

HURTFUL WORDS PART 1

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In the past weeks we have discussed various commandments that are related to speech, such as lashon hara. Another, less well-known command relating to speech is the prohibition of 'hurtful words', (Onas Devarim in Hebrew). There is a well-known saying that, "sticks and stones might break my bones but words can never hurt me." This is not the Torah approach; speech is a very powerful tool that can be used to cause great good or great harm. In a certain way, harmful speech can actually do more damage than causing physical pain because speech can penetrate deep into a person's inner being. Anyone involved in a long relationship can testify that a few harsh words can be remembered for several years.

There are a number of different forms of Onas Devarim. The most obvious is speaking harshly to a person. It is forbidden to speak in such a way that will cause emotional damage to a person. Thus, raising one's voice, or shouting are forms of speech that are almost always prohibited. A person may feel that he has the right to shout at his children and there may be very rare occasions when it may be appropriate, however, as a rule one should never shout at his children¹. Shouting may achieve an immediate goal but the long-term results are invariably negative.

It seems that the closer we are with people, the more likely we are to speak hurtfully to them. Thus, a husband and wife may often speak to each other in such a way that they would never dream of speaking to strangers. This is of course extremely damaging - there is no need to speak harshly to one's spouse. Even if we feel that it is necessary to criticize them in some way, doing so in a harsh way invariably fails. Only speaking softly, and sharing one's feelings will have any chance of success².

There are times where we may feel it necessary to offer constructive criticism to someone. In order for such criticism to have any chance of its success working it must be said over in a gentle and humble way. People are generally very sensitive to any criticism but if it is done in an unthreatening way then the person is far more likely to accept it. However, when a person feels he is being verbally attacked he will be placed on the defensive and will not accept what he is being told.

¹ Moreover, on the rare occasions where it may be permitted to speak harshly to one's children, one is NEVER allowed to shout at them from a sense of anger, only if one's motivations are completely pure.

² It should be noted that many marriage experts suggest that the best way of changing one's spouse for the better is to change ourselves first. When they see that we are treating them with respect, then they are far more likely to reciprocate.

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