

How to Deal with Insulting People

PARSHA INSIGHTS - B'HAR (5757)

GENTLE WORDS

“And you must not hurt the feelings of one another, and you should fear your G-d...” (*Perek Chof Hey, Pasuk Yud Zayin* Chapter 25, verse 17). *Rashi* cites *Toras Kohanim*, that the reference here is to *ono'as devarim* - harming someone else with words. The *Chofetz Chaim* enumerates this *pasuk* as one of the prohibitions associated with *loshon hora* [evil gossip]. What exactly is *ono'as devarim* [hurtful words], and how is it different from regular *loshon hora*? Also, is it ever permissible to insult someone?

The *Chofetz Chaim*, citing *Bava Metzia* 58B, explains that sometimes a person insults his friend, maybe even unknowingly, by reminding him of his former deeds. Perhaps he is a *ba'al teshuva* [one who has repented], and he finds this topic embarrassing. There are numerous other examples of insulting words. A “defect in one’s family” - a family member who is a source of shame because of his reprehensible actions - is a conversation piece, which often causes humiliation to other members of his family. Besides, *loshon hora* is usually involved in such dialogues. Lack of Torah wisdom or worldly knowledge, if mentioned in the presence of the person, is another type of *ono'as devarim*. If discussed in his absence, it is *loshon hora*. In fact, the *Chofetz Chaim* includes a case where someone is asked a question; he in turn directs the inquiry to someone whom he is certain does not know the correct answer. The victim suffers emotional anguish as a result. In all these cases, the words anger and humiliate the victim, and he has nowhere to hide, no way to save himself from embarrassment. This is *ono'as devarim*.

What if only two people were involved in the dialogue - the speaker and the insulted party? Could this be a problem of embarrassing someone? Certainly! But if it is in front of others, the sin is obviously more serious.

To gain more insight into this prohibition, let us explore the *Sefer Hachinuch* in *mitzvah* [commandment] 338. What is at the root of this *mitzvah* not to hurt people’s feelings with words? It is supposed to create peace between human beings. How great is peace— that it is the major source for *bracha* [blessing] in the world! Quarreling, on the other hand, generates many catastrophes and curses. The *Sefer Hachinuch* brings additional examples of *ona'ah* [deceit] from *Chazal* [our Sages], some not actually committed with words. One should not lead a storekeeper to think he is going to make a purchase if he has no such intentions. In general, one must even avoid gestures, hints, or hand motions that might hurt someone’s feelings. Why? The Torah is very particular about *ono'as devarim* since it is a major source of emotional pain to its victim. In fact, *Chazal* tell us that *ono'as devarim* is worse than *ono'as mamon* [cheating someone in monetary matters]. Most people would rather lose money than suffer verbal insults like those mentioned above; they are just too hard to endure.

It would be impossible to list all the examples of *ono'as devarim*, says the *Sefer Hachinuch*. So what is the rule? We all must avoid hurting people in any manner, and we need our common sense to figure out which actions fit into this category.

This *mitzvah* applies at all times and to all people. But what about small children who need to be reprimanded often? Should we worry about hurting their feelings and making them cry when we discipline them? The *Sefer Hachinuch* informs us that we should avoid insulting them and hurting them more than is necessary for their rebuke. True, they do need a lot of admonishment so they will be raised properly, but it should not be overdone with hurtful words.

You might be aware that in general, one who transgresses a prohibition of the Torah receives *malkos* [lashes], if it was done on purpose, with witnesses and warning. Does one receive *malkos* for *ono'as devarim*? No, because there is a major rule in the *Gemara*, which states that a sin which does not involve an action cannot bring lashes. Speech is technically not considered an action, so such transgressions don’t make one liable for *malkos*. This also explains why a *bais din* [Jewish court] cannot punish a gossip with *malkos*. If so, where will justice be done? “And how many lashes there are, without a leather whip, in the hand of the Master who commands (us not to insult others with words)!” Thus states the *Sefer Hachinuch*. Exemption from human punishment surely does not indicate exemption from divine retribution. This is another motivation not to insult others.

What about the following scenario: One Jew begins insulting another with unjustified, abusive words... must the victim of the insults be silent? The *Sefer Hachinuch* feels that the Torah never meant that we are required to be passive in such a case.

“It is impossible for a person to be like a stone which can’t be turned over...the Torah does not command one to be like a silent stone to the one who insults him, the way he is to those who praise him. Rather, it commands us to distance ourselves from this trait, and that we must not BEGIN to fight and insult people...but if perhaps an insulter will compel one to respond, it is proper for the wise person to answer in a respectful, pleasant manner, but let him not get very angry, since anger rests in the lap of fools (*Koheles* [Ecclesiastes] 7:9) ...and he should defend himself in front of the listeners, and he should send the burden back to the one doing the insulting - this is the manner of upstanding people. And we can learn this *din* [law], that we may answer the fool, from the fact that the Torah allowed us to kill a person who stealthily enters our house (a burglar who breaks in while we are home - he may generally be killed before he tries to kill the homeowner) ...there is no doubt that a person need not tolerate damage from another person - he is authorized to be saved from his hand. And this also applies to the words of his mouth (we may certainly defend ourselves from insults).”

In summary, the Torah warns us to avoid hurting others’ feelings in any manner. We may respond, however, to someone’s insults by defending ourselves.

The parting words of the *Sefer Hachinuch* are inspiring and appropriate as we conclude our topic.

“However, there is a group of people whose piety goes to such an extent, that they don’t even allow themselves the permissibility of answering those who insult them, even with one word. They are concerned that anger will overpower them, and they will get too involved in the matter.

(Note: They surely will not hold a grudge nor be upset at people who direct abusive words at them.) About such people the *Chazal* said, ‘Those who are insulted but don’t insult, they hear their defamation but they don’t respond, the *pasuk* (*Shoftim* [Judges] 5:31) says concerning them that they are true lovers of Hashem, and they are like the sun coming out in its full strength.’”

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