

Bais Midrash Zichron Eliezer

Message from the Rav – Parshas Behar-Bechukosai ‘5772

The first of this week’s double Parshah, contains the famous verse instructing us to refrain from causing pain to another person (see 25:14). The importance of this precept is emphasized strongly, as the Torah repeats it again a few verses later (see 25:17), with the second instance concluding with a general exhortation to “fear Hashem.”

It would seem obvious that it is forbidden to hurt someone. If so, why is it necessary for the Torah to repeat itself? Why isn’t once enough? Furthermore, why did the Torah instruct us to “fear Hashem” in the second instance, but not the first?

In answering these questions, Rashi draws a distinction between the first instance, which refers to financial oppression, and the second, which refers to verbal oppression. Finally, in order that a person not fool himself into thinking that he can use words to hurt someone under the guise of innocence, (for example, giving bad advice), the Torah states “fear Hashem” so that a person be reminded that Hashem knows all intentions.

Why is verbal oppression worse than financial oppression?

The Maharal sees a basic difference between the two forms of harm. Financial misdeeds (which also include physical harm) can be corrected. For example, stolen money can always be returned. On a more extreme level, proper punishment can be meted out for severe offences. For example, a murderer can be sentenced to death to pay for his crimes.

In contrast, it is very difficult to compensate verbal harm, for it is an affliction not of the body, but of the soul. Steps can be taken to repair physical pain in our world, but almost none can repair emotional and spiritual pain.

For example, we all know that the punishment for embarrassing a person in public is the forfeiture of one’s share in the world to come (see Pirkei Avos 3:11). The embarrassment was not a physical affliction, but an emotional and spiritual one. As such, the punishment cannot take a physical form, and must be delayed until Olam HaBoh.

Because of this, the Torah warns us to avoid verbal oppression, and specifically tells us to “fear Hashem” so that we don’t fool ourselves into thinking that our verbal insults will not be recorded by Hashem, who knows and understands all (see Pirkei Avos 2:1).

#2

R. Avraham Pam, ZT’L, expressed a different explanation for the inclusion of the command to “fear Hashem.” He points out that people often behave differently in public than they do in

private. The biggest “tzadik” in public can easily be the biggest “rosho” in private. It is for this reason that the Torah specifically says “fear Hashem,” for a person must know that Hashem sees all, even how a person speaks behind closed doors.

#3

R. Eliezer of Metz (Sefer HaYereyim) extends the prohibition of “causing harm” to a case where a person simply greets other people in an angry and unpleasant fashion. No words were spoken, yet the person’s demeanor was enough to cause emotional and spiritual harm.

#4

What lesson can we learn from the explanations of the Sefer HaYereim, the Maharal and Rav Pam?

First, we must make a concerted effort to realize that others can be directly harmed when we don’t speak, or even greet them, in an appropriate fashion.

Second, we must remember that verbal oppression, though worse than financial harm, is unfortunately easy to do. For example, while a person would dare not insult his boss, such restraint may not be shown toward one’s spouse, or children. The statement “sticks and stones break my bones, but words can never harm me” is simply not true. The Torah therefore warns us to be particularly careful with verbal oppression, and to be extremely careful that anything we do say is guided by proper intentions and motivations.

Finally, let us not delude ourselves into thinking that Hashem will not know our true intentions when we give bad advice, or how we behave behind closed doors when we are rude and harsh to our spouses and children.

Do not forget the Rambam’s 10th article of faith, which many of us recite each morning: “I believe with perfect faith that Hashem knows all of man's deeds and thoughts.”

Good Shabbos.

Rabbi Menachem Spira