

BEHAR (LEVITICUS 25:1-27:34)

Ask a Stupid Question...

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

I once saw a book called, "Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions." The title speaks for itself. The book, which, if I recall, was quite entertaining, gives one the ability to put people in their place. With rancor and sarcasm, it allows the reader to feel quite smart and witty. But at what cost?

When you sell to your friend or buy from your friend, AL TONU – don't abuse one another ... V'LO TONU – and don't abuse one another, and you shall have fear of your G-d... (Leviticus, 25:14, 17)

CHAYIM: I can't believe what happened to me today!

YANKEL: What happened?

CHAYIM: A guy came by the office today selling ties. He showed me some hand-made silk ties. He told me that they were worth \$50, but he was willing to sell them for only \$30. What a bargain! Twenty dollars off! I bought five!

YANKEL: That's great, Chayim! What's the problem? You saved \$100! That's wonderful!

CHAYIM: Well, not exactly. As it turned out, they were actually made of polyester, and are available on ebay for \$3 apiece.

YANKEL: Oh...Uh, Chayim...

CHAYIM: Yes, Yankel?

YANKEL: You, my dear friend, are a jerk. A naive, stupid fool! You should be ashamed of yourself! What's the matter with you?! How could you allow yourself to be ripped off like that?! Boy, that con man must be laughing at you now!

We have just observed two violations of Torah Law.

The Torah says, "*AL TONU – don't abuse one another.*" This refers to financial abuse. One is not permitted to grossly overcharge or underpay. The Torah's caveat is, "Let the buyer and seller both beware! Let the seller beware of taking unfair advantage by overstating the value of a product. Let the buyer likewise beware of UNDERstating the value of a product." By claiming that the ties were something that they weren't, the seller violated this Commandment.

The Torah says, "*V'LO TONU – and don't abuse one another.*" This refers to verbal abuse. One is not permitted to say hurtful things to another person. While it is, of course, appropriate to reprimand an erring person when necessary, the Torah prohibits casting gratuitous insults at a person.

It is wrong to remind a person of mistakes he made in the past. Spiteful, vicious comments about a person violate the Torah's commandment against verbal abuse. This prohibition applies even in private, when there is no one else around to hear it. Public scorn is even worse.

AL TONU ... V'LO TONU – Don't abuse one another ... and don't abuse one another... Which form of abuse is worse, financial or verbal?

The Talmud (Bava Metzia, 58b) points out that in reference to verbal abuse, the Torah adds the phrase, "*and you shall have fear of your G-d.*" Evidently, insulting a fellow human being, created in G-d's image, is tantamount to insulting G-d Himself!

Financial abuse has specific parameters. If I overcharge you, and the price differential is one sixth or more, the sale is deemed invalid. The transaction is canceled, and you are entitled to a full refund. Verbal abuse has little if any parameters. If I say something hurtful, ANYTHING hurtful, I have violated the Commandment against hurting another person.

Financial abuse can be undone. I overcharged; I'll give you a refund. I underpaid; I'll give you more money or return the item.

How do you give back a person's shattered self-esteem?

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz