

ONAAAT MAMON

Honesty in Business

The Torah teaches us a fundamental mitzva for daily life: to be completely honest in all our business transactions.

The pasuq says:

VaYiqra 25:14 — וְכִי־תִמְכְּרוּ מִמְּכָרְךָ לְעֵמִיתְךָ אֹד קָנָה מִיָּד עֵמִיתְךָ אֶל־תִּגְנוּ אִישׁ אֶת־אָחִיו: "When one sells something to his fellow, or buys from his fellow, do not deceive one another."

This mitzva is known as onaat mamon — monetary harm caused through deliberate deception.

The Torah forbids:

- charging abusive prices by taking advantage of the buyer's ignorance,
- hiding defects in a product,
- deceiving about the quality of merchandise,
- manipulating information to gain economic advantage.

Honesty is not merely good moral advice. It is a Torah obligation.

RELIGIOSITY AND BUSINESS

Judaism does not separate spiritual life from economic life.

A person may pray every day, observe Shabbat, and eat kosher... but if he deceives in business, he is not considered a religious individual.

Our Hakhamim taught that the first question a person is asked in the Olam HaBa, the World after this life, is not how much he prayed, but rather:

"Did you conduct yourself honestly in your business dealings?" (Shabbat 31a)

Religious observance is expressed in how we sell, buy, and handle our money.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

If we sell a used object, we must clearly disclose any significant defect.

If we receive too much change in a store, we are obligated to return it, even if no one noticed.

If we are merchants, we must avoid taking advantage of the buyer's lack of knowledge.

If we offer a service, we must honestly fulfill what was promised.

THE STORY OF RAB SAFRA

The Talmud transmits an extraordinary example of absolute honesty.

Rab Safra had a donkey to sell. A non-Jewish buyer came and offered him 50 coins for the animal. At that moment, Rab Safra was reciting the Shema Yisrael and could not interrupt his recitation to respond. However, in his heart he had already decided to accept that offer. The buyer, thinking that the silence meant rejection, raised the price to 60 coins... and then to 70.

When Rab Safra finished the Shema, he did something incredible: he refused the 70 coins and asked only for the original 50.

Why?

Because internally, in his mind, he had already accepted the first offer. For Rab Safra, honesty was worth more than earning extra money.

Most people would have said: "I never responded verbally..." "Technically I did nothing wrong..."

But Rab Safra understood that HaShem also knows what happens inside our minds. That is why the Talmud considers him a supreme example of yirat Shamayim — religious observance and fear of Heaven.

KIDUSH HASHEM

When a Jewish individual acts honestly in business, it produces an enormous kidush HaShem. Others say: "What incredible honesty." "How trustworthy they are." "You can tell he lives according to the Torah."

But if a Jewish person deceives, manipulates, or acts dishonestly, the spiritual damage is enormous. He not only harms the other: he produces a hilul HaShem. Commercial honesty requires discipline and constant awareness that HaShem observes every transaction.

Religious observance is measured not only in the Bet haKeneset, but also in a business shop, in an office, in a contract, and in every commercial conversation.

VEHECHEZAKTA BO

Preventing Poverty

Another beautiful and sensitive mitsva of Parashat BeHar is the obligation to proactively help someone going through economic difficulties.

The pasuq says:

VaYiqra 25:35 — וְכִי-יָמוּךְ אָחִיךָ וַיִּמָּטֶה יָדוֹ עִמָּךְ וַיִּחַזְזֶקֶת בְּיָדְךָ וַתִּשָׁבֵב יָדְךָ עִמָּךְ "When your brother becomes impoverished and his hand begins to slip from you, you shall sustain him..."

The Torah does not only tell us to help the poor. It teaches us here something much deeper: we must help the person before he reaches indigence and is forced to humiliate himself by asking for charity.

BEFORE HE FALLS

When a person begins to fall, he can still be sustained with one hand. But once he has fallen completely to the ground, several people will be needed to lift him up. The Torah teaches us to intervene early. Proactively.

Not to wait for someone to lose everything. Not to wait for him to have to ask for help publicly. Not to wait for him to reach desperation.

The goal is to prevent the fall before it happens. Many times, a small amount of help given on time can save a person, a family, or an entire business.

THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF TSEDAQA

Maimonides teaches something extraordinary. In Hilkhos Matenot Aniyim he lists eight levels of tsedaqa, and the highest level of all is not simply to give money to the poor. The highest level is to help him "maintain" his economic independence.

How?

– by offering him work,

- by helping him open a business,
- by giving him an interest-free loan,
- by teaching him a trade,
- by connecting him with opportunities.

The best help is not only to give bread to the needy but to help him produce his own bread again. Or, as is often said: "Don't give him the fish; teach him to fish." The Torah seeks to preserve not only the survival of the person but also his dignity.

MUTUAL RESPONSIBILITY

Our Chakhamim taught:

"Kol Yisrael arebim ze laze" "Every Jew must feel responsible for one another."

The strength of Am Yisrael is not measured only by the success of the wealthiest but also by the dignity of the most vulnerable. A strong community is not one where some triumph while others are abandoned.

A true Jewish community is one where people sustain one another.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

If we know someone who has lost his job, we can help him by recommending him.

If someone is going through economic difficulties, we can offer him a dignified and discreet loan.

Sometimes, a phone call, a contact, or a job recommendation can completely change a person's situation.

Even emotionally supporting someone going through difficulties is part of this mitzvah. Often, the worst suffering is not only the lack of money, but the feeling of being alone.

HELPING WITH DIGNITY

The Torah does not want us to help "from above," with arrogance or superiority. It asks us to help, seeing the other as "achikha" — your brother.

Not as a social case. Not as a burden. Not as someone inferior.

But as a brother who today needs support... and who tomorrow could be the one who helps others.

Because in the Torah's vision, no one is completely self-sufficient. We all need others.

ONAAT DEBARIM

Avoiding emotional harm

Parashat BeHar also teaches us one of the most profound and relevant lessons in all of the Torah: it is not only forbidden to harm a person by cheating him commercially; it is also forbidden to wound the other, to harm him, with hard words.

The pasuq says:

VaYiqra 25:17 — וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ וְיִרְאַתְךָ מֵאֵל-לֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיכֶם: "Do not harm one another, and you shall fear your God, for I am ה' your God."

At first glance, this verse seems to repeat the same prohibition mentioned a few verses earlier, where the Torah forbade deceiving in business. But our Hakhamim explain that here the Torah is speaking of another, much deeper kind of harm: onaat debarim — the suffering caused to another person through words.

The Torah understands something we often forget: words do not disappear. A single phrase can accompany a person for years. Sometimes, an entire lifetime.

THE INVISIBLE DAMAGE

The Talmud (Baba Metsia 58b) teaches something surprising: emotional harm can be more serious than economic harm. Lost money can be recovered. A wounding word can leave an injury that sometimes never heals.

There are people who still remember humiliating comments they heard in their childhood. A mockery in public, an offensive nickname, a phrase said "as a joke," a criticism in front of others... invisible wounds that remain engraved on the heart. That is why Judaism considers that taking care of the way we speak is an essential part of the service to HaShem.

EXAMPLES GIVEN BY THE CHAKHAMIM

The Rabbis gave very concrete examples of onaat debarim:

– Rashi cites the Midrash, which warns about giving bad advice to a friend. If someone asks me, for example, what I think about buying a certain property as an investment — and it turns out that I want a relative of mine to buy it — I cannot give my friend bad advice in order to create

that opportunity at his expense. This would be harming him economically through words, by means of bad counsel.

- The Rabbis in the Talmud give more concrete examples of purely emotional harm:
- Not reminding a person of past mistakes after he has changed his life and improved.
- Not using offensive nicknames, even "as a joke."
- Not mocking another's physical appearance, accent, financial situation, or abilities.
- Not asking the price of a product if there is no real intention to buy it, making the seller waste time and raising false expectations.

Sometimes we think, "But I didn't do anything wrong!" I didn't hit. I didn't steal. I didn't physically harm. However, the Torah teaches us that sometimes a word can hurt the other more than an action.

HALBANAT PANIM—"SHEDDING BLOOD" and BULLYING

The Rabbis compared public shame to the shedding of blood.

Why? Because when a person is humiliated in front of others, the blood disappears from his face. The face turns pale. The person feels he wants to disappear. Today, in the era of WhatsApp chats, social networks, and social media, this mitzvah is even more important.

A sarcastic comment. A mockery sent to a group chat. A humiliating meme. An unnecessary public criticism. All of this falls into the category of onaat debarim.

"AND YOU SHALL FEAR YOUR GOD"

The Torah here adds a very special phrase:

"וַיִּרְאֶתָּה מֵאֵל-לִהְיוֹךָ" "And you shall fear your God."

The Rabbis explain that this appears because verbal harm is something that often only HaShem can judge.

When someone wounds another with words, he can always justify himself:

"It was a joke."

"I didn't mean it."

"He's too sensitive."

"I was only telling the truth."

Human beings cannot know what was truly in the heart of the one who spoke. But HaShem can. That is why the Torah reminds us: before speaking, think not only how your phrase will sound to people's ears — but how it will be heard in Heaven.

THE POWER TO BUILD

Words have immense power. A single phrase can give a person strength to keep going. A sincere compliment can change someone's day. A word of support can save someone from despair. Just as onaat debarim exists to destroy, there also exists the capacity to use the mouth to build worlds.

The mouth can become the holiest instrument of the human being... or the most destructive. It all depends on how we use it.

THINK BEFORE SPEAKING

Before speaking, it is worth asking ourselves:

Can what I am about to say cause harm to anyone?

Is it necessary to say it?

Is this the right moment?

Could the way I am going to say it wound?

Am I building or destroying?

Spiritual greatness is measured in an informal conversation with friends or family, when giving advice to a friend, in a business discussion, in a text message, in a chat, and in the way we treat people every day.

Shabbat Shalom!