

The Leviticus Project

Parashat Behar-Bechukotai 5777

יד וכי-תמכרו ממכר לעמיתך, או קנה מיד עמיתך--אל-תונו, איש את-אחיו. **Leviticus 25:14** And if thou sell aught unto thy neighbor, or buy of thy neighbor's hand, ye shall not **wrong** one another.

Just as there is **ona'ah** in buying and selling, so there is ona'ah in words, [it being written (**Leviticus 25:17**): "And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow, and you shall fear your G d." This speaks of verbal wronging, the good or evil intent of one's words not being manifest, but known only to the speaker.] One should not ask another the price of an article if he does not intend to buy it. If he were a penitent, he should not say to him: "Remember your past deeds." If he were the descendant of proselytes, he should not say to him: "Remember the deeds of your ancestors," as it is written (**Exodus 22:20**): "And a stranger you shall not wrong, and you shall not oppress him."
Mishna Bava Metzia 4:10

One must be exceedingly careful to not publicly embarrass their friend, whether a child or adult, nor to call them a name that they are ashamed of, or to say anything in front of them that they may be embarrassed by.
Maimonides Hil. De'ot, 6:8

Charter of Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion ~ to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate ~ to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful

information about other traditions, religions and cultures ~ to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity ~ to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies. –

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.



"An Alphabet for World Peace," by Debi Strong. The red thread that winds throughout the piece is a symbol from Chinese mythology wherein an invisible red thread connects a newborn baby to all the people who will become significant in its life. As the child grows, the threads shorten in length to bring those people closer together.



The Charter for Compassion is a document that transcends religious, ideological, and national differences. Supported by leading thinkers from many traditions, the Charter calls on us to activate the Golden Rule around the world.

The Charter for Compassion

The principle of compassion lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves. Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect.

It is also necessary in both public and private life to refrain consistently and empathically from inflicting pain. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism, or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody, and to incite hatred by denigrating others—even our enemies—is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

We therefore call upon all men and women—to restore compassion to the centre of morality and religion—to return to the ancient principle that any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred or disdain is illegitimate—to ensure that youth are given accurate and respectful information about other traditions, religions and cultures—to encourage a positive appreciation of cultural and religious diversity—to cultivate an informed empathy with the suffering of all human beings—even those regarded as enemies.

We urgently need to make compassion a clear, luminous and dynamic force in our polarized world. Rooted in a principled determination to transcend selfishness, compassion can break down political, dogmatic, ideological and religious boundaries. Born of our deep interdependence, compassion is essential to human relationships and to a fulfilled humanity. It is the path to enlightenment, and indispensable to the creation of a just economy and a peaceful global community.



In 2008, Karen Armstrong won the TED Prize for her wish to create a Charter for Compassion. Thousands of people contributed to the process and the Charter was unveiled in November 2009. Since then, the

Charter has inspired community-based acts of compassion all over the world. From Seattle to Karachi, Houston to Amsterdam, in schools, houses of worship, city governments, and among individuals everywhere, the message of the Charter is transforming lives.

Join the global compassion movement!

- Sign the Charter
- Join Our Community
- Become a Partner
- Start a Compassionate Cities Campaign
- Find Resources

charterforcompassion.org
facebook.com/charterforcompassion
[twitter/The Charter](https://twitter/TheCharter)



CHARTER FOR
COMPASSION

Peace starts here

Questions? Email us:
contact@charterforcompassion.org

"What Empathy Is"...And What It's Not

"The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear or the mind. Hence it demands emptiness of all of the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or understood with the mind."-Chuang-Tzu

Empathy is the basic practice that brings me to compassion. It is ultimately quite simple, and quite challenging. As a child growing up, and for most of my adulthood, I learned to listen with my mind... often with a purpose other than connecting to the person I was with. As I listened to people, I would focus on the future... "What can I say back?" or "What can I think of to fix this?" ... Other times I would go to the past, "What does that remind me of?"

When I thought these things I became distracted from the moment, more disconnected and I less able to understand what the other person was experiencing. Then I discovered empathy.

Empathy is the exploration of our human experience... our feelings... our needs... our life energy trying to emerge and guide us. It is the mindful questioning, the wondering and the genuine curiosity about what we or someone else is going through.

This may sound strange, but I have witnessed over and over again, that this search, or wondering, is the stuff of connection on a deeper plane and sometimes, even an opening of spiritual space.

The ability to be present in this way challenges many of us 21st century humans, highly trained in thought... as opposed to simply listening. Often when we are trying to be empathic (even in situations where we are feeling compassionate), we may say things that do not connect us with the other person as well as empathy might.

We may choose to have "non-empathic" forms of communication as part of our lives... and of course, many can serve us wonderfully. They're just NOT empathy. They tend to fill the space; they do not tend to open it up. Becoming aware of these "non-empathic" forms of communication can help make choices to have a deeper connection when we want it.

To illustrate, below is a quote... something we may hear from a friend, followed by some examples of habitual, "non-empathic" responses that can prevent us from moving to a deeper connection. This is not to say these forms of communication are "wrong". They're just not empathy. Do any of these responses sound familiar?

"Sometimes I just hate my job. My boss is such a slave driver."

Comparing and One-upping

"Yeah, mine too. MY boss is the worst. She makes going to work a living hell. I remember a time when..."

Often, when people share what's going on for them, it reminds us about our situation. We may, without thinking about it, share that experience. So think about it... Did we just change the subject? Are they telling us this to elicit our experience? Probably not.

Educating and Advising

"Oh yeah, I know what you mean. You know there's this great book called How to Love a Boss that Stinks"... or "Yeah, when my boss does that, I've learned to ..." or "Have you ever tried speaking to the HR department?"

When we hear of someone's pain, we may assume they want us to tell them how to deal with the situation. And of course, we don't like to see people we care about in pain, so we want to help them. Are we doing this to understand what is alive in them or are we working on a fix? Do we expect them to take our advice? And if they don't, are we OK with that? Are we being present to their experience? Probably not.

My friend Marshall Rosenberg told me he only gives advice when it is asked for in writing, notarized and in triplicate. It helps him stay more present. And of course, advice has a place in life... It's just not empathy.

Discounting

"That's nothing. In this economy, you should be thankful you even have a job."

We may have a "knee-jerk" reaction to try to draw someone's attention to something else in an attempt to "make them feel better". Can you recall a time when you received this kind of response and you thought to yourself, "Oh yeah, that's so true. Thanks for that. I feel better now". I can't.

Fixing and Counseling

"OK. Calm down. Don't worry. We're gonna get through this. I know it feels bad now, but I'm sure it will get better. These things always have a way of working themselves out."

When we hear another's pain, we can feel uncomfortable ourselves and want to somehow fix things. If we check in with ourselves... whose need is that about?

Sympathizing

"Oh, you poor thing. I'm so upset when I hear about that. I just hate that boss of yours."

Sympathy (the sharing of a feeling through an imagined shared experience) is different than empathy. It's kind of like responding to a drowning person by jumping into the water and drowning with them. Yes, it may let them know that you get what is going on for them. It's just not empathy.

Data Gathering and Interrogating

"So tell me, exactly what did he do? Has he done this before? Have you noticed a pattern here?"

Data gathering is often a precursor to advising, the warm up to fixing it all. It may come from a sense of OUR curiosity or our discomfort with their pain. We may have a genuine interest, to be sure. It's just not empathy.

Explaining and Defending

"Well, as a boss myself, I know sometimes we just need to crack the whip. He's probably under a lot of stress and doesn't really mean anything by it. It's really hard to be a boss with all that responsibility."

Sometimes WE are triggered by someone else's pain. This can be especially true in situations when we think we are "to blame" or "responsible". In these moments, we can become more concerned with our side of the story... OUR need to be understood. This often results in what I call TTNRS: "two transmitters, no receivers syndrome". Sometimes we call it "a fight". It's certainly not empathy.

Analyzing

"So where else in your life does this show up? Have you ever considered that this is a pattern for you? Perhaps it's because of your unfulfilled relationship with your father."

Sometimes we are so interested in "getting to the bottom of things" that we forget about the top. Our urge to understand in order to fix or our discomfort with someone's pain can have us rushing to our brains for answers. Or maybe we have dealt with our own pain this way. No doubt, there are places in life where analyzing is important. It's just not empathy.

So What Then? Perhaps Empathy

I'm sure none of us has ever said anything like these examples (heheheh *wry smile*). OK, I know I have, and likely will again. The difference now is that when I have the awareness of what I'm doing, I have the choice to do something else... if I want to.

I can recall times, before I developed my empathic skills and my trust in the power of empathy, when the experience of wanting to connect and not knowing how left me frustrated, confused and disconnected against my will.

This is where empathy comes in. In the beginning it can be SOOOO hard to refrain from these habitual ways of thinking and speaking. Our "robot" kicks in and away we go, like always.

Now we have a chance to add a new way of being to our lives... a new skill to create a new level of connection... empathy. Shifting to this new focus on feelings and needs is rarely easy. I know for me, it is a life work... one that has given me some of the most beautiful moments of my life.

<http://www.compassioncourse.org/offline/sample-message-about-empathy/>

arsenal, each weapon inflicts harm in its own way, but all use the same ammunition — the words we speak about each other and to each other.

In its narrower sense, *loshon hora* refers specifically to derogatory or harmful speech which is related to a third party. When Neighbor A says to Neighbor B, "Neighbor C is such a cold, unfriendly person," A and B have engaged in *loshon hora* — A as the speaker, and B as the listener, who is also guilty of a second transgression if he believes A's statement.

Rechilus, the second and form of loshon hora, literally means "peddling." One who engages in rechilus peddles a tale, informing one person of a negative statement that has been made about him by another person. Relating back to the example above, rechilus would occur if, after having their loshon hora conversation, Neighbor B went to Neighbor C and told him, "Neighbor A tells me that you're unfriendly toward him."

The defining trait of *rechilus* is that it causes animosity between people. Neighbor C, who may never have harbored any ill feelings toward Neighbor A, has now been turned against him, and B's report is the sole reason for that change.

A third form of *loshon hora* is *motzi shem ra*, slander. While the first type of *loshon hora* applies to statements that are true, *motzi shem ra* refers to negative statements that are false. Among the three neighbors, *motzi shem ra* would occur if Neighbor A told Neighbor B something untrue about Neighbor C, for instance, that he never returns what he borrows, when in fact that isn't true.

The Torah looks upon this pain as a real wound, in complete opposition to the common belief that words cannot hurt. In the Torah's acute awareness of the power of words,

it sees *onaas devarim* as every bit as real as, and in some ways more serious than, the physical or financial harm individuals can inflict upon each other.

In reality, many difficult situations arise in life. The need to reproach someone who is heading in the wrong direction, to correct a child, to instruct or perhaps even fire an employee, are all real needs to which one must attend. However, the prohibition against *onaas devarim* tells every Jew to use the softest possible approach to such situations, to use the kindest possible words and manner to convey the message.

Onaas devarim does not, however, always arise out of necessary situations. Often, it is simply the product of insensitivity, or the mistaken belief that opinions on such matters as physical appearance, a new purchase, a spouse, someone else's background or perceptions, and so forth, are open fields for frank discussion.

There are scores of sensitive subjects which, when approached in an insensitive way, can leave people feeling insecure, inept or somehow diminished. There are also scores of methods for conveying disdain. Such phrases as "I told you so," sarcastic jokes or comments, quotes and aphorisms that point out another's deficiency, even certain gestures and facial expressions, can all serve as weapons of *onaas devarim*.

The potential is there, for anyone who lacks a basic sensitivity, to cause pain in many everyday interactions, leaving a battlefield of emotional carnage in his wake.

Besides these forms of *loshon hora*, the Chofetz Chaim discusses other types of speech that a Jew must avoid. Words of anger, arrogance, deceit, lying and false flattery are all within this category. Each

Hurting Others' Feelings

[Onaat Devarim](#) is the prohibition to say anything that would pain, [anger](#), hurt, frighten, bother or embarrass another person. ^[1]

The obligation

1. This obligation applies at all times, in all places, to all Jewish men and women. One must also train one's children in this obligation. ^[2]
2. It is prohibited even to hurt the feeling of a child. ^[3]
3. One should be extra careful not to hurt the feelings of a convert ^[4] as well as one's own wife. ^[5]

When is one liable?

1. This prohibition applies even if one simply gestured or wrote something that hurt somebody else without actually saying it. ^[6]
2. The main prohibition is violated when the word, action or gesture, was intended to hurt. ^[7] Nonetheless, one is obligated to distance oneself from the possibility of causing hurt unintentionally. ^[8]

Specific Applications

Negative Reminders

1. It is prohibited to remind someone of his previous sins, or that he never used to be religious, or that he is a convert. ^[9]
2. It is prohibited to remind someone of his wounds or of his ugly appearance. ^[10]
3. It is prohibited to inform someone that his afflictions came to him because of his sins. ^[11] Nonetheless, it is permitted, and is even a Mitzvah, to softly allude to this possibility if one's goal is to inspire him to repent. ^[12]
4. It is prohibited to give rebuke to another person if it cannot be done without embarrassing, insulting or hurting his feelings. ^[13]

Public Areas

1. It is forbidden to wake somebody up unless they either want to be woken up or it is for the fulfillment of a mitzva and it is also forbidden to make a lot of noise thereby preventing somebody from falling asleep. ^[14]
2. It is forbidden to cut lines in a public area, even with the permission of the person at the front, since one has caused pain to every person who was previously closer to the front. ^[15]
3. It is forbidden to emit a foul body odor ^[16] or to scratch one's wounds ^[17] in the presence of others.
4. One may not open or close windows, if it will cause others discomfort. ^[18]
5. One may not cause another discomfort by saying a long [Shmoneh Esrei](#) directly behind someone who plans to sit down after being able to take his three steps back. ^[19]
6. It is prohibited to crowd around an ambulance when the ill person is being brought in, since it causes pain, fright and embarrassment to the family. ^[20]

7. One may not embarrass another by asking him a question that he may not know the answer to. ^[21] A rabbi may do so under certain circumstances in order to sharpen his students. ^[22]
8. One may not ask a guest to say a dvar Torah unless one knows that he would be able to say one. ^[23]
9. One may not make prank phone calls, or perform other practical jokes that are likely to cause any degree of hassle, pain or anguish like calling a fire engine for no reason. ^[24]
10. One is obligated to return sefarim or library books to the correct shelf immediately after use. ^[25]
11. Some say that one should not tell a sick person "Ad Me'ah Ve'Esrin" – "May you live until 120" because it may be considered like a curse limiting their time to 120 years. ^[26]

Financial Hurt

1. It is prohibited to ask a seller how much an item costs, or to stare at an item, if one has no interest in buying it. ^[27] However, it is permitted if one informs the seller from the onset of one's intention to only enquire or browse rather than to buy. ^[28]

From Halachipedia

FROM THESE EXAMPLES WE CAN SEE THAT "ONA'AT DEVARIM" SPANS A RANGE OF INTENTIONS FROM INNOCENCE TO MALEVOLANCE.

To emphasize this point, consider the concluding words of the verse. Why is it necessary for the Torah to insert the commandment, "and you shall revere G-d," following the instruction to not verbally oppress?

Anytime we encounter the phrase, "And you shall revere G-d," it is a reference to those matters that are found privately in one's heart.

Babylonian Talmud, Kidushin 32b

There are scenarios of ona'at devarim wherein a person who seems well intentioned says things to help someone.

Nevertheless, if they looked more closely into their heart, they would realize that they are really causing pain. Therefore, the Torah immediately states, "And you shall revere G-d" — the One who truly knows your innermost thoughts.

Torah Temimah, Vayikra 25:17

כל דבר המסור ללב נאמר בו
ויראת מאלהיך.
קדושין ל"ב

ויראת מאלהיך - כי יש אונאת דברים
כאלה שאפשר להמאנה להתנצל לפני
בני אדם לומר שכונתו לטובה ולכבוד,
אבל בלבו הוא יודע כונתו, ולכן אמר
ויראת מאלהיך הבוחן ובודק מחשבות
האדם ותחבולותיו.
תורה תמימה ויקרא פרשת בהר כה: יז

The conclusion of the verse, "and you shall revere G-d," conveys the message that *ona'at devarim* goes far beyond bullying or blatant verbal abuse. It is most easily violated when casual comments are made, without first taking the deep sensitivities and feelings of others into account. Only through the sobering introspection that comes with the knowledge of G-d's awareness of our innermost thoughts, can one truly ensure that their words are entirely pure.

How important is it to go the extra mile and measure one's words before speaking?

It was taught before Rav Nachman son of R' Yitzchak: Anyone who publicly shames his friend is considered to have murdered.

Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia, 58b

תני תנא קמיה דרב נחמן בר יצחק: כל המלבין פני
חבירו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים.
תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נח: