

“Do not harass one another.” (25:17)

Rashi interprets the pasuk as an enjoinder against *onaas devarim*, verbal harassment. Ridiculing someone can have an enduring effect upon his personality development. The humiliation and scorn one is subject to at the hands of others can damage his psyche, impairing his self-esteem and his ability to relate to others. Humiliation does not only result from words; it can also be the consequence of an intentional snub. There is nothing as demeaning as being ignored by others, so that one feels as if he does not exist in their eyes. While the individual should not be obsessed with his ego, self-esteem is a pre-requisite for emotional stability. One who denigrates a fellow Jew, either with disparaging words or by giving him the cold shoulder when a smile would make his day, is acting reprehensibly. Perhaps it would serve the individual well to realize that Hashem will act towards him in the same manner in which he has acted towards others. Hashem's rebuff, however, hurts much more.

As mentioned above, we often do not realize the long term effect of our actions. Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites the following narrative from Chazal in the Talmud Shabbos 145b and notes the accompanying lesson to be derived from it:

The Talmud relates that Rabbi Chiya Bar Abba and Rabbi Assi were sitting before Rabbi Yochanan, and they asked him, “Why are the Babylonian fowls fat?” Rabbi Yochanan responded, “Because they were not sent into exile, as is quoted in Yirmiyahu 48:11: ‘Moav has been at ease from his youth, and he has settled on his lees... Neither has he gone into captivity.’” He quoted this pasuk to demonstrate the adverse effects of exile.

Upon reading this passage in the Talmud, one wonders about its purpose. Are Chazal debating a zoological question, or are they teaching a profound lesson? Horav David Wein, z.l., explains that Chazal seek to emphasize to us that the pain and anguish that are intrinsic to *galus*, exile, unfortunately endure for many generations. Babylonians did not drink from the bitter cup of misfortune that was the lot of those who were exiled. Thus, their fowl were fat and, because they were not driven from their homes, they did not suffer.

Horav Zilberstein concludes this thought with his own reflection on the consequences of verbal harassment. We think that after we have insulted or humiliated someone, a “quick *mechilah*,” forgiveness, on Erev Yom Kippur, will suffice. This is not true. The pain and suffering endured by the one upon whom we have vented our abuse lasts, even after we have apologized. Abuse is a terrible assault on a person's total being. Verbal abuse may seem to be non-violent, but it creates damage that lasts long after the marks of a violent blow have disappeared. An abused child becomes an abusive parent, an abusive mate, and an abusive person. The lack of self-esteem resulting from being the object of someone's verbal abuse can have deleterious effects that stigmatize generations. Can someone grant forgiveness for such far-reaching emotional damage?