

## Drasha/Sermon: Parshas Re'eh "Silence is Strength: Dealing with Insults"

In the past month or so, much discussion has taken place about 'stand-your-ground' laws. A stand-your-ground law is a type of self-defense law that gives individuals the right to use deadly force to defend themselves without any requirement to evade or retreat from a dangerous situation.

Less than half of the states in the United States have adopted the Castle doctrine, that a person has no duty to retreat when their home is attacked. Some states go a step further, removing the duty of retreat from other locations. Many of you may remember a stunning incident last year here in St. Louis, when a 65-year-old Missouri driver in a heated exchange with a motorcyclist got punched in the face, pulled a semiautomatic handgun from the glove box and shot the other man. The incident left the motorcyclist injured, the driver shaken. But the prosecuting attorney decided not to press charges, citing Missouri's "castle doctrine" law.

After the shooting death of Florida teen Trayvon Martin by neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman, who claimed self-defense, discussion of stand-your-ground laws increased exponentially. In a July 16, 2013 speech in the wake of the jury verdict acquitting Zimmerman of all charges, Attorney General Eric Holder criticized stand-your-ground laws, saying they "senselessly expand the concept of self-defense and sow dangerous conflict in our neighborhoods.

The right to self-defense, while based upon both Torah principles and common sense, can be particularly difficult to apply in the face of a verbal assault. Can we -- and should we -- always respond when someone says something that hurts our feelings? Restraint and even silence may be the wisest course of action in the face of insults and critical comments. I'd like to discuss the topic of: The proper response to insults.

Let's begin by raising an important question. What is the difference between an insult and criticism?

Criticism creates opportunity to correct yourself while an insult is meant to demoralize you. Criticism is usually meant to help the person, is often constructive, and comes from a place of caring. An insult is only meant to hurt with nothing productive in the offending message -- as we see in the following story about Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States.

Eisenhower attended the United States Military Academy at West Point. It was a West Point tradition that second year students, called "Yearlings," got to "boss around" the new students, called "Plebes." Sometimes the second year students carried their "authority" too far. One day, a Plebe came running around a corner and crashed into Corporal Dwight Eisenhower. The Plebe was highly embarrassed, and Eisenhower decided to embarrass him further in order to really "put him in his place."

Eisenhower said, with an insulting sneer, "You look like a barber!" The Plebe looked at the ground and said, "I was a barber, sir." Many years later Eisenhower told how he had always regretted never apologizing to this Plebe. Instead he walked away, went to his room, and told his roommate that he would never again harass a Plebe, because he had just done what he himself called a "stupid and unforgivable" thing. He had made a man ashamed of the work he did to make an honest living.

How does one best deal with an insult? Let's examine three approaches.

The Talmud relates that there was a couple who had serious communication problems due to a language barrier; the wife spoke Hebrew, while the husband's native language was Aramaic. On one occasion the man asked for a melon, but instead his wife brought him a candlestick. It might have been comical had the husband not gotten angry and said of the candlestick, "Break it on the Bava (the doorway)."

As it was, the great rabbi Bava ben Buta was sitting at the doorstep at the time. The woman went in the direction that her husband had angrily pointed, looking to break the candlestick on something called a "bava," a word she was unfamiliar with. Seeing Rabbi Bava sitting there, she "realized" what was expected of her, and banged the candlestick on Rabbi Bava's head.

Amazingly, Rabbi Bava simply looked up in confusion and asked, "What is this?"

The woman replied, "My husband told me to bang it on "Bava".

Realizing instantly the painful comedy of the situation, Rabbi Bava declared, "You fulfilled the directive of your husband. May G-d grant you two children as great as Bava."

The essence of this story can be found in the rabbi's response: "What is this?" When you truly understand that most people aren't really evil, and that you are fundamentally okay (even though you still have much to work on), you can realize that hostile behavior means one of two things. An insult may simply reflect another person's own misfortune or misery, having nothing to do with you. Or possibly, it may be an alert to a self-deficiency. Either way, what in the world is there to be angry about?

With this perspective, you won't even arrive at the point of needing to forgive someone for an insult thrown our way, as there was really no offense to you no matter how you look at it.

A second approach that works wonders in dealing with insults is the use of self-deprecating humor.

Ronald Regan was once accused in a debate by Walter Mondale of 'government by amnesia'. Reagan said, "I resent that remark about me having amnesia. I wish I could remember who said it."

On another occasion, reporters were giving Reagan a hard time about his leisurely work habits. He came out of the Oval Office one day and said, "Gentlemen, I want you to know I'm in there burning the mid-day oil."

John F. Kennedy was another president who could make fun of himself. They were taunting Kennedy about his father's wealth, and JFK said, "You don't know how stingy my father is. He told me not to buy a single vote more than is necessary. He's not going to pay for a landslide."

Disarm your unreasonable critics by humorously agreeing with them through the use of self-deprecating humor.

Third and finally, a healthy dose of humility can render us virtually invulnerable to insults that come our way.

The Talmud relates the story of a man (who we'll call Chaim) who wagered a large amount of money that he could cause the great sage, Hillel, to lose his temper. Chaim came to Hillel's home late on a Friday afternoon, as last minute Erev Shabbos preparations were being completed. Hillel was in the shower, when Chaim called out, "Hillel, Hillel, I need to speak with you immediately. I have a very important question to ask." The great rabbi, perhaps still having shampoo in his hair, came downstairs. Chaim then asked,

"Why is it that Asians have slanted eyes?"

The great rabbi responded, "My son, Asians have slanted eyes due to blowing sand that is frequently found in the countries in which they live."

Hillel then went upstairs to complete his shower, when he was again interrupted by Chaim calling him with yet another 'important question.' The Talmud relates that Hillel again answered several more ridiculous queries with the utmost patience, respect and love. Exasperated, Chaim said to Hillel, "Because I was unable to cause you to respond to me in anger, I lost a huge sum of money in a wager!"

Hillel responded, "My son, it is better for you to have lost that sum, and twice that amount, rather than that I should lose my temper."

In a prayer said three times daily, we ask the Almighty to enable us to become 'like dirt, to all.' There is certainly nothing to be said for allowing ourselves to become punching bags. However, this prayer is understood in the following way:

Just as dirt is virtually impervious to damage and injury, so too the humble person will be unaffected by insults and hostile words. There is great strength in silence born of humility.

Let me share a final story about Yogi Berra, a St.Louis-born Hall-of-Fame baseball player who, by all reports, is also an outstanding person.

*Dick Schaap, a writer and an ABC announcer, told a friend, speaking of Yogi Berra, " I was pretty hard on Yogi, too hard as I look back, and do you know he never said a word. He was always gracious to me. Never turned his back. Never made me feel uncomfortable, even though I may have been critical of him in print or even on the air .... Yogi Berra wears well. Over the years I did (knock Yogi) and sometimes, thinking back, rather harshly ... The remarkable thing about him is that he always treated me the same way. Like I was a gentleman, and of course, he always was one ... You say something in print or over the air about a guy and he says, 'Hi! How you doing?' the next time you see him and it does something to you. It doesn't make you wish you had pulled your punch, but it does make you think what a remarkable guy you have covered.*

At times we need to protect ourselves and 'stand our ground'. But while we often can-- and should -- employ methods of self-defense -- we occasionally or even encounter harmless but hostile behavior and insults directed our way.

Through an objective analysis of the situation ('What's this?'), disarming, self-deprecating humor, and walking humbly in the presence of the Almighty, we can respond properly to insults that are cast our way.