YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**PARASHAT BEHAR**

**SICHA OF HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL ZT”L**

Hurtful Speech

Adapted by Zev Frimer

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You shall not defraud each other, and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord your God. (*Vayikra* 25:17)

Rashi, quoting *Chazal*, comments as follows:

Here [the Torah] warns concerning *ona’at devarim* (hurtful speech): a person should not vex his fellow, nor give him inappropriate advice that reflects the ways and interests of the advisor. And if a person should say, "How can anyone know if my intentions were bad?" – for that reason [the Torah] says, "You shall fear your God." The Knower of all thoughts will know.

*Sefer Ha-chinukh* (commandment 338) likewise interprets this verse as a warning against *ona’at devarim*, and explains what this prohibition includes:

This mitzva includes several warnings and exhortations enumerated by our Sages, of blessed memory, so as not to cause pain to others in any way, and not to shame them. They go so far as to teach that a person should not eye merchandise at a time when he has no money. And it is proper that one take care that his speech contain no hint of contempt towards people, for the Torah is very strict about verbal abuse, since it is something that people take strongly to heart. In fact, many people are more concerned about [having people speak to them in a dignified way] than they are about money matters… It is not possible for the Torah to list all those actions that may cause anguish to others, therefore each person must take care in accordance with his understanding…

As with any other commandment, after listing some of the laws that this mitzva entails, the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* defines who the mitzva applies to and what punishment awaits a person who transgresses. While the discussion of the commandment usually concludes at this point, in the case of *ona’at devarim* the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* elaborates further, noting its extreme importance:

Seemingly, this does not mean that if one Jew comes and starts castigating his fellow with harsh words, that the listener should not answer back. For it is impossible for a person to be like a stone, remaining unmoved. Furthermore, if he remains silent, it is as if he acknowledges the [truth of the] insults. In truth, the Torah does not command that a person be like a stone, retaining the same equanimity in the face of those who insult him and those who bless him. However, [the Torah] does command us to distance ourselves from this trait, such that we do not come to argue with and insult people. In this way a person is saved from all this, for one who is not argumentative will not be insulted by others, except for fools, and one should not pay attention to fools.

And if some person, by his insults, forces one to answer back, then it is appropriate for one who is wise to answer back sweetly and pleasantly, and not to be excessively angry, for anger is a trait of the unwise. He thereby distinguishes himself, before the listeners, from the insults, and casts the burden upon the one who does the insulting. This represents the conduct of the best among men.

We learn, then, that it is permissible to answer a fool, just as the Torah permits one to kill in defense when thief enters one’s home stealthily. Unquestionably, a person is not required to suffer damage inflicted by his fellow; rather, he is permitted to save himself from him, and likewise from the words of his mouth, if they are full of deceit, in any manner necessary to protect himself.

However, there are certain people whose piety is of such a degree that they do not include themselves in this license to answer back insults, lest their anger overcome them and they become carried away. Concerning them, our Sages said (*Shabbat* 88b): “Those who are insulted but do not insult in turn, who hear themselves humiliated and do not answer back – concerning them it is written, ‘And those who love Him are like the sun rising in its splendor.’”

From the above we learn a fundamental principle in the Torah’s perception of man: the Torah does not ignore a person’s natural tendencies. It does not require that a person suppress his feelings in order to fulfill the commandments. The Torah knows, for example, that it is difficult for a person who is being insulted to maintain his equanimity and not to react, and therefore it does not require a person in such a situation to remain silent. Rather, a person should try to avoid such situations, and in the event that he nevertheless finds himself being verbally abused and insulted, it guides him as to how to respond.

Obviously, it is an added measure of piety if a person hears insults but does not respond to them. However, the Torah does not oblige a person to behave in this way; rather, it takes his human needs into consideration. Furthermore, even with regard to those pious individuals we are not told that they do not feel any anger. Anger, in such a situation, is a natural, human inclination. Those pious people manage to conquer their anger and refrain from replying.

In this context we recall the words of Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, concerning the verse, “You shall be people of sanctity unto Me” (*Shemot* 22:30). The Holy One, blessed be He, is not looking for angels, devoid of desires and inclinations. He has enough of them. What He wants is for us to be *people* – mortal, material creatures with earthly desires, but “people of sanctity” – such as those who succeed in overcoming their urges and directing their inclinations towards sanctity and purity.