

A Purim Message from Rabbi Stephen Berger

This week, I had a very interesting dialogue with my Grade 10 students. We are exploring a unit on Jewish business ethics, and we were learning about finding great deals at garage sales and should you buy it? I mean, we were talking about great deals. For example, you get a chance to buy a \$10,000 item that is priced at \$10. The owner really does not know what he has. Or flip the situation. You go online to Air Canada and see there is some sort of glitch on the site and all flights, including first class, are going for \$10 (yes, this really happened).

Many of our students answered that it is the sellers responsibility for knowing what they are selling and "business is business," meaning business and Judaism live in entirely different realms and play by different rules. You have to lose in order for me to win.

When it writes about business in our Torah, it uses a strange language. "When you make a sale to your friend, or buy from your friend -- don't תונו - Tohnu each other" (Vayikra/Levitics 25:14). In context you might think the Hebrew word tohnu means "cheat" or "deceive". But the word actually means "oppress." What is the difference?

The context makes it clear by calling this practice "oppression." The Torah's emphasis is less about the monetary loss and more about the negative effect it has on human relations as one person takes advantage of another. We see that this verse mentions both selling and buying, thus it applies equally to sellers and buyers.

The very term "oppression" conjures up dramatic images of slaves, tyrants, and victims. One only has to go so far as the front page stories on Ukraine to see vivid accounts of oppression. But, according to our Torah, oppression can be happening not only in extraordinary war-torn settings but even in our own everyday lives. Every time we take advantage of someone else's vulnerability, through word or deed; every time we misuse a position of power (however transient that position may be- like an error in your favor on an Air Canada website), we commit ona'ah and to all of its damaging consequences.

This lesson is also front and center this week in synagogue as we read the section of the Torah of Amalek that leads us into Purim. Haman was our mortal enemy and he descended from the tribe of Amalek. Who were the Amalek and what did they represent? The Torah describes our battle with Amalek: "And they attacked you from behind, targeting the weak stragglers at the rear" (Devarim 25).

Now, notice how Moshe describes what happened here. He doesn't say, "remember that wicked nation that attacked you." He's very specific about the nature of Amalek's attack: it was a surprise. They didn't come out and declare war- they ambushed you from behind! They targeted the weakest members of the nation, who could barely keep up with the pack.

The Amalekite Haman of the Purim story acted in the same way. He saw a nation recently exiled from its land. It was weak, scattered and dispersed among the other nations. Easy pickings. He saw their vulnerability and took the opportunity to destroy it for his own selfish reasons.

Our Torah asks us to erase the memory of Amalek from the world. Not erase the people of Amalek, but erase the zechar Amalek. Erase their legacy, erase what they stand for. Erase the cruel mentality that seeks to trample on the vulnerable, that views weakness as something to take advantage of and attack. We don't have to wait for war to do this. We can do it in the realm of business and everyday life. We don't have to take advantage of someone who mispriced something or does not know quite what they are selling. Because when we take advantage of the vulnerable, any temporary pleasure or gain ultimately pales in comparison to the irretrievable harm caused to our own souls.

This Purim I pray we all can take advantage of the opportunities to help the vulnerable all around us whether in business or everyday life. May we have a wonderful Purim celebrating and uplifting each other together.