

Our Words: Helpful or Hurtful? Ona'at Devarim in the Singles Community

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After a decade of dating and watching all of her other friends get married, Sara, a 31-year-old single woman, sighs at the thought of attending another wedding. Yet, this wonderful, accomplished and independent woman stands tall, and takes a deep breath as she enters the wedding hall with a smile.

However, the procession quickly begins. One person after another approaches Sara with genuine heartfelt offerings of “Im yirtzeh Hashem by you” (may it be G-d’s will that you be next to get married). Sara smiles and says Amein, but deep down wishes that people would take action to help her find her bashert, rather than just offering their blessings.

Throughout the evening, Sara endures numerous well-meaning gestures of sympathy; compassionate nods, squeezes of the hand and gentle pats on the back from those who wish to convey their awareness of her single status. During dinner, several women raise her hopes by loudly boasting, “I know the perfect boy for you.” Yet Sara knows full well from all of her previous experiences that the chances of anyone actually following through and making a call on her behalf are slim to none.

Obviously, Sara's feelings as a single are extremely sensitive, and rightfully so. However, does that require well-intentioned people to dance around her sensitivities and refrain from ever referencing her dating life? Isn't it just a little callous to hang out with Sara without ever acknowledging the very issue that is weighing foremost on her mind?

Halachic Analysis

The Torah clearly commands us to avoid verbally oppressing another person. This prohibition is known as *ona'at devarim*.

One shall not oppress his fellow, and you shall revere G-d, for I am the Lord your G-d.
Leviticus 25:17

ולא תוננו איש את עמיתו ויראת מאלהיך כי אני ה'
אלהיכם.
ויקרא פרשת בהר פרק כה יז

The Gemara explores five scenarios wherein a person violates the prohibition of *ona'at devarim*:

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How might one violate *ona'at devarim*?

1. Reminding a *Ba'al Teshuva* (returnee to Jewish observance) of his previous ways.
2. Reminding the son of a convert about the ways of his non-Jewish ancestors.
3. Reminding a convert concerning his own previous ways; suggesting that his mouth, which previously ate non-kosher food, will now engage in studying G-d's holy Torah.
4. Suggesting to a grieving, suffering, or ill person that their pain or loss may be related to a particular deficiency in their *mitzvah* observance.
5. Sending a person who is in search of wheat on a wild goose chase to a vendor that you know full well does not sell wheat.

Babylonian Talmud Bava Metzia, 58b

באונאת דברים. הא כיצד? אם היה בעל תשובה אל יאמר לו זכור מעשיך הראשונים, אם היה בן גרים אל יאמר לו זכור מעשה אבותיך, אם היה גר ובא ללמוד תורה אל יאמר לו פה שאכל נבילות וטריפות, שקצים ורמשים בא ללמוד תורה שנאמרה מפי הגבורה. אם היו יסורין באין עליו, אם היו חלאים באין עליו, או שהיה מקבר את בניו, אל יאמר לו כדרך שאמרו לו חביריו לאיוב - הלא יראתך כסלתך תקותך ותם דרכיך זכר נא מי הוא נקי אבד. אם היו חמרים מבקשין תבואה ממנו, לא יאמר להם לכו אצל פלוני שהוא מוכר תבואה - ויודע בו שלא מכר מעולם.
תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נח:

All of these are examples of causing harm with one's words. However, one must wonder why the Gemara felt it necessary to specifically present these five scenarios as a demonstration of this sin.

Upon closer examination, one will notice that the progression of the five examples represent a journey, transitioning from comments uttered out of pure innocence to those veiled in sheer malice. The Gemara could have simply instructed us to refrain from overt forms of verbal abuse; however, the point of the Gemara is that *ona'at devarim* reaches far beyond the obvious. The real danger in violating this grievous commandment emerges from those statements that are ostensibly innocuous.

The first three cases listed in the Gemara are examples of when a person might make a mild comment, or even a joke, blind to the deep emotional sensitivities or insecurities of the recipient and the pain they are subsequently causing. The intention was never to inflict harm, nevertheless the damage was done.

The sin intensifies with the fourth case, as the speaker is a surprisingly compassionate person, thoughtful enough to take the time to visit and console someone who is in great emotional distress in the wake of a tragedy. However, despite selfless intentions, the speaker only adds insult to injury by casting critical judgments upon others. Through the speaker's remarks, implications are made which suggest that the source of their pain, suffering and tragedy is actually a well-deserved punishment in response to their shaky commitment to G-d. Thus, instead of delivering words of comfort as intended, they inject further pain into the already agonized hearts of the downtrodden.

In the final, and most obvious case of *ona'at devarim*, we meet a person who is simply cruel. By design, he intends to inflict harm on others by raising and then dashing the hopes of both the buyer and seller.

It is through these five examples that we can more clearly understand that *ona'at devarim* spans a range of intentions from innocence to malevolence.

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

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

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

צריך אדם להזהר שלא לבייש חבירו ברבים
בין קטן בין גדול, ולא יקרא לו בשם שהוא
בוש ממנו, ולא יספר לפניו דבר שהוא בוש
ממנו.

רמב"ם הלכות דעות ו:ח

The Rambam is conveying a recipe for healthy interactions. Rather than speaking to others based upon our own compass of what we personally deem reasonable, acceptable or humorous, we should look more closely at the person to whom we are speaking and assess what they might deem hurtful or offensive based upon their station in life. Just as each person has a varying degree of tolerance to physical pain, the same is true with emotional anguish. What one person might think innocuous, to others may seem very hurtful.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that this situation is a difficult one. It is not as much a question of defining right and wrong, as it is a matter of achieving maximum sensitivity and support without crossing the line of *ona’at devarim*. In the case of Sara, every guest who approached her at the wedding

was well-intentioned, but was simply unaware of how she felt. What the traditional Jewish sources demonstrate is that it is not the intention of the speaker that matters, as much as the potency of the words themselves. Therefore, it is important to know the person before we speak. Some singles may genuinely appreciate the comments, while others may not. In cases of doubt, one should err on the side of caution and refrain from raising the subject of dating or marriage (unless Sara raises it first).

Unfortunately, by addressing these challenges of *ona'at devarim*, we may be causing additional problems. If we silence those who care, and prevent them from contributing toward the solution, what constructive avenues are left for those who wish to help Sara find her mate?

In lieu of blessings, rhetoric, or well-intentioned comments, consider the wisdom of Shamai:

Shamai said:

1. Allow your Torah to be constant.
2. Let your words be few, but your actions be great.
3. Receive each person with a pleasant demeanor.

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Fathers, 1:15

שמאי אומר עשה תורתך קבע, אמור מעט
ועשה הרבה, והוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר
פנים יפות.
משנה מסכת אבות פרק א, משנה טו

This Mishna is a formula for how we can relate to singles with greater sensitivity. If we truly wish to help, we should let the Torah guide us, so that instead of offering just words (which can at times be painful), we take action on their behalf, and care enough to embrace everyone and uplift them with a pleasant demeanor.

When you see a single at a *simcha*, smile and enjoy the event together. It is a great opportunity to be a friend, as you support and embrace them *b'sever panim yafot*, with a pleasant demeanor (and be sure to do so regularly after the wedding as well). If you are inclined to offer a blessing but are not sure how it will be received, consider an alternative, which may reduce the risk of *ona'at devarim*. Rather, keep them in the forefront of your mind and serve as an ongoing advocate.

After the wedding is over, get right to work on their behalf and send a few e-mails, make a few phone calls and try to think who you might know that could help suggest a match. Even if you are not a trained *shadchan*, your involvement can help make those critical introductions and connections. In addition to our sensitivity, friendship and support, what the singles community needs most to help advance them to the *chupah* is אמור מעט ועשה הרבה, less words and more action.