**SALT – PARSHAT BEHAR**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Behar (25:14) introduces the prohibition of *ona’a*, which forbids buying or selling merchandise for an unfair price, misleading the seller or buyer. Several verses later (25:17), the Torah seems to repeat this prohibition, but the Gemara (Bava Metzia 58b) interprets this verse as referring to a different type of *ona’a*, which it calls *ona’at devarim* – inflicting emotional harm with words. The Mishna (Bava Metzia 58b) gives several examples of *ona’at devarim*: asking a retailer about the price of merchandise which one has no intention of buying; reminding a penitent sinner of the misdeeds he committed; and reminding a convert of his lineage. The Gemara cites a *Berayta* which adds other examples: saying to somebody suffering from illness or other crises that he is being punished for his misdeeds, and directing someone who is seeking a certain product to a place where this product is not available. All these are codified in the *Shulchan Arukh* (C.M. 228:4).

The question arises as to why these two prohibitions share the name “*ona’a*,” when there appears to be no direct connection between them. The Torah uses the same expression (“*tonu*”)to establish both prohibitions, and *Chazal* refers to them with the terms “*ona’at mamon*” and “*ona’at devarim*” (“monetary” *ona’a* and “verbal” *ona’a*), indicating that they are somehow linked. This link is perhaps understandable with regard to the examples of *ona’at devarim* that involve misleading someone, such as falsely expressing interest in making a purchase, or directing somebody to the wrong place. These forms of *ona’at devarim* resemble *ona’at mamon* in the sense that a person deceives or misleads his fellow. Less obvious, however, is the connection between *ona’at mamon* and the forms of *ona’at devarim* that involve offending somebody, such as by reminding him of his past misdeeds. What connection is there between the prohibition against misleading somebody in commerce, and saying something hurtful and offensive?

One possibility that has been offered is that when we insult somebody, we mislead him in the sense that he will likely begin to question his own value and worth. If we taunt somebody because of his past misdeeds, for example, he is reminded of the stains on his record and starts to think lowly of himself. If we speak to somebody in a disrespectful, belittling way, that person will immediately recognize his low esteem in our eyes, which will, almost inevitably, cause him to hold himself in low esteem. Just as the prohibition of *ona’at mamon* forbids misrepresenting the value of a piece of merchandise, the prohibition of *ona’at devarim* forbids misrepresenting the value of the person to whom one speaks. Insulting somebody leads him to think lowly of himself, to fail to recognize his worth and his great potential – and it is in this sense, perhaps, that *ona’at devarim* resembles *ona’at mamon*. We should never cause people to think lowly of themselves, to question their innate goodness or their potential for greatness. To the contrary, we should try to always encourage people by drawing their attention to their fine qualities and to help them realize how great they are capable of becoming, thereby giving them the motivation to work towards actualizing their potential to the very fullest.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Behar (25:35) presents the command to offer financial assistance to one’s fellow who has come upon economic hardship. Specifically, the Torah commands, “*ve-hechezakta bo*” (literally, “you shall hold him up”), which Rashi (citing *Torat Kohanim*) explains to mean that we must support the struggling individual before he falls into poverty. We are to offer assistance once the struggles begin, even before the individual becomes impoverished, as once he becomes poor it would be far more difficult for him to recover. This verse concludes, “*va-chai imakh*” – “so that he may live with you.” The Torah commands lending the individual help to prevent him from financial collapse so that he may continue living in comfort and dignity.

Rav Yosef Meir of Spinka, in *Imrei Yosef*, finds in this verse an allusion to spiritual assistance, to the effort to help our fellow grow and improve. Just as we are to try to help those who struggle financially, so must we do what we can to assist those who struggle spiritually, by endeavoring to steer them in the proper direction. However, the Rebbe of Spinka writes, the Torah here cautions, “*va-chai imakh*” – these efforts must be made in a manner that truly leads to “life,” to spiritual growth, and not in a way that will yield detrimental results. The Rebbe of Spinka explains that if the individual is not prepared to accept words of criticism, or if the person who criticizes is unworthy of repudiating him, then the criticism will make matters worse. Words of criticism which will not result in the desired effects should not be spoken. As the Gemara (Yevamot 65b) famously teaches, “Just as it is a *mitzva* to speak words that will be heeded, so it is a *mitzva* not to speak words which will not be heeded.”

Before offering criticism, we must first carefully and honestly consider whether the words will have the desired effect of “*va-chai imakh*,” of uplifting the person and helping him improve himself. If they will not, then we are bidden to remain silent. If our intent is truly and sincerely for the benefit of our fellowman, and not for the purpose of our own ego and aggrandizement, then we will refrain from criticizing people who have no interest in hearing our criticism and will not be helped by it; we will keep quiet when we observe wrongdoing rather than react in a way that will do nothing other than evoke anger and resentment.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Behar (25:36) commands lending financial assistance to one’s fellow in need, so that “*ve-chei achikha imakh*” – “your brother shall live with you.”

This verse was famously referenced by Rabbi Akiva in his debate with a colleague – Ben Patura – regarding the case of two desert travelers suffering dire dehydration, and one of them has enough water to save his life, but not enough to save also his companion’s life (Bava Metzia 62a). Ben Patura advanced the view that the traveler with water must share his last bit of water with his comrade, even though this will result in both their deaths, as it is forbidden for him to keep his water for himself and thereby indirectly kill his fellow. Rabbi Akiva disagreed, noting the verse “*ve-chei achikha imakh*,” which implies that, in Rabbi Akiva’s famous words, “your life precedes your fellow’s life.” Although the Torah requires us to share our assets with people in need, we are to give precedence to our own lives, as implied by the phrase, “your brother shall live with you,” such that if we can save only ourselves or only another person, we are to save ourselves.

A subtle but important distinction exists between Rabbi Akiva’s ruling regarding this case and the Gemara’s definitive ruling elsewhere (Sanhedrin 74a) that one may not murder for the sake of protecting his life. If, for example, somebody is commanded at gunpoint to kill his fellow, he must sacrifice his life rather than take his fellow’s life, because, in the Gemara’s words, “Who says that your blood is redder? Maybe that person’s blood is redder.” One may not take his fellow’s life to save his own, because he cannot assume that his life is worth more than his fellow’s. Even though the Torah does not require saving one’s fellow’s life at the expense of his life, one is not permitted to actively kill to save his own life. The Torah distinguishes in this regard between refraining from saving somebody, and actively murdering, permitting the former for the sake of protecting oneself, but not the latter.

A third situation is where one seeks to actively save his life, committing an action which will have the effect of indirectly causing his fellow’s death. As opposed to the case debated by Rabbi Akiva and Bat Patura, where one refrains from saving his fellow’s life in order to save his own, the individual in this case acts to protect his life in a manner that will cause his fellow to die. But as opposed to the case discussed by the Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin, the person in this case does not actually commit murder, but rather indirectly causes his fellow’s death in the process of acting to save his own life. The question arises as to whether one may act to save himself in such a situation, where he would indirectly be causing another person’s death.

This question arose in a number of horrific situations during the Holocaust. Rav Efrayim Oshri, in *Divrei Efrayim* (*Eimek Ha-bakha*, 1), writes a heartrending responsum about the time when the Nazi officials in the Kovno ghetto issued 5,000 work certificates, the holders of which would remain to work rather than be deported to the death camps. These certificates were to be distributed among the approximately 10,000 skilled workers in the ghetto. Tragically, the issuing of the certificates resulted in fierce competition among the Jews in the ghetto, with people violently fighting to obtain the life-saving documents. Rav Oshri addresses the question of whether it was permissible to grab a certificate to save one’s life, which would have the effect of causing another eligible workman to be killed. He references the discussion of the *Yad Avraham* commentary to *Yoreh Dei’a* (157:1) regarding the situation of hostile government authorities who decided to kill a specified number of Jews, and seized a group of random Jews to be put to death. The *Yad Avraham* rules that people may not lobby on behalf of one of those Jews if, as a result of his or her release, the government would seize someone else to kill, but those who were seized for execution are permitted to lobby for their own release. The *Yad Avraham* here clearly states that one is allowed to take action to rescue himself from death, even if this indirectly results in the death of his fellow. It seems that according to the *Yad Avraham*, although one may not directly kill to save his life, he may indirectly cause another person’s death in order to save his life. Rav Oshry initially considers applying this ruling to the situation in the ghetto, such that one would be allowed to rescue himself by seizing a certificate, even though this would result in a fellow Jew’s death. However, Rav Oshry then suggests drawing a distinction between the case addressed by the *Yad Avraham*, and the case in the ghetto. The *Yad Avraham* addressed a situation where once a captive successfully lobbies for his release, the authorities will then go and arrest another Jew who will then be killed. In the case in the ghetto, by contrast, all the Jews were already assembled in the ghetto and condemned to death; hence, attempts at securing a certificate causes a fellow Jew’s death more directly than in the situation described by the *Yad Avraham*, where the authorities would have to go and find a Jew to arrest. Rav Oshry therefore suggests that even if we accept the *Yad Avraham*’s position, it might nevertheless be forbidden to save oneself in the situation in the ghetto, where seizing a certificate automatically results in a fellow Jew’s murder.

(See Rav Yoel Amital’s comprehensive [article](http://shaalvim.co.il/torah/view.asp?id=175) on the subject.)

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Behar (25:36) reiterates the prohibition against lending money on interest, emphasizing “*ve-yareita mei-Elokekha*” – “you shall fear your God.”

Rashi explains that the Torah found it necessary to emphasize the fear of God in this context because “a person’s mind is drawn after interest, and it is difficult to abstain from it, and he tells himself it is allowed because of his money that was not available to him.” The prohibition against charging interest poses a difficult challenge because it is very tempting for a person with available funds to capitalize on the needs of his less fortunate fellow, and, secondly, he feels justified in charging interest because he made his money inaccessible during the period of the loan. The Torah therefore emphasized that we must fear God and submit to His laws despite the lures and temptations that we face.

In a generally similar vein, Rav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch writes that fear of God “is the real reason for the prohibition of interest on loans, which, as far as human social ideas go, can find no justification. It is the recognition of God…as the arbiter of your fate and the guide of your actions, in which capacity He has forbidden you to take interest on loans…” The Torah emphasizes, “you shall fear your God” because our intuitive sense of fairness finds nothing wrong with charging interest, and it is thus only in humble submission to God’s authority that we refrain from doing so.

Rav Uri Langner, in *Or Ha-Torah*, presents an additional insight into the emphasis “you shall fear your God.” A lender might feel that lending on interest is not only acceptable, but a *mitzva*, as such a loan does, after all, resolve the borrower’s immediate financial problems. He might actually take pride in extending the loan, despite the long-term profit he stands to gain from it, because he is helping the borrower who currently needs money. The Torah therefore adds, “you shall fear your God” – to emphasize that we must submit to God’s determination of what is noble and admirable, and what is sinful. We must avoid the instinctive tendency to decide on our own which actions are commendable and which are wrong. Even if something “feels” right or gives the impression of being a good deed, it could in truth be iniquitous. We must humbly submit to the Torah’s authority without ever assuming that a behavior which seems noble is indeed the right thing to do; we are to live with genuine “fear of God,” following His commands even when they run counter to our intuitive perceptions of right and wrong.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Behar discusses the laws relevant to an *eved ivri* – an indentured servant, who sold himself as a servant due to financial troubles. The Torah commands, “*lo tirdeh vo be-farekh*” (25:42) – that the master is not permitted to impose slave labor upon the servant. Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, writes that this prohibition includes forcing the servant to perform unnecessary work, for the sole purpose of causing him distress or to feel subservient. Even a simple task, Rashi writes, may not be imposed upon the servant if it is not needed. Rashi gives the example of a master who instructs the servant to heat water for him, when in fact he does not need hot water.

The verse concludes, “and you shall fear your God,” and Rashi explains that this was added as a warning to the master not to impose upon the servant a task which he does not need performed even though nobody will know that it was not needed. For example, if the master tells the servant to heat water, it might likely seem that he needs hot water for drinking or bathing, and thus nobody except the master knows that he wishes to have the servant perform unnecessary work just to upset him. The Torah therefore warns, “you shall fear your God” – that the master must recognize that God knows his intentions, whether or not he truly needs the task he has the servant perform, or if he imposes this job upon the servant for no constructive purpose, in violation of this command.

Rav Eliyahu Lopian, in *Lev Eliyahu* (Parashat Mishpatim), explains Rashi’s comment to mean that the master might deceive himself by deciding that he needs this task, when in fact he does not. The master might wrongly justify the demand he makes of his servant by imagining that this is something he truly needs. The Torah warns the master to fear God, to realize that even if he can deceive himself, he can never deceive the Almighty, who knows whether he really needed the servant to do this work, or if he ordered the servant to do it simply to make him work harder or reinforce his feeling of subservience to the master.

The broader message of Rashi’s comment, perhaps, is that we should always to minimize the extent of our imposition upon others, even those whom we can rightfully expect to serve us. We are to carefully and honestly distinguish between our needs and our wishes when other people’s time and energy are at stake. We should not freely impose our wishes upon family members, employees, friends and others who are dutybound, or expected, to assist us. Just as the Torah forbids making unnecessary demands of one’s servant, so should we refrain from making excessive or unnecessary demands of the people in our lives, and draw a clear distinction between our needs and our wishes, between that we can rightfully expect people to do for us, and that for which it is improper to cause people inconvenience.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Behar commands lending assistance to those facing financial struggles, and then concludes, “I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt…to be for you a God” (25:38).

Seforno explains the phrase “to be for you a God” to mean that God wants and expects all of us, every member of the nation, to work collectively towards the fulfillment of our nation’s mission. He writes: “The intended purpose is to be realized by all of you, and it is therefore proper that the nation’s arrangement be such that that you are all able to live with one another, and assist one another to complete the intended [purpose].” God wants the entire nation, each and every member, to contribute toward *Am Yisrael*’s mission of representing Him in the world, and we are therefore required to assist all our fellow Jews in need, to ensure that each and every one will have the ability to make his or her contribution.

Rav Henoch Leibowitz (*Chiddushei Ha-lev*), citing Seforno’s comments, notes that it is therefore wrong to refrain from performing acts of kindness and assisting those in need, out of fear of stunting or personal spiritual growth. *Am Yisrael* is supposed to achieve collectively, together, and not as a disjointed group of individuals. As such, working to help those in need, and thereby enable them to make their contribution to our nation’s collective effort, is no less vital to the realization of *Am Yisrael*’s mission than our personal ambitions. Just as we are to strive for spiritual achievement, so are we to enable others to achieve by providing the assistance they need, so that we are able to work collectively as a nation to fulfill our mission in the world.

Friday

The latter section of Parashat Behar discusses the laws relevant to those who were compelled due to financial hardship to sell themselves as servants, either to a fellow Jew or to a gentile. The Torah forbids overworking or mistreating a servant, and outlines the basic guidelines for how the servant can regain his freedom, either by obtaining the money needed to pay his master for the remaining years of service, or by a relative paying the master for his release. At the conclusion of this section, the Torah commands, “Do not make yourselves gods, and do not erect for yourselves an idol or monument…” (26:1).

Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*, explains that this command is directed toward the man who was forced to sell himself as a servant to a gentile – the situation addressed in the previous verses. Living in the gentile’s home as his servant, he might have thought that he is allowed to follow his master’s example of idol worship and other forbidden activities (Rashi mentions specifically illicit sexual relations and Shabbat violation). The Torah therefore commands, “Do not make yourselves gods” – emphasizing that even while living in the gentile’s service, the servant must remain loyal to God and obey His commands.

Many later writers addressed the question of why this needed to be stated. Is it not obvious that one who serves a gentile remains bound by the Torah’s laws, and must certainly refrain from idolatry?

One answer perhaps emerges from Seforno’s comments to this verse. Seforno writes that in this verse, the Torah speaks of the time when the Jews will be driven into exile and will live among other nations. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 105a) relates that after the Jews were exiled, some turned to the prophets and asked, “A servant whose master sold him, or a woman whose husband divorced her, do they have any responsibilities towards one another?!” They felt that the exile marked God’s permanent rejection of *Am Yisrael*, such that they were no longer bound by the Torah’s laws. The prophets replied that the exile did not signify the end of God’s relationship with the Jewish People, and that He was still protecting them and they thus remained bound to obey His commands. Seforno thus suggests that the Torah here admonishes us to remain loyal to God even when we are living among foreign nations, because we are always God’s servants. The Torah states repeatedly in this section, “*Ki avadai heim*” – “For they are My servants” (e.g. 25:55), and we are thus commanded to try to redeem servants held by gentiles, and not to mistreat Jewish-owned servants, because we are all servants of God and thus no one can be entirely subservient to another human being. By the same token, we remain God’s servants even when we come under foreign rule, and thus even in our state of exile and subjugation, we are commanded, “Do not make for yourselves gods” – to remain loyal to the Almighty, to whom we are eternally subservient, even in exile.

Accordingly, we might explain Rashi’s comment to mean that just as the servant must continue obeying God’s commands even while living in the service of an idolater, likewise, we are to continue obeying God’s commands even while living among gentiles under foreign rule.

Rav Yisrael Meir Hamnick, in his *Mei Ha-da’at*, offers a different insight into Rashi’s comments, suggesting that it speaks to a servant that has undergone a process of drastic spiritual decline. Having sold himself into the service of a pagan gentile, he hardly lives a Torah lifestyle. Rashi understood the Torah’s command to mean that despite his current state of decline, this servant is not to despair altogether. He is urged to, at very least, refrain from idol worship and other grave violations, such as illicit intimate relations and Shabbat desecration. Although he has fallen, he must do what he can to avoid falling any further. The Torah tells this servant not to give up on himself, because God Himself does not give up on such a person. Even if a person has fallen into bad habits, he must not despair or assume that God no longer has any interest in his observance. He must instead try to adhere to whatever Torah precepts he can in his current condition, until the time comes when he will be able to rebuild and recover, and become the devoted servant of God that he is meant to be.