

Parashat Behar/Bechukotai

How do I Deal with Reminders of My Non-Jewish Past?



Dear Rebbetzin,

I'm a recent convert who grew up in a devout Catholic family. For many years, I lived in a convent where I became a teacher and preacher. The more I delved into the Bible, the more I discovered inconsistencies in the Catholic faith. This eventually led me to discover the truth of Judaism. I am not hiding my past, but I am weary of always being reminded of my former life, wherever I go. I know people are well meaning and just curious. Most have never met someone who used to be a nun in a catholic convent, and they find my story fascinating. However, I have worked so hard to detach myself from my background, so it is quite annoying when, for example, at a Shabbat table someone will ask me, "So tell us Yehudit, what does Catholicism have to say on such and such topic?" I would much rather discuss what the Torah has to say without having to constantly refer back to my prior faith, which I'm trying so hard to forget. It is also a bit embarrassing for me to be reminded of my Catholic background in front of everyone, when what I desire most is to fit in, gain acceptance and feel part of the Jewish community to which I now belong. I don't want to be rude, but I am beginning to become more and more resentful to the constant inquiries about my prior connection to and knowledge of Catholicism. How can I politely make people leave me alone and stop prying into my prior life?

Yehudit Baldwin (name changed)

Dear Yehudit,

First of all, I want to strengthen you in your desire to detach yourself from your past and deflect the constant reminders of your Catholic background. The Torah indeed recognizes the discomfort it may cause converts to be reminded about their former life. This is included in prohibited speech called *Ona'at Devarim*, which means verbal mistreatment. It entails saying things that would pain, make angry, hurt, frighten, bother or embarrass another person. So, according to the Torah, you are indeed entitled to be annoyed when people remind you that you used to be a Catholic teacher! However, are well-meaning questions from the Jewish community really considered *Ona'at Devarim* and how are you supposed to respond when you are faced with these kinds of probing questions?

Defining אונאת דברים / *Ona'at Devarim*

אונאה / *Ona'ah* is mentioned twice in *Parashat Behar*:

ספר ויקרא פרק כה (יד) וְכִי תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְכָּר לְעַמִּיתְךָ אוֹ קָנָה מִיַּד עַמִּיתְךָ אֶל תִּזְנוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו:

"When you sell property from your neighbor or buy any from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another" (*Vayikra* 25:14). Rashi explains this verse to refer to deception in monetary matters.

ספר ויקרא פרק כה (יז) וְלֹא תִזְנוּ אִישׁ אֶת עַמִּיתוֹ וְיִרְאֵת מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי הַשֵּׁם אֱלֹהֶיכֶם:

"Do not wrong one another, but fear Your G-d, for I am Hashem your G-d" (*Vayikra* 25:17).

Rashi explains that this verse refers to verbal oppression (wounding a person's feelings).

One should not annoy his fellow, nor give him advice which is unfitting for him, but rather in accordance with the plan and the advantage of the adviser. In case you would say, "Who knows if I had any intention to harm the person?" Scripture states, "But you shall fear G-d"! He Who knows the thoughts of people, He knows it! ...

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There are thus three forms of *ona'ah*. Besides dishonesty in business (*Vayikra* 25:14), there are two forms of verbal oppression (*Vayikra* 25:17). 1. Verbally misleading or tricking another and 2. Verbally causing pain or discomfort to another. Included in this is the commandment of "You shall love your fellow as yourself," for if one causes pain to another for no reason, one is certainly transgressing the Mitzvah of treating every Jew in a loving manner.

The Talmud's Examples of אונאת דברים / *Ona'at Devarim*

Just as there is a prohibition against exploitation [*ona'ah*] in buying and selling, so is there *ona'ah* in statements, i.e., verbal mistreatment. One may not say to a seller: For how much are you selling this item, if he does not wish to purchase it. He thereby upsets the seller when the deal fails to materialize. One may not say to a Ba'al Teshuva: Remember your former deeds. If one is the child of converts, one may not say to him: Remember the deeds of your ancestors, as it states, "You shall not mistreat a convert, neither shall you oppress him" (*Shemot* 22:20). If one is a convert and he came to study Torah, one may not say to him: Does the mouth that ate carcasses, repugnant creatures, and creeping animals, come to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty? If torments are afflicting a person, if illnesses are afflicting him, or if he is burying his children, one may not speak to him in the manner that the friends of Iyov spoke to him: "Is not your fear of G-d your confidence, and your hope the integrity of your ways? Remember, I beseech you, whoever perished, being innocent?" (*Iyov* 4:6–7). Certainly, you sinned, as otherwise you would not have suffered misfortune (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 58b). Speaking in this fashion is prohibited from the Torah, as the *Shulchan Aruch* repeats the abovementioned examples word for word (*Choshen Mishpat* 228, 1-5). Furthermore, *Ona'at Devarim* is more severe than Monetary Oppression because a person feels more distressed when his feelings are hurt; and money earned dishonestly can be returned, whereas, hurt feelings cannot be undone (*Ibid.* 1).

Verbal Abuse?

It is still questionable whether people who remind you of your Catholic background with their questions are indeed transgressing the prohibition against אונאת דברים / *Ona'at Devarim*, since their questions are not outwardly denigrating. They are not putting you down for having eaten unkosher food or worshipped idols etc. They may not even know that their questions are causing you discomfort. On the contrary, perhaps they think that they are showing you respect by requesting you to enlighten them about matters in which they themselves are ignorant. However, we must be extra sensitive and careful not to offend a convert in even the slightest way, as the Torah mentions numerous times that we must be kind to the convert. Since the convert comes from the outside and naturally wants to fit in, it can be expected that he or she is more vulnerable and sensitive even to well-meaning comments. The *Shulchan Aruch* states, "One needs to be most careful not to oppress the convert..." (*Choshen Mishpat* 228, 2). Likewise, the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubawitz in his sicha from *Mem Hei*, seems to indicate that one is not allowed to remind a convert of his origins at all. Although, it seems that the halacha prohibits reminding a convert of his origins only when one's intention is to denigrate him, the Rebbe writes, whatever it states in regards to the children of converts applies also to the actual convert, as a child of converts is also called a convert. He is completely separate from the nations of the world, even more than other Jews who were never part of the other nations. Thus, it is also not permitted to remind an actual convert about his background at all (*Sichos* of Rabbi Scheersohn of Lubawitz, 1980 ש"פ, אהו"ק).

The Holy Lineage of Righteous Converts

A convert who gave up so much to become part of the Jewish people deserves the greatest respect. When people make you uncomfortable with questions referring to your non-Jewish background, try not to take it personally. It is very likely they have such high regards for converts that they cannot imagine that any comment about your non-Jewish background could in any way be insulting. They also most likely are not aware that their questions or comments could be against halacha. You may gently remind them by responding something like, "I am not comfortable discussing these matters." Know that once you have converted, you are no less a Jew than anyone else. As we prepare ourselves to receive the Torah on Shavuot we are reminded that every Jew was a convert. Moreover, Shavuot celebrates the birthday of King David who descended from Ruth the righteous "Jew by Choice."