



Onaas Devarim

"Class, I would like to begin today's mussar lesson by telling you a story."
"We love, stories, Mora Sara."

"Good. Here we go. A poor man was once walking down the street. He did not look very poor. He was actually dressed quite normally, however, he did not have even a penny in his pocket. He came upon a gift shop and peeked inside. It was a small cramped store packed with a lot of merchandise. A sign hung by the entrance, 'Due to the small size of our shop, please limit your browsing time to five minutes.'

"The poor man entered the store and thought, 'There are many interesting items here. I can spend time looking around. In the end I will leave without buying anything.' He began browsing. He looked at the key chains, picture frames, saltshakers, and children's books. Then he cast his eyes upon an exquisite crystal and silver wine decanter. It was easily the most expensive item in the shop. The poor man gazed at its beautiful shape, sparkling in the afternoon sun.

"The shop owner watched his potential customer. He thought, 'That is my most expensive item. If he buys it, I will make a lot of money. Business has been very slow lately. This would give me a big boost. This man really looks like he is really going to buy.' The shop owner approached the poor man. 'May I help you sir?'

"Not right now, thank you.'
The owner thought, 'I'll let him take his time. The profit from this sale is worth waiting for.'

"And so, the poor man browsed, and browsed. In the end, when the shop owner was not paying attention, he quietly slipped out. The owner looked up and saw that his precious customer had left. 'What?!? Where is my customer?!? He was going to buy the crystal decanter! He looked at it for over twenty minutes! He just left?!? I am crushed!'

"My question to the class is: Did the poor man do anything wrong?"

"He did not lie by saying that he was going to buy the decanter."

"True, Leah."

"He did not steal the decanter."

"Absolutely not, Shoshie."

"But he hurt the owner's feelings!"

"Excellent, Esti. In what way?"

"He led him to believe that he was going to buy the decanter. The owner was already counting on the money from the sale. When the poor man left, the owner's feeling was terribly hurt."

"Fantastic Esti! What is the name of this aveyra?"

"Onaas devarim."

"Correct! Onaas devarim, hurting some-

one with terrible,

The source is a verse in this week's parasha, 'Each of you shall not wrong your fellow man (with words), and you shall fear your God; for I am the Hashem your God' (Vayikra 25:17). The gemora darshens, 'Just as it is forbidden to wrong someone in monetary matters, so too it is forbidden to wrong him with words' (Bava Metzia 58b)."

"Mora Sara, I have a question. The poor man in the story said no hurtful words. He did not mention that he was going to buy the crystal decanter. How did he wrong the shopkeeper with his words?"

"That is an excellent question, Ahuva. It reveals the extent of how far his aveyra (sin) goes. The gemora states explicitly, 'Do not set your eyes on an item when you have no money to purchase it. 'Why is looking at an item onaas devarim? The browser builds up the shopkeeper's hope that he will make a sale. He may begin to feel that the money is already in his pocket. In the end, when the browser does not buy, the shopkeeper is terribly



disappointed. The browser has hurt his feelings without even uttering one word."

"How careful we must be with other's feelings!"

"Indeed, Deena. Any word or deed that embarrasses, humiliates, causes pain, frightens, distresses, or angers his friend in any way is included in the aveyra of onaas devarim."

"It sounds very serious, Mora Sara, however it cannot possibly be as bad as cheating someone out of his money."

"The gemora teaches us that onaas devarim is worse than onaas mommon (wronging someone in monetary matters). The money damage can be calculated and paid back. The hurt feelings cannot. Onaas mommon damages a person's property; onaas devarim damages his body. The verse that speaks about onaas devarim warns us to fear Hashem. There is no such warning for onaas mommon. The Sefer HaChinuch relates that people are very sensitive. Many of them guard their feelings more than their money. People whose feelings have been hurt, and as a result cry out to Hashem, are answered immediately."

"Oy va voy!"

"Mora Sara, all of this is dependent upon the person's intentions. He could come

words, is a terrible sin.

into the store intending to buy, browse for a long time, and then decide to not buy. He does the exact same action and because he intended to buy, it is not an aveyra."

"That is very perceptive, Miri. That is why the verse states, 'You shall fear your God' (Vayikra 25:17). Only Hashem and you know what is in your heart. Eyes of flesh and blood see a person's actions, but the Almighty sees into his heart. If you fear Him, you will purify your heart and not want to hurt His children, your fellow Jews."

"Can you give us some other examples of onaas devarim, Mora Sara?"

"Yes, Malka. One may not ask the price of an object if he does not intend to buy it. One cannot tell a baal-teshuva to remember his old deeds. One cannot tell the son of a ger (convert) to remember his father's deeds. One cannot tell a person who is suffering that his aveiros caused his tsorus. If a person asks you where he can buy a certain product, you cannot send him to someone who never sold that product."

"This aveyra is so common and far reaching! Why is the Torah so particular about it, Mora Sara?"

"The Maharal states it quite simply. If you carelessly hurt another's feelings, it shows that he is worthless in your eyes. Would you humiliate, mislead, or disappoint someone whom you valued and respected? Surely not! Onaas devarim shows a disregard for others. They are insignificant. This leads to machlokes, cursing, and many mistakes which destroy the fabric of society."

"We never realized how careful we have to be about other's feelings."

"Boruch Hashem, that is why we learn. May we all receive Siyata Di'Shmaya (Heavenly Assistance) to succeed in this mitzvah."

"Amen!"

Kinderlach . . .

Your fellow Jews are wonderful, precious, human beings. They are Hashem's chosen people – His kinderlach. Treat them with care! Do not hurt them in any way! Guard their feelings as you would your own. Any word or deed that embarrasses, humiliates, causes pain, frightens, distresses, or angers your friend in any way is strictly forbidden! It will be punished terribly! On the other hand, if you are careful with onaas devarim, you bring peace and blessing into the world (Sefer HaChinuch). The choice is clear. Don't even think about hurting your fellow Jew.

Parasha Questions:

- How do we calculate the value of a field based upon the Yovel year? (Rashi 25:15)
- How much produce will grow in the sixth year of the Shmitta cycle? (25:21)
- Who owns Eretz Yisrael? (25:23 and Rashi)