

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

FEELINGS ARE AS REAL AS OBJECTS: A STUDY OF THE OVEN OF AKHNAI STORY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES, PART III

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Another midrash is the bedrock of this whole discussion of hurt feelings. It is found in the midrash collection Sifra covers the book of Leviticus. We will look at its expositions of the following Torah verses:

And when you sell anything to your neighbor, or buy anything from your neighbor's hand, let a man not oppress (tonu) his neighbor: According to the number of years after the Jubilee [year] shall you buy [property at a certain price] from your neighbor; according to the number of crop years [remaining between now and the next Jubilee year] shall he sell [property] to you. The greater the number of years, the greater [the property's] price and the fewer the number of years, the lower [the property's] price will be, for it is the number of crop years he sells to you. [So] let not a man oppress (tonu) his neighbor and you shall fear your God for I am the Lord Your God. (Leviticus 25:14-17)

The transaction under discussion in the Torah is selling land and how the Jubilee year, during which land returns to its original tribal owner, affects such trades. According to this system, one really only sells a lease on land and its value is related to how many years the lease can last until the next Jubilee year occurs. The words in italics, above, form a sort of frame for the law. Anytime we have this sort of framing it means (1) that the message within the frame is extremely important and (2) that the words in the frame themselves are wide open for later interpretation by the sages. The midrash takes these verses to apply to both hurting with words and with money in a way quite similar to Mekhilta's.

"And men should not wrong one another (Leviticus 25:17)". This refers to ona'ah with words. [You might think] it's possible that [it refers to] ona'ah with money. [However,] when it [Scripture] says, "A man should not wrong his brother (Leviticus 25:14)" it [already] refers to ona'ah with money. So how do I establish [that the verse] "a man should not oppress his neighbor (Leviticus 25:17)" [applies to] ona'ah with words [since Leviticus 25:14 is already taken to refer to ona'ah with money]?

How [does one oppress with words]? If [a person] was a repentant sinner, one should not say to him, "Remember your earlier deeds which you did." And if he was the child of converts, do not say to him, "Remember the deeds of your ancestors." How [does one oppress with words]? If illnesses came upon him [or] trials came upon him [or] he buried his children, do not say to him, in the way that Job's friends said to him, "Is not your fear of God your confidence and your hope the integrity of your ways? Remember, please, who that was innocent ever perished or where were the upright cut off? (Job 4:6-7)"

[If] he saw ass drivers seeking produce or seeking wine, he should not say to them, "Go to So-and-so" and [so-and-so] never sold wheat. R. Yehudah says, "He shouldn't even cast his eyes on a product nor say to him [the merchant] 'How much does this cost?' if he does not wish to buy [it]. And if you will say, 'Good advice do I give to him!', behold the matter is given to the heart, as it is said in [Scripture], 'You shall fear your God. (Leviticus 25:17)' and everything that is given over to the heart, it is said of it, 'You shall fear.'" (Sifra Behar Sinai 4:1-2)

Here we see a far broader approach to hurting with words. It's not just for converts, it's also for people who are

suffering or who are vulnerable in other ways.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare this midrash with Mekhilta (the last web page). How are they the same? How do they differ?
2. Have you ever experienced or seen examples of people trying to "justify" another person's suffering as Job's friends did? What happened?
3. The sages believed that God knows all about us...even our innermost feelings. There is no pulling the wool over God's eyes, so to speak. Do you believe this? What are the consequences of this belief?