



Thanks for the Feedback • Parshat Bereishit

If we want to grow, we need to be receptive to feedback. Yet, hearing and internalizing feedback is challenging even when it is delivered constructively and from someone we trust and love. In their bestselling book, *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, Harvard law lecturers Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen delve into the nuances of how to grow from feedback “even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and frankly, you’re not in the mood” (p. 6). Engaging productively with feedback requires us to “recognize and manage our resistance,” learn “how to engage in feedback conversations with confidence and curiosity,” and perhaps the hardest challenge, even when the feedback seems wrong, we should still “find insight that might help us grow” (p. 6).

At the conclusion of the sixth day of creation, God reflects on His handiwork and evaluates the situation as “very good” (Gen. 1:31). In a stunning and tragic reversal, by the end of the Torah portion, God evaluates the human experiment as an utter failure: “And the Lord regretted that He had made man on the earth, and it saddened Him in His heart” (Gen. 6:6). What precipitates God’s drastic change of mind?

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In a cryptic and dark description, the previous verse states that “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that all the impulse of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen. 6:5). In a penetrating insight, Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno, the 15th-16th century Italian rabbi, physician, and philosopher, distinguishes between the first half of the verse, which he contends refers to the evil perpetrated in the past, and the second half of the verse, which refers to the evils that humanity would have performed in the future. Yet, this seems overly pessimistic and deterministic. Even if they acted wickedly in the past, wouldn’t they have the opportunity to repent and improve for the future? Sforno explains that since they would not listen to rebuke, they had no hope for changing. It turns out, that their evil ways were not the impetus for destruction. Rather, it was their inability to be receptive to feedback which sealed their fate.

The inability to grow from feedback can lead to stagnation or failure. The ability to be receptive to feedback is the starting point for growth and provides us the hope that we can change.

Character Challenge: Approach someone that knows you well, whom you trust and respect, and has your best interests at heart. Ask them for feedback on how you can grow. Try to overcome the natural resistance to hearing feedback and explore ways you can improve.

“Criticism is easy to deliver but hard to bear. It is all too easy for people to close their ears, or even turn the criticism around” (Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l, “The Effective Critic,” *Covenant & Conversation*)