

PARSHAT BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI
RABBI VERNON KURTZ
MAY 12, 2018

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin tells the following story in his *Book of Jewish Values*: “My mother was once called by a stockbroker whom she knew slightly and who urged her to buy shares in a certain company. He enumerated several reasons why he thought the company was poised to do well. My mother bought the stock, which promptly fell and stayed depressed for a long time. She later had reason to suspect that the firm at which this broker worked had a large quantity of this stock to unload, and instructed its brokers to encourage their clients to purchase it. Obviously the brokerage firm, and this particular broker did not know the stock would fall. But had my mother been informed that they were trying to dispose of a large quantity of stock, she would not have purchased it.”

We live in a world in which words are very important. We live in a world where dealings with other human beings are critical. And, we live in a world where both of these modes of behavior are being called into question.

In our Torah portion of Behar we are told: “When you sell property to your neighbor or buy anything from your neighbor, you should not wrong one another.” It is understood by the Rabbis, that this is the concept of Ona’at Mamon, financial oppression. This concept fundamentally forbids deceptive pricing. Both the buyer and the seller are enjoined against capitalizing on the lack of knowledge of the other concerning the market value of a specific commodity. The seller is forbidden to deceptively overcharge and the buyer is forbidden to deceptively underpay. If either one goes beyond a certain percentage of the price, usually considered to be a sixth, then the sale can be invalidated.

The Torah informs us that in our business dealings we must be fair, honest, and forthright. We cannot deceive anyone, even unwittingly. Needless to say, if it is done with malice, it is totally improper and unjust.

The Talmud in the tractate of Bava Metziah, as well as the medieval codes, amplify this law so that everybody understands exactly its legal ramifications and its teachings. One wonders whether if these laws were actually put into practice in our society and in the marketplace, how many could live up to them? What about the ads that appear in the media? Do they always portray the truth and nothing but the truth? What about those who wish to sell you something when you walk into the store? Are their motives always pure? And lest we only concern ourselves with the seller, the buyer too must be ethical. He is not allowed to try to undersell the marketplace by stretching the truth, by bargaining, or by stressing that the item which he wishes to buy must be sold to him at an unfair depressed cost.

Three verses later in the Torah we are told: “Do not wrong one another, but fear your God, for I, the Lord, am your God.” This the rabbis suggest was oppression of another type. It is a description of Ona’at Devarim, verbal oppression. In the Mishna of Bava

Metziah we are told that: “Just as there is overreaching in buying and selling, so is there wrong done by words.” The examples noted are quite interesting. The text tells us that one must not ask another: “What is the price of this article?” when he has no intention of buying it. You are simply wasting the seller’s time. If a person was a repentant sinner, you cannot say to him: “Remember your former deeds.” If he was a child of a convert one must not taunt him by saying: “Remember the deeds of your ancestors.” In each case we are told that one must be careful with one’s words in the same way that one must be careful with one’s money. Living in the marketplace and in human space one must be ever mindful that words and deeds have consequences, and lead either to an ethical and just society or one which is predicated on the opposite values.

Words matter. Judaism is very clear about that. Think of the final meditation after the Amidah which reminds us to be careful with the words of our mouth and the meditations of our heart. Think of the major prayer on the evening of Yom Kippur, Kol Nidre, not really a prayer but a statement of the importance of carrying out vows. Think of all the confessionals on Yom Kippur and how many of the individual sins mentioned are done with our words. In a society where we are besieged by millions of words each day in person and on the internet; in the media and in advertising; in politics and in diplomacy, it reminds us how careful we must always be.

The political arena in which we live is filled with words, normally not of the nicest nature. The negative ads that we’ve already been exposed to remind us how politics and democracy are becoming almost distasteful. R.K. Scher wrote of the modern campaigns that the attack ads are “as American as Mississippi mud – as American as apple pie.” What a shame, what a disgrace. The attack ads have become Ad Hominem, debasing individuals rather than discussing their stated policies. I am all for debate, but it should be done on a high level. The civil discourse that I called for on Rosh Hashanna is still missing in our society. The sermon that I delivered was published by the *Chicago Jewish News*, was read by hundreds, if not thousands, across the globe and yet, I am afraid, nothing has changed. In fact, the atmosphere has become worse. Twitter attacks on all sides allow social media to monitor the way we think and to engender views according to the news we hear or that is told to us. We must do better. I am not surprised that it is stated that the best and the brightest are not going into politics.

To disagree with another is part of Jewish tradition. To attack another human for the position they profess is simply beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Ona’at Devarim reminds us that you may disagree with an individual, but remember they are still created in the image of G-d and are deserving of respect. Don’t castigate them for their ancestors, don’t even remind them of their past behavior. Give them the benefit of the doubt and listen carefully to them. Otherwise, it is verbal oppression.

To the rabbis of old Ona’at Devarim led to shaming a person maliciously in public and led to the comment of the Talmud: “anyone who shames his fellow in public, it is as if he has spilled blood.” The Talmud in Bava Metziah states: “All those who go down to Gehinom eventually come back up, except three: one who has committed adultery with

another man's wife, one who has shamed his fellow in public, and one who has given an insulting nickname to his fellow.”

It is clear that our society can learn from these values. But Ona'at Devarim is not only about shaming an individual. It is also about telling half-truths, or lying on purpose. Tomorrow on the Jewish calendar is Yom Yerushalayim, the day Jerusalem was unified in 1967. It is a day of rejoicing for our people as we returned to the capital and rebuilt the Jewish Quarter, which had been destroyed by the Jordanians, and renewed our visits to the Western Wall, the place adjacent to Temple Mount of Old. Tomorrow at the Synagogue we will recite Hallel, symbolic of the miraculous nature of this particular event which we have witnessed in our own time.

But even as we rejoice we recognize that it is a time of concern for Jerusalem and the State of Israel. On the Gaza border, we continue to witness demonstrations which lead to violence. Words have been used to uproot Israel's historic heritage in the land and in the City of Jerusalem. In 2012, the leader of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, stated that Jerusalem's identity is Arab and the city's and Christian holy sites must be protected from Israeli threats. He declared, decrying Israeli excavation work, that “It will not undermine the fact that the city will forever be Arabic, Islamic and Christian.” Again, words matter and those who utter them must be held responsible for the statements that they utter.

Only a week ago, he gave a speech at the first session of the Palestinian National Council since 1998 in Ramallah. He delivered what he called: “a history lesson,” claiming Israel was established as a European “colonial project” and has “nothing to do with Judaism.” He also alleged that the Holocaust, the Shoah, was caused by Jewish social behavior, including charging interest and financial matters. He cited the common conspiracy theory that Ashkenazi European Jews are descended from the Khazars, a Turkic people, not the ancient Israelites and that European Jews therefore have “no historical ties” to the land of Israel. He added that the creation of Israel was simply a colonial project to safeguard European interests. “Those who sought a Jewish state weren't Jews,” he told the audience, thus Israel “has nothing to do with Judaism.”

These lies and half-truths have impact. For the leader of the Palestinian Authority, for someone who is supposed to be a partner for peace in the Middle East, to deliver those statements which negate historical fact and historical memory, is unacceptable and demeaning. It was very sad to learn that Kuwait, a non-permanent member of the Security Council, prevented a US-sponsored condemnatory statement of his anti-Semitic comments from moving forward. Though he apologized later after his words were published, he must be held responsible for the statements that he made. Thankfully, most of the Western nations of the world denounced these words.

Words matter, our deeds matter, our behavior makes a difference. We must learn to guard our words, be careful with our actions, and make sure we live life honestly, justly, and ethically. It is not by mistake that the Torah and rabbinic literature teach us how we

must act in the world of commerce and human fellowship. It reminds us that our behavior states a great deal about us and how G-d is either sanctified or desecrated by the actions we take. In the world in which we live no lesson could be greater. We must ensure that in our homes, in our businesses, in our synagogues, in the political venues, and in the diplomatic arena, in fact, wherever we find ourselves, we can be proud of what we say and what we do as we teach by example to the next generation.