

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Lech Lecha

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And he came to Hagar, and she conceived, and she saw that she was pregnant, and her mistress [Sarai] became unimportant in her eyes. (Genesis 16:4)

The Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 45:4) explains that when Hagar immediately became pregnant she boasted that Sarai who had remained barren for so many years may have appeared righteous on the outside, but must have lacked the merit with God to be blessed with a child. The next verse clearly indicates that Sarai is upset by Hagar's taunts. Such behaviour is known as **אונאת דברים** - ona'as devarim which means hurtful words. The word ona'ah literally means defrauding or treating wrongfully and devarim are words.

We can all appreciate the Torah forbidding such insulting and cruel behaviour. Yet the Talmud (Bava Metziah 58b) discusses other aspects of this prohibition which are perhaps more subtle. Examples include reminding someone of a previous misdeed after they have repented or mentioning to someone who had converted what they had indulged in before becoming Jewish. Even asking the price of an item in a shop when you have no intention of buying it could cause distress to others.

There are a variety of reasons why something seemingly innocent like asking the price of something without intending to buy it could lead to distress. The Chofetz Chaim (d. 1933) says that if it is a genuine inquiry then it's permitted to ask, but to raise the hopes of the shopkeeper that they might make a sale without reason and dash them causes unnecessary disappointment.

Rabbi Menachem Meiri (d. 1310) explains that people might hear the price and decide that the shop is too expensive causing a loss to the shopkeeper. Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir (d. 1158) held that other customers may avoid buying it if they think someone else is negotiating the price while the Rabbi Avraham ben David (d. 1198) held that the shopkeeper will feel his time was wasted.

Either way, the Talmud indicates that words can cause harm even when they seem innocuous. Our duty is to be as sensitive to the feelings of others as we would want others to be to ours.

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