

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 11:6

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

We're asked to draw close to G-d Almighty in this world and to others as well (aside from drawing close to ourselves, the truth be known, but that's not the point here). And so while we might sometimes affront G-d with our wrongs -- which we'd been concentrating on till now in this chapter -- we also sometimes offend friends and family. So let's address some of the issues there, starting with the instances in which we might offend or abuse others verbally.

"In general," as Ramchal terms it, "verbal abuse refers to speaking to someone ... in an offensive manner and shaming him. Or, in a more serious vein, shaming him in public, or doing something that would lead to that." And so we're taught that if we come across a penitent (i.e., someone who'd been off the mark for a long time who then turned himself around and done teshuvah) who then angers us for one reason or another, that we're not to taunt him by reminding him of his soiled past (see Baba Metzia 48b).

In all honesty and as most of us know though, it's far easier saying nasty and hurtful things than doing them. For while your heart would be pained seeing someone you'd struck or robbed, for example, suffering right before your eyes, you could always deny the hurt brought on by your insult simply because the effect is so subtle and seemingly harmless.

But our sages reveal a number of covert details about verbal abuse: that it's "even worse than monetary abuse" (Baba Metzia 48b), that "one who shame-faces his friend in public has no place in the World to Come" (Pirkei Avot 3:11), and that "all gates of prayer are closed except those reserved for the verbally abused" (Baba Messiah 59a), that "The Holy One blessed be He demands retribution from all ... but the verbally abused" (Baba Metzia 59a).

And even though we're told to "admonish your neighbor" (Leviticus 19:17) ironically enough (seeing how fraught with the chance to abuse him that would be), nonetheless our sages added that while "you might think that this would allow you to make him to blush (in shame)" that's not so, since the Torah goes on to say, "do not bear a sin because of him" (Arachin 16b), meaning to say that you cannot shame him, since that would be abusive.

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