

HURTFUL WORDS PART 2

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

Previously we discussed one aspect of the prohibition of speaking hurtful words. We saw that it is generally forbidden to speak harshly to people. However, there are a number of other aspects to this prohibition:

1. The Talmud states that it is forbidden to remind a person of past misdemeanors that he would rather forget¹. To remind him of such unpleasant memories is very likely to cause him considerable pain.
2. It is also forbidden to make fun of a person if there is any possibility that he will be hurt by it. It is very common that friends spend much time teasing each other about aspects of their character or appearance. This may be acceptable if there is absolutely no chance of causing anguish; however, very often, the victims of such 'innocent' joking do feel hurt. Many of us know that we do not appreciate personal jokes aimed at us and it is important to realize that just like we would prefer not to be the butt of such jokes, our friends may feel the same way. Moreover, even if we are not effected by teasing, other people may be more sensitive than us and may still feel hurt.
3. Another aspect of joking that is often forbidden is making practical jokes, such as telling a person the wrong directions. This also causes a person discomfort and loss of valuable time and effort.
4. Similarly, it is forbidden to enter into a shop and look around at the items for sale with absolutely no intention of every buying them. Doing this will inevitably cause the shop owner to have unfounded expectations of a sale. However, if one wants to look at the items to see if he may want to buy them some time in the future, this is permitted².

The laws of 'hurtful words' teach us the importance of being sensitive to the feelings of our fellow man. This concept includes any speech that could even inadvertently cause pain. Many people are sensitive about specific things and talking about such matters are very likely to cause them discomfort. For example, if a person is suffering a certain difficulty in a certain area, it may be insensitive to discuss other people's success in that same area, because to do so will likely remind them of their lacking in that area.

Like all commandments, this one is intended to cause us to improve as a person. Someone who is careful to avoid harming people with his words will surely develop into a highly sensitive person.

¹ Bava Metsia, 58b.

² Heard from Rav Yitzchak Berkovits Shlita. However, there are authorities who hold that if one does not have money with him he should not look at the items. (Mishpatey Shalom, p.87.).

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