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You might use this lesson:

- When studying *Parashat Kedoshim* where the commandment for rebuke is found. (Leviticus 19:17)
- As part of an upstander training for middle or high school students.
- To help process reactions if a teacher or communal leader in your community is found to have done something wrong.
- In response to a classroom altercation.
- In *madrichim* training to bring Jewish text into a session on the Jewish approach to correcting behavior.
- As part of a series on parent/child relationships or respecting elders.
- In a drama elective
- When teaching about famous Jewish friendships.
- As a component of high holiday lessons centering on how Judaism approaches wrong-doing.

Description of Activities

Wipe that Smile off Your Face!

Hand out the Smile to Frown Scale. For each question below, ask students to place a chip or other marker on the face that best corresponds to their emotions. If you choose, you can debrief quickly after each question, asking for a volunteer to share their answer or asking all participants to raise their hand when your hand reaches the place on the scale that they marked.

How do you feel when...

- You do something you know is wrong?
- You are caught doing something wrong?
- Someone confronts you about your action or behavior?
- A friend points out a personal flaw that you are already aware of?
- A parent or teacher points out a personal flaw that you are already aware of?
- Someone points out a personal or character flaw you weren't aware of?
- You have to confront a friend about behavior that could harm them?
- You have to confront someone about behavior that is harmful or hurtful to you?
- You have to confront a grown up about unfair, dishonest, or hurtful behavior?

Take a few moments to process the activity, trying to get a sense of which things evoked the greatest sense of discomfort or negative emotion. Take a few moments to delve deeper, asking about the cause of discomfort; some possible answers might include: guilt, fear of consequences, hurt, embarrassment, and shame.



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What's the Word?

Let the students know that today's lesson will center on rebuke. Ask if anyone is familiar with the word and solicit definitions. You might mention that “rebuke” is a word and concept that is common in biblical literature, but is not used as regularly in everyday conversation.

Share the following definition:

The Oxford English Dictionary defines rebuke as follows: “Express sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behaviour or actions.”

Ask a few volunteers to rephrase the definition using their own words, to check for understanding.

Practice

Hand out the “Just Between Friends” scenarios and read one of the situations you have chosen, or solicit a student to do so.

For each scenario you choose, ask the students if they would choose to rebuke the person and why or why not. If they would choose to rebuke the person, ask them what words they might use. Allow for all comments and suggestions without judgement.

After you've gone through two or three scenarios, write the following verse from the book of Proverbs on the board or a large piece of newsprint. (If you choose to write on newsprint, this can be done ahead of time and simply hidden from view until this point.)

Proverbs 9:8

Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; Reprove a wise man, and he will love you.

אַל-תּוֹכַח לִץ פֶּן-יִשְׂנֹאָךְ הוֹכַח לְחָכָם וַיֵּאָהֲבָךְ:

Ask students for their interpretation of this verse.

Acknowledge that giving and receiving reproof or rebuke are difficult. The rabbis thought this was true many years ago when they said that no one was able to give or receive reproof in their generation—they tried to find fault in the person who rebuked them (*Sifra, Kedoshim*, 4:9).

Remind them of their feelings about being on both the giving and receiving end of rebuke in the earlier exercise using the “Smile to Frown Scale.”



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More Practice

Let students know that, even though giving reproof is difficult, the Torah considers it necessary. Nonetheless, Judaism has guidelines about how this is to be done.

Write the following verse from the book of Leviticus on the board or a large piece of newsprint. (If you choose to write on newsprint, this can be done ahead of time and simply hidden from view until this point.)

Leviticus 19:17

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsperson but incur no guilt because of them.

לֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶת-אָחִיךָ בְּלִבְבְּךָ הוֹכִיחַ תוֹכִיחַ אֶת-עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֵטְא׃

Solicit volunteers to share their understanding of the verse.

Share Rashi's interpretation of the verse, as follows:

"...But incur no guilt because of them" i. e. though rebuking him you shouldn't put him to shame (lit., make his face grow pale) in public, if you do, you will bear sin on account of him.

Ask students to share Rashi's interpretation in their own words. Engage the students in a conversation about the difference between guilt, remorse, shame, and humiliation. Explain that one is expected to have some negative feelings after being rebuked—these feelings may spur them to different action in the future. Rashi's point is that we can rebuke someone without causing shame or humiliation.

Let them know that you are going to practice rebuking someone without shaming them.

Solicit volunteers to read two or more of the scenarios marked, "Adults are Always Telling us What to Do." Proceed in one of the two following ways:

As students read each scenario, ask for volunteers to come up with rebukes that are shaming and non-shaming. Ask which were harder to think of, the respectful or disrespectful rebukes.

Have students read the scenarios you've chosen one after the other. While they do this, tape newsprint around the room with a few key phrases that will help them remember each scenario. Hand out pens and two colors of post-it notes to each student or table. Instruct them to walk around the room posting rebukes for each scenario on the



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corresponding piece of newsprint, using one color for negative or shaming remarks and one for respectful remarks. After they've finished, ask students to revisit each scenario, putting check marks next to the rebuke they would like to hear most and least.

Speaking Truth to Power

Now that students have practiced rebuking their peers and modeling the types of rebuke they would and wouldn't like to hear from their elders, let them know that sometimes it can be important to rebuke people who are older or more powerful than they are. Before continuing, ask what challenges might occur when trying to rebuke someone older and/or in a position of power.

Hand out source sheets: Talmud Shabbat 54b/55a. Ask a volunteer to read and others to paraphrase the text in their own words. Let students know that, according to the Talmud, we are obligated to try and influence someone's behavior if we are unsure that our words will have any effect.

Hand out the "Respect your Elders" handout. Working in pairs, or small groups, ask the students to come up with what they might say in each instance. You might also give them the option of different modes of communication—letters, emails, petitions, meetings, etc. Remind them that their rebukes must be respectful, something which is even more difficult when speaking to elders.

Opportunities for Extension

Have students research a local public official who has done something wrong and write a letter to them.

Have students watch the news or videos from their favorite news source—mainstream or satirical—for clips of someone in public life rebuking someone else. Have them think about better ways that this could have been done.

For Learners needing Assistance

Have students speak their answers instead of writing them down on post-its.

If the student is a visual learner, you might have them portray, in a drawing, someone being shamed and being rebuked respectfully given the same situation.



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SCENARIOS

Just Between Friends

1. You are playing on a playground near your house. You are there alone. While you are on the swings, you hear two kids nearby using fake accents and making fun of the way immigrants speak. They don't have a specific target; no one else is around.
2. You are walking with a friend in the park. There is a developmentally-delayed young adult walking nearby, listening to music and talking to himself, sometimes quietly, sometime loudly. You see two kids about your age walk over and start to talk to him. It soon becomes clear that they are mimicking him.
3. You are at overnight camp. There is someone in your cabin or tent who has been wearing the same shirt for the past four days. It's pretty dirty, but it doesn't smell.
4. You are taking a test at school. You see the person next to you pushing up the sleeve on their shirt and looking at something that's written there before writing something down on their test paper.
5. You are playing volleyball. There is a kid on your team who really loves to play but is not very good. You hit the ball right to them—in the perfect position to hit it over the net into a spot where no one can reach it for the winning point. They hit it into the net instead.

Adults are Always Telling Us What to Do

1. When students go to the library, they are supposed to bring a notebook and a pen or pencil. Every time the class goes to the library, two or three kids aren't prepared. Though different kids forget at different times there is one student who is always unprepared.
2. Sam prefers to dress in casual clothes. He is most comfortable wearing basketball shorts and a t-shirt. His parents wish they liked to dress more formally, but they usually allow him to dress the way that he prefers. The family has plans to go to synagogue on a Friday night and Sam's parents have asked him to wear nicer shorts and a collared shirt. When called, he comes to the kitchen wearing the usual t-shirt and basketball shorts.
3. You're having a snack in the playroom. When your parent comes in the room, they notice that there is popcorn all over the floor.



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4. There is a student in your class who is always annoying you. Every day, when you walk into your classroom, they say, “FY, you’re stupid.” When you look up from your work, they are often staring at you. In the hallway, they often bump into you and say, “Sorry...not sorry,” when no one is looking. One day you’ve had enough and you say, “I wish you’d drop dead.” Your teacher only hears what you said.

Respect your Elders

1. There is a severe budget crisis in your state and some politicians felt that, in order to save money, all state parks should be closed for all of the weekends in July. Lots of people want to visit the parks in the summer, which requires more workers. If the parks are closed, the government can save the money it might use to pay park workers. Your local representative voted to close the parks but one Monday there was a picture of him camping the previous weekend.

2. The administration in your school, led by the PE teacher, created a new food policy which says that only healthy food will be allowed at school celebrations such as birthdays and class parties. Suggestions include fruit and pretzels. Chips, cookies, cake, and ice cream are specifically prohibited. One day your teacher asks you to go to the teacher’s lunchroom, where students are not usually allowed, to bring something to another teacher. When you arrive, you see a number of teachers eating cake and ice cream. The assistant principal is wearing a birthday hat.