

The Silent Retort (Ki Tetze)

It is no little wisdom for a man to keep himself in silence and in good peace when evil words are spoken to him, and to turn his heart to God and not to be troubled with man's judgment. -Thomas Kempis

The news, social media and our own selves seem to thrive on disparaging remarks. To take one's enemy, opponent, associate or even loved one a peg down is almost instinctive in many circles. It is constructive criticism, we argue. They deserve it, we explain. Someone needs to point out their mistakes, or their poor economic policies, or their warped ideologies. I'm not referring here to purely hateful, broadly broadcast anti-Jewish and anti-Israel content of which we've seen an unending deluge since October 7. Rather, I'm referring to personal, directed comments by a known, familiar person.

One might think that it would be fair game to respond in kind. To fight fire with fire. To return hurtful comments with our own criticism of the criticizer.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Prague, the Kli Yakar (1550-1619) however, on Deuteronomy 23:14, has an entirely different reaction to a verbal attack. From verses on actual warfare, he explains the ideal counterattack to personal verbal abuse is none other than silence. Silence will stop a critic's diatribe in its tracks. There is only so long one can criticize an opponent who is ignoring verbal nonsense. This is not to diminish the harm or wrong that such attacks represent. Ideally, one should avoid and not have to put up with such abuse. However, in the reality of being subjected to unwarranted criticism, silence is not only golden but also smart.

May we learn to keep our peace, on both the giving and the receiving end.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To Dalia and Ed Stelzer for awesome hospitality.