



## What are the Parameters of Verbal Mistreatment?

### Consciously Refraining from Accidentally Stepping on Someone's Toes

I often voice my opinion against women taking upon themselves the mitzvot of men, because there are an endless amount of mitzvot pertaining to women, which are often neglected. One such mitzvah is אֲוֹנָת דְּבָרִים / *ona'at devarim* – ‘verbal mistreatment.’ While, thank G-d, awareness of *lashon hara* (evil speech) has been greatly heightened by the Chafetz Chaim, the parameters of verbal mistreatment, mentioned in *Parashat BeHar*, are less well-known. While it is vital to refrain from gossip and negative speech behind someone's back, the way we communicate directly with others is no less important. More than once have students shared with me, that people asked them uncomfortable questions about their past before they were Torah observant or before they embarked on their path of conversion to Judaism. People may be well-meaning, but that is not enough. We need to develop sensitivity to how our remarks and questions affect the person with whom we are communicating. I was fortunate to attend two of the last courses given by the renowned Nechama Leibowitz z"l, in her home, at the age of 93. What I recall best from these courses is her explanations and anecdotes on moral integrity in interpersonal relationships. Nechama related an incident in a crowded bus, where someone accidentally stepped on the toes of another, exclaiming, “Sorry! I didn't mean to step on your toes!” Nechama explained that more is expected than not intending to purposely hurt someone else. We need to constantly make an effort and heighten our awareness of how to consciously refrain from accidentally stepping on someone's toes- whether literally or figuratively. The Talmud recognizes that even well-meaning comments and questions can be hurtful. “If one is a ba'al teshuva, do not tell him: Remember your earlier deeds. If one is the child of converts, do not remind him of the ways of his ancestors” (*Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia* 58b). Once I met a friend I hadn't seen for a while. She looked obviously pregnant and even close to giving birth, so I excitedly wished her “*be'sha'ah tovah!*” (the traditional well-wishes for a pregnant woman). Whoa! Was I taken aback by her reaction to my well-meant congratulations on her pregnancy. Her face turned color, as she angrily informed me of my mistake. I felt so terrible about what I had just done. I had just stepped on her toes, big, big time as often women, after multiple pregnancies, have a very hard time getting their stomach back to normal. Apparently, her protruding belly was a real sore point for her, and an object of embarrassment. I decided then and there that never was I going to congratulate anyone for being pregnant, unless they personally share their blessing with me. The good end of the story is that I immediately blessed her to become pregnant. She answered “amen!” and lo and behold she gave birth exactly nine months following my blessing!

### Excessive Parental Advice May be Verbal Mistreatment

Twice in *Parashat BeHar* does the Torah mention the prohibition of wronging someone:

**ספר ויקרא פרק כה פסוק יד** וְכִי תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְכָּר לְעַמִּיתְךָ אוֹ קָנָה מִיַּד עַמִּיתְךָ אֶל תּוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו:

“When you make a sale to your fellow Jew or make a purchase from the hand of your fellow Jew, you shall not wrong one another” (*Vayikra* 25:14).

**ספר ויקרא פרק כה פסוק יז** וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת עַמִּיתוֹ וְיִרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם:

“You shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall fear your G-d, for I am Hashem, your G-d” (*Vayikra* 25:17).

From this repetition, the Talmud learns that the second mention, of the prohibition of wronging a fellow Jew, refers to verbal mistreatment, such as saying anything that may insult, hurt, or anger another person in his presence. Rashi explains that verbal mistreatment includes offering advice that is unsound for the person we advise, and only beneficial to the mode of life of the advisor. This shows the great sensitivity toward others that the Torah requires. It is not enough to live by "Don't do to others what you don't want done to yourself." Often, I catch myself thinking that I wouldn't have minded something which insulted someone else. Why should that person feel bad about such and such, since it wouldn't bother me a bit? For example, if someone asked me about my past, before I became Torah observant, I would be happy to share. Yet, I am not she, and she is not me. I must learn to understand that what is perfectly fine with me may not be fine with her. If I pose a question or make a comment that is hurtful to that particular person, even if I myself would not be hurt by it, I will be committing a Torah prohibition of "you shall not wrong another..." Rashi's comment also made me think about all the unsolicited advice we give to others. Most often, others just want to relieve their heart. They want a listening ear more than solutions and advice. When we really listen, it helps to come up with their own solutions to their problems. This especially pertains to our teen and young adult children. In their path to forge their own way, they need their parents support rather than advice. When well-meaning parental advice rains down on their head with the force of repeated hammer blows, it not only is damaging, it may even be included in the prohibition of verbal mistreatment.

### Three Ways Verbal Mistreatment is Worse than Monetary Exploitation

The Talmud further elucidates that verbal mistreatment is worse than monetary exploitation in three ways:

Rabbi Yochanan says in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai: Greater is the transgression by verbal mistreatment than the transgression by monetary exploitation: 1. Regarding verbal mistreatment, it states: "And you shall fear your G-d;" But regarding monetary exploitation, it does not state: "And you shall fear your G-d." Rabbi Elazar said: 2. Verbal mistreatment, affects one's body; but monetary exploitation affects one's money. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nahmani says: 3. Monetary exploitation is given to restitution; but verbal mistreatment, is not given to restitution.

#### 1. The importance of Intention in Communication

Verbal abuse is not always apparent to others. It is far easier to conceal one's true intentions to harm people verbally than financially. Engaging in verbal mistreatment is worse than harming others financially, because it shows that the person fears people more than G-d. He is only concerned with what others may think, while being unconcerned that G-d knows his true intentions. As Rashi explains, and if you say, "Who can tell whether I had evil intentions [when I talked to my fellow in an insulting manner? Perhaps, I did so to make him feel remorseful and repent his ways]." Therefore, it says, "and you shall fear your G-d." – The One Who knows all thoughts – He knows. Concerning anything held in the heart and known only to the One who bears this thought in his mind, it says "and you shall fear your G-d!" (Rashi, *Vayikra* 25:17). This teaches us the importance of our intentions when communicating with others. The exact same words can be either helpful or hurtful depending on the underlying feeling behind the remarks. By those who are sensitive, this feeling may be detected by the intonation and tone of voice.

#### 2. Think Twice Before Clicking 'Send' for Recorded Messages

Greater harm can be inflicted through words than through damaging someone's property. This is because property damage is external while verbal mistreatment affects a person's inner being. A careless word can go straight to our core, hurting our very essence. This is especially true today, when verbal messages can be fired from every corner of the earth with lightning speed through SMS, *whatsapp*, email and more. "...All other weapons strike close up, while arrows strike from afar. That is the way of evil tongues: What is said in Rome, kills in Syria... even though you have

appeased [the person harmed by words] and he has seemingly been appeased, he still is burning on the inside” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 19:19). In my experience, especially recorded messages, which can retain an angry abusive tone are more hurtful than if they were said in person. This is because the person would not feel comfortable speaking in such manner to a person he sees face-to-face, whereas it is so easy to just click a message off without any qualms. Having been on the receiving end of such messages recently, I can testify to the exceeding hurt they inflicted. It felt like part of my core had been robbed and depleted. I can’t imagine that the same person – who took license to spew out all his accumulated anger, yelling accusations to me in recorded what’s app messages – would have said even a fraction of the content of those messages in person, and surely not in that tone of voice. So please think more than twice before clicking ‘send.’

### 3. The Challenge of Repairing Verbal Mistreatment

Whereas monetary exploitation can be rectified by financial restitution; how can you measure and make up for the pain your words have inflicted? A rule of thumb is that it is always better to say less, as you can always add the rest later, but once you realize that you said something which was better not mentioned, your words cannot be taken back. Often, people don’t even realize the repercussion of their words. In a flick of irritation, an insensitive remark may slip, without the perpetrator even noticing. Should you confront him about it later, he will deny having said anything less than kind and proper words. Who can explain to someone else the hurt their tone of voice can cause? For that, recorded messages actually do have merit. I was so hurt by the recorded verbal abusive messages fired at me, that I immediately deleted them all. Yet, although the messages were no longer polluting my phone, I felt emotionally polluted. Perhaps, if the person would listen to his own messages a month afterward, he may be so taken aback to realize what he had said and how he had yelled it repeatedly, that he may actually be moved to apologize. Still, nothing can make up for the emotional damage caused, not even a sincere apology.

### Women Can Recreate the World with Rectified Words

Women are communicators as it states, “Ten measures of speech were given to the world, and nine of them were allocated to women” (*Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin* 49b). We, women, are called upon to repair the world, which is created through speech. We have the choice between emptying our verbal garbage-can in the emotional property of our fellows, or working on weighing our words carefully, using our feminine *binah* to understand the sensitivities of others and achieving true refinement of speech! By tuning into the Divine speech that originally created the world, we have the opportunity to recreate the world with our words and lead humanity to the final, perfected planet.