



THE ETHICS OF GUILT TRIPS

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R. Aryeh Levin (1885-1969), known as “The Tzaddik of Jerusalem” for his acts of kindness, was once walking through the streets of Jerusalem minutes before Shabbat when he was approached by a man asking for directions to a certain hotel. Reb Aryeh would have normally jumped at the opportunity to escort the man to the hotel, but he was concerned because the man was smoking a cigarette and being that Shabbat was about to start, people seeing the two of them walking together while this man was smoking on Shabbat may get the wrong impression about the importance of Shabbat. He wasn’t sure what to do. Reb Aryeh’s solution to the dilemma didn’t involve pressuring the man to discard the cigarette or offering to escort the man on condition that he would discard it. Rather, he walked with the man and gently discussed with him the importance of Shabbat and that smoking is a violation of Shabbat. By the time they reached the hotel, the man remarked that he is not an observant Jew and he is normally very stubborn when people try to influence him. However, because of R. Aryeh’s kindness and sensitivity, he pledged to never again smoke on Shabbat. *A Tzaddik in our Time*, pp. 294-295

Pressuring someone may be an effective way of getting someone to agree to something. When is it ethical to use pressure? When is it effective? The following scenarios can teach us about this issue:

Let's look at the following scenarios:

CASE ONE	Rina left her lunch at home. She knows that if she asks Michelle for half of her sandwich, Michelle would give it to her because Michelle is the type of person that has difficulty saying no to someone. Is there anything wrong with Rina asking for some of Michelle’s sandwich?
CASE TWO	Tzvi is trying to organize a 9:00 <i>minyan</i> (prayer service) on Sunday mornings. He has asked a few people who don’t normally attend services on Sunday morning to commit to coming and hasn’t received much positive response. He feels that the only way he can get them to come is by pressuring them or making them feel guilty. Should he use that approach?
CASE THREE	Yisrael needs help moving a book shelf from one room to another. He asks his neighbor Chaim to help and when Chaim says he is not interested, Yisrael is surprised. After all, Yisrael has helped Chaim with these kinds of tasks on many occasions. What should Yisrael do? Is it appropriate for Yisrael to guilt Chaim into helping by bring up Yisrael’s previous favors to him?

Let’s Examine the Sources

The discussion about pressuring someone to do something begins with a prohibition in the Torah:

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house, you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, servant, maidservant, ox, donkey or anything your neighbor owns.

Shemot 20:14

לא תחמד בית רעך לא תחמד אשת רעך
ועבדו ואמתו ושורו וחמורו וכל אשר לרעך.

שמות כ: יד

When we think about this prohibition known as “*lo tachmod*” we may think about feelings of jealousy or desire. However, Rambam teaches us that one violates *lo tachmod* through a specific action:

Anyone who covets the servant, maidservant, house or utensils of one's friend or any other item that can be acquired and makes that friend uncomfortable by using pressure to procure the item from him/her, even if one gave the friend a lot of money, one violates a negative prohibition as it states "you shall not covet ..." One does not violate the prohibition until one has procured the item that one coveted.

Rambam, Hilchot Gezeilah 1:9

כל החומד עבדו או אמתו או ביתו וכליו של חבירו או כל דבר שאפשר לו שיקנהו ממנו והכביד עליו ברעים והפציר בו עד שלקחו ממנו אף על פי שנתן לו דמים רבים הרי זה עובר בלא תעשה שנ' לא תחמד ... ואינו עובר בלאו זה עד שיקח החפץ שחמד.
רמב"ם, הלכות גזילה א' ט

Questions for the Table:

Why is using pressure to procure an item a form of coveting and prohibited? Does this mean that all forms of applying pressure are prohibited?

Rabbeinu Yonah adds another dimension to the prohibition of *lo tachmod*:

If an authority figure desires to procure an item such that if he/she asks for something, the request won't be turned down, that individual may not ask a friend for an item, either through purchase or gift, unless it is known that the owner is giving it wholeheartedly without any misgivings.

Sha'arei Teshuva 3:43

והחומד לקחת כל חפץ והוא איש נכבד, שאם ישאל שאלה אור פניו לא יפילון אסור לשאול מעם רעהו מקח או מתת, בלתי אם ידע כי נתון יתן לו בנפש חפצה ולא ירע לבבו בתתו לו.
שערי תשובה שער ג' ס' מג

Questions for the Table:

- 1) According to Rabbeinu Yonah, is the critical aspect of *lo tachmod* the person's desire for the item, or is it the taking of an item from someone who doesn't really want to give it away? What would Rabbeinu Yonah say in a case where the person didn't really covet the item, but the owner felt pressured to give it away?
- 2) How would you apply Rabbeinu Yonah's comments to case #1? Is there a way for Rina to determine if Michelle would give away part of her sandwich wholeheartedly?

Pressuring Others to Perform a Mitzvah

In our Shabbat Table Discussion entitled “[Ahavat Yisrael](#),” we discussed the mitzvah to rebuke someone who is doing something wrong and noted that the Talmud¹ states that one should be very persistent in rebuking the transgressor, even to (at least) the point where the transgressor is agitated. It would seem that pressuring someone to perform a mitzvah is not only permissible, it is a recommended method of getting someone to perform it. Yet, we find that this is not always true:

¹ (ערכין טז:) מנין לרואה בחבירו דבר מגונה שחייב להוכיחו שנאמר הוכח תוכיח הוכיחו ולא קבל מנין שיחזור ויוכיחנו תלמוד לומר תוכיח מכל מקום ... עד היכן תוכיח רב אמר עד הכאה ושמואל אמר עד קללה ורבי יוחנן אמר עד נזיפה.

How do we know that if one sees one's friend doing something wrong that there is an obligation to rebuke? The verse (Vayikra 19:17) states "you shall surely rebuke your friend." If the first attempt at rebuke didn't work, how do we know that one must try again? The verse states "surely rebuke" [implying] that one must keep trying ... How far must one persist in one's rebuke? Rav stated until [the transgressor is prepared to] hit [the rebuker]. Shmuel stated until [the transgressor is prepared to] curse. R. Yochanan stated until [the transgressor is] agitated.

Should [the requirement to rebuke] apply even if the sinner is going to be embarrassed? The [end of the] verse [about rebuke (Vayikra 19:17)] states "and you will not bear a sin because of him/her" [implying that you should not embarrass him/her]. It was taught: R. Tarfon said, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who is receptive to rebuke" ... R. Elazar b. Azariah said "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who is capable of rebuking properly."

Erchin 16b

יכול אפילו משתנים פניו
תלמוד לומר לא תשא עליו
חטא תניא אמר רבי טרפון
תמה אני אם יש בדור הזה
שמקבל תוכחה ... אמר רבי
אלעזר בן עזריה תמיהני אם
יש בדור הזה שיודע להוכיח.
ערכין טז:

Questions for the Table

- 1) Why do you think it was so difficult to rebuke effectively during the time of R. Tarfon and R. Elazar b. Azariah? Do you think nowadays it is easier or harder?
- 2) What are the negative consequences of putting pressure on someone to perform a mitzvah? Are there situations where someone can know in advance that there won't be negative consequences?
- 3) In case #2, Tzvi is less interested in getting his friends to go to **any minyan** and more interested in them going to **his minyan**. How does that fact impact his decision as to whether pressure or guilt are appropriate?

Pressuring Someone to do You a Favor

It is not appropriate to pressure people into giving away something that they don't want to give. What if they are not being pressured into giving away something specific, but rather, their services or their time?

R. Yechiel M. Epstein (1829-1908) notes that when Rambam (mentioned earlier) uses the language "any other item that can be acquired" in describing the prohibition of *lo tachmod*, it seems superfluous. R. Epstein explains why Rambam adds that term:

It seems that if Reuven learned a certain technique or skill and Shimon covets this technique or skill and uses pressure tactics on Reuven to teach it to him, I might have said that this is included in "you shall not covet." The Torah specifically excluded this situation and limited it to something that can be acquired such that when Reuven has it, Shimon doesn't have it, to the exclusion of techniques and skills which cannot be acquired [physically.]

Aruch HaShulchan, Choshen Mishpat 359:10

נראה שאם ראובן למד איזה חכמה ואיזה מלאכה ושמעון חמד בלבו חכמה זו או מלאכה זו והשתדל והרבה רעים על ראובן עד שלמדו והייתי אומר שגם זה הוא בכלל דלא תחמוד לזה מיעטה התורה דוקא דבר שהוא בקנין שכשהיא אצל ראובן איננו אצל שמעון לאפוקי חכמה ומלאכה אינם בקנינים.
ערוך השלחן, חושן משפט שנט"י

Questions for the Table:

- 1) Why do you think *lo tachmod* is limited to something that can only be in the physical possession of the owner or the one who covets? How would you apply R. Epstein's comments to pressuring someone to provide a service that he/she doesn't want to provide?
- 2) If there is no prohibition against coveting a skill or service, does that mean it is ethical to pressure someone to do something they don't want to do? What other prohibitions might be involved?

We have seen that pressuring someone to perform a mitzvah could theoretically be appropriate. The reason why it shouldn't be employed routinely is because, in most cases, it is not effective and can have negative consequences.

Questions for the Table:

In case #3, can Yisrael justify using pressure because he is trying to convince Chaim to perform a mitzvah (assuming he is sure that it would be effective)? Is there a difference between this case and an ordinary case of trying to convince someone to perform a mitzvah?

R. Yosef Babad, *Minchat Chinuch* no. 240, notes that rebuking someone for something he/she did to you is different than rebuke in general. When rebuking someone for a general mitzvah that he/she violated, the importance of performing the neglected mitzvah overrides the risk of potentially embarrassing the person or making the person feel uncomfortable. However, if one was the recipient of a wrongdoing, one should consider forgiving the wrongdoer before engaging in an activity that might embarrass the wrongdoer or make him/her feel uncomfortable.

Questions for the Table:

1) In case #3, do you think that Yisrael is trying to pressure Chaim because of Yisrael's genuine interest in making Chaim a kinder person or because Yisrael needs Chaim to help? Why is this question important according to R. Babad?

2) Based on the comments of R. Epstein and R. Babad, what would you advise Yisrael to do?

When someone agrees to do something after being pressured, it often means that it is not being done wholeheartedly. At times, the person being pressured may be appreciative for the extra motivation, but many times, the person may resent the pressure or guilt. It also depends on the relationship. Parents are expected to motivate their children and the methods they use are different than those one would use to motivate a friend. In any relationship, from the prohibition of *lo tachmod* we learn that there are appropriate ways to ask others to do something for us and we should think carefully how to properly ask for something.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe ben Maimon (also known as **Rambam** and **Maimonides**, 1138-1204) is one of the most famous rabbis in Jewish history. His works on Jewish law and Jewish philosophy are extremely influential and continue to be studied regularly by scholars and students from all walks of Jewish life. He began his life in Cordoba, Spain but eventually settled in Egypt.

Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona (d. 1263) was a Spanish scholar. He is most well-known for his ethical works such as *Sha'arei Teshuva* and his *Commentary on Pirkei Avot*. He originally opposed the philosophical works of Rambam, but he viewed the burning of the Talmud in 1242 as a sign that he was incorrect in opposing Rambam's philosophical works.

R. Yechiel M. Epstein (1828-1908) served as the rabbi of Navahrudak (now part of Belarus) for over thirty years. His *Aruch HaShulchan* is a popular work on Jewish law that often records the common practices of the Lithuanian-Jewish community of his time.

R. Yosef Babad (1801-1874) is most well-known for his *Minchat Chinuch*, a commentary on *Sefer HaChinuch*. He held a number of rabbinic positions in the Ukraine.