



Behar: The Power of Words

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall fear God, for I am the Lord, your God (Vayikra 25:17).”

The Torah is replete with laws that govern our inter-personal conduct. We are taught how to treat the property and person of the other. We are obligated to help another in need and to be sensitive to the challenges and difficulties of our fellow Jew. So what is the Torah coming to teach us in the above quoted verse? We are commanded to help and aid when another is in need. Is it necessary to tell us that we “*shall not wrong*” another? What is being added here that has not been covered in the commandments that precede and follow these words?

The Talmud (Bava Metzia 58b) explains that this verse comes to warn us against a very specific transgression – wronging another with our words.

Our Rabbis taught: “You shall not therefore wrong one man his fellow Jew;” Scripture refers to verbal wrongs. E.g., if a man is a penitent, one must not say to him, ‘Remember your former deeds.’ If he is the son of proselytes he must not be taunted with, ‘Remember the deeds of your ancestors.’ If he is a proselyte and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, ‘Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!’ If he is visited by suffering, afflicted with disease, or has buried his children, one must not speak to him as his companions spoke to Job, ‘Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished, being innocent?’

Words are powerful and can deliver a blow far more debilitating than any fist. The Talmud teaches us important principles in the realm of interpersonal conduct. Don’t dwell on things of the past that cannot be changed. Don’t tell a person that as a result of his past mistakes he has limited his future. Don’t try to give insight into the suffering of another – true omniscience is reserved for God. Every person carries a burden of their past. Every person has things they wish they could change – but cannot. Every person has things they wish they could do over – but life does not afford us that opportunity. Be sensitive to this reality – be sensitive to the burden of the other.

But there is another message as well. The great Chassidic leader, Rav Simcha Bunim of Pshischa (1765-1827) writes, *“Who is a Chassid (pious individual)? One who goes above and beyond that which is required. The Torah tells us not to wrong another – this is the law. Piety, to go above beyond requires that we not wrong ourselves.”*

The Rebbe teaches us a profound lesson. We all make mistakes. We do things that are wrong, we engage in behaviors and actions that we know are beneath us and undermine our personal growth. As a result we begin to look down on ourselves, we begin to feel we are worthless and have lost any potential of being holy and significant. Don’t wrong yourself. Don’t compound the sin by losing faith in yourself. It is important to remember that despite engaging in negative activity – at our core, we are good. God created each of us with a beautiful and pure soul and no matter how many mistakes we make this soul remains intact, this soul remains unsullied.

And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, simple words that yield a profound lesson. Words hurt and can create irreparable damage. Don’t visit pain upon the other – don’t visit pain upon yourself. We face so many challenges, both personal and national. We have obstacles and hurdles that we must overcome. Don’t create additional obstacles for another with hurtful and harmful words. Don’t create additional barriers for yourself with negative self-perception and image. Build up the other, build up yourself and pave the way for accomplishment and fulfillment.