

**More on Words: Deception and Distress**

Onaat Dvarim

“The Torah states: No one of you shall wrong their comrade....this verse refers to verbal abuse.”

The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 58b)

There are two types of “onaa” (a type of harm or distress) in Jewish law. The first, onaat mammon, refers to overcharging someone for more than its worth. This is forbidden, and in some opinions, even renders the sale null and void.

The second, onaat dvarim, refers to saying something, or even making a gesture, that causes distress. The main prohibition is violated when the word, action or gesture, was *intended to hurt*.

Nonetheless, our sages believed we are obligated to distance oneself from the possibility of causing hurt unintentionally as much as one can.

Here are some specific examples:

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**Negative Reminders**

1. It is prohibited to remind someone of their previous wrongdoings or mistakes, or that they never used to do something good which they do now.
  2. It is prohibited to remind someone of something considered a wound or physical defect.
  3. It is prohibited to inform someone that their afflictions came to them because of their sins.
  4. It is prohibited to give rebuke to another person if it cannot be done without embarrassing, insulting or hurting their feelings.
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.
  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.
  3. It is forbidden to emit a foul body odor.
  4. One may not open or close windows, if it will cause others discomfort.

5. 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.
6. One may not embarrass another by asking them a question that they may not know the answer to.
7. One may not ask a guest to say a dvar Torah unless one knows that they would be able to say one.
8. 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.
9. One is obligated to return sefarim or library books to the correct shelf immediately after use.

### **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. 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.

One could easily imagine the extension of this principle today to include not using a pronoun for someone without first inquiring what their preferred pronoun is; using non-gendered constructions in writing and speaking; and the use of trigger warnings.

### **Truth and Falsehood**

“Stay far away from falsehood,” says the Tanakh (Shemot/Exodus 23:7). Jewish law stipulates that we aim to speak truly and precisely about things we have made an effort to make sure are true as much as we can. We are also to avoid “g’neivat daat.”

G'neivat da'at (literally “stealing the mind”) refers to deceiving others so that they will think more highly of us than we deserve, for example, by making them believe that we have done them a favor when we haven't, or possess a virtue we don't.

The Talmud offers several examples of this, including the typically subtle: “Rabbi Meir used to say, ‘A man should not urge his friend to eat with him if he knows very well that he won't. Nor should he offer him any gifts if he knows that he won't accept them’ (Chullin 94a).”

Many traditions consider that we should never lie. Judaism parts ways here, however, providing several situations where another value is considered higher than truth and lying is permitted or suggested. Rabbi Telushkin provides a list:

*-lying to prevent future harm (for example, when life—either your own or someone else's—is at stake)*

*-lying in order to right a past wrong done to you (for example, when dealing with a dishonest or deceptive person or government)*

*-lying when the effect of telling the truth will cause unnecessary hurt (for example, when people's feelings are involved, and no advantage, but only pain, will come from speaking the truth)*

*-lying to create peace or otherwise do good (for example, lying to a poor person to encourage them to accept money they need)*

*-lying because a question invades your zone of privacy (for example, a woman who tells unwanted suitors that she is engaged or married)*

*-lying when exaggerating to make a point, and it is understood that you are exaggerating (“I was so upset, I thought I was going to explode”)*