

Each of you shall not aggrieve his fellow, and you shall fear your G-d. (25:17)

Hurting another Jew is an egregious sin. What makes it most serious is the fact that one does not always observe the damage that he has wrought. Embarrassing someone, reminding him of an inappropriate episode in his life, can cause grave emotional trauma, which is concealed beneath the surface of the man's demeanor. It hurts no less; since it is covert, the pain may be even greater. Talking about something that bothers a person is in itself a form of therapy. *Onaah*, aggrieving, applies to cheating in commerce, while *onaas devarim* refers to aggrieving with words, such as reminding people of: their questionable and embarrassing past; their far-from-distinguished lineage; or anything that makes a person self-conscious. Indeed, *Chazal* (*Bava Metzia* 58b) teach that it is worse to hurt someone personally than financially. A monetary loss can be made up, while humiliation lingers on. Shame often follows a person from place to place, haunting him, destroying his relationships, and preventing him from developing new ones.

Nonetheless, we often ignore the hurt we cause others, because we do not “see” the damage. Hashem does see, and this is why He says *V'yareisa mei-Elokecha*, “And you shall fear your G-d.” Hashem will not be as forgiving. He knows the pain that the subject of your ridicule has sustained, and He will exact punishment. At times, the punishment will take years to materialize, but one should never despair of punishment. If an individual hurt someone, he will pay.

The following story took place over a period of time. Perhaps if we think about this story, we will realize that, if we offend someone, we will pay – regardless of how long it might take.

The uncle of a *chassan*, young man about to be married, arrived from out of town to share in his nephew's festivities. He drove to the home of the *kallah*, bride, where the reception was to be held. He rang the bell, which was promptly answered by the bride's father. The two sat down and talked about their individual backgrounds, *yeshivah* life, going back as far as elementary school. Apparently, the uncle and the *kallah's* father had been students in the same *yeshivah* during the same *tekufah*, era. They began to share experiences, reminiscing about their time together in the *yeshivah*.

During the course of the conversation, the uncle reminded himself of an incident that had occurred during this period in the *yeshivah*. “I remember one night,” the uncle began, “you were in your dormitory room, and the other students wanted to have some ‘fun’ at your expense. They locked you in from the outside, essentially trapping you in your room. You banged on the door and pleaded to be released, but no one seemed to hear your pleas. Do you remember that incident?”

Being reminded of the incident cast a pall over the bride's father's face: “Of course, I remember that night. I have harbored the pain and humiliation within me throughout the years. Indeed, I said then – and I reiterate now – that I would never forgive the person who was responsible for that

debacle!"

When the uncle who had related the story heard the father's reaction, he almost passed out. He was traumatized by this statement of contempt for the one who had locked the door, since it was he who had been the culprit who had committed the dastardly act against the *kallah's* father. Now what?

The next morning, the uncle presented himself at the office of one of the distinguished *poskim*, *Halachic* arbiters, to seek some form of resolution to this issue. The *Rav* suggested that he approach the bride's father, tell him the truth and beg his forgiveness. Otherwise, it would put a strain on the relationship between the two families. Apparently, this *posek* neither knew the uncle, nor was aware of the misery that had been his companion for years.

The uncle listened to the *Rav* and proceeded to the *kallah's* house to reveal to her father that it had been he who had traumatized him years ago in the *yeshivah*. He now was asking his forgiveness. It was merely meant to be a prank. He had not intended to hurt, and certainly not to cause him distress for the rest of his life. Thirty years had elapsed since that fateful day, and much suffering had been generated by that act of teenage foolishness.

At first, the *kallah's* father hesitated. On the other hand, he could not look at the pleading man's face and turn him down. He acquiesced, absolving him on the condition that he would never hurt another person again. The uncle immediately accepted the resolution and promised to go out of his way to be sensitive to the feelings of others.

Postscript: One year following the incident, the uncle came knocking on the door of the bride's home for a third time. This time, he appeared with a shining countenance and an ear to ear smile. "I have come to inform you that my wife just gave birth to our first child – after twenty-six years!" One teenager's trauma and lack of forgiveness for his pain had resulted in the culprit's childlessness for twenty-six years. I write this story as a public service.