



Torah Thoughts from the YIGC Community

Tu B'Shevat: Actualizing Our Potential

Rafi Silverman

The Mishna in Rosh Hashana (1:1) lists four new years, one of which is the subject of a dispute between Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai: Beis Shammai is of the opinion that the new year for trees is on Rosh Chodesh Shevat, while Beis Hillel says it's the fifteenth of Shevat, i.e. Tu B'Shvat.

There is a halachic principle that we follow Beis Hillel and not Beis Shammai, with very few exceptions – this not being one of them.

The Gemara in Rosh Hashana (14a) expounds on the reasoning for each opinion: according to Beis Shammai, the first day of Shevat is the new year since that is when most of the year's rain has fallen, whereas Beis Hillel says the fifteenth of Shevat because that is when the trees actually blossom (see Tosfos & Meiri).

Why does each school say what they do in this case? I would like to suggest that Beis Shammai focuses on the potential, while Beis Hillel focuses on the actual. We see the same in the case of Chanukah: The Gemara says (Shabbos 21b) that according to Beis Hillel, we light corresponding to the

outgoing days (i.e. days that have happened), whereas Beis Shammai says we light corresponding to the incoming days (i.e. future potential days). Here again, we see their dispute in terms of actual vs. potential.

There is a Mishna in Pirkei Avos (5:17) which states that any dispute which is for the sake of heaven will endure. The mishna then states that the dispute of Beis Hillel and Beis Shammai is an example of this kind of dispute. According to the Arizal, this means that while we now hold like the opinion of Beis Hillel, in the times of Moshiach we will follow Beis Shammai.

The debate about the new year for trees is not just one of a simple date on the calendar, but rather of two viewpoints, and I think this is why the Arizal says that in the future we will switch sides. In the present day, our focus is on how Beis Hillel sees things: the actuality of the world. In the times of Moshiach, there will be such a revelation that we will see things in their potential, like Beis Shammai.

Words That Hurt

Dov Frankel

In Parshas Behar, the Torah commands us "*lo sonu ish es amiso*" – do not aggrieve your fellow Jew (Vayikra 25:17). Rashi explains that this *pasuk* is referring to the prohibition of *onaas devarim*, using one's words to cause pain or anguish to another. According to most *poskim*, *onaas devarim* is separate and distinct from the prohibition of *onaas mammon*, aggrieving someone monetarily (typically by overcharging), which is derived from the words "*al tonu ish es achiv* – do not aggrieve your brother," located a few *pesukim* earlier (Vayikra 25:14).

The Mishna (Bava Metzia 58b) contains several examples of *onaas devarim*: (i) asking a merchant the price of an item one has no intent of purchasing; (ii) reminding a *baal teshuva* of any past transgressions; and (iii) reminding a convert of the transgressions of his/her ancestors. The

Gemara cites a *beraita* that adds several more: (i) telling a person experiencing pain or tragedy that their troubles are the result of certain transgressions committed by that person; (ii) directing people interested in grain to a person who has no grain to sell; (iii) entering a store without money to make a purchase.

Rambam (Hilchos Mechira 14:14) extends *onaas devarim* to include other similar examples, such as asking a person a question regarding a topic in which that person lacks knowledge.

The *Sefer Hachinuch* explains that the *lav* of *onnas devarim* prohibits one from saying words to another that will cause pain and anguish against which the other person has no defense – i.e. taking advantage of another's weakness. Rav S. R. Hirsch similarly explains the root of the word *onaah* as

“the exploitation of the weakness of a man, in order to cheat him.” In a commercial setting, *onaas mammon* is taking advantage of a person’s lack of knowledge regarding the value of an item being sold or purchased. *Onaas devarim*, on the other hand, takes advantage of a weakness caused by an individual’s sensitivity.

The Gemara proceeds to list three ways in which the sin of *onaas devarim* is worse than the sin of *onaas mammon*:

<i>Onaas Devarim</i>	<i>Onaas Mammon</i>
Against a person as an individual (<i>guf</i>)	Monetary transgression
No possible repayment	Subject to repayment
<i>Pasuk</i> includes “ <i>viyaraisa me'Elokecha</i> – “Fear your G-d”	No mention in the <i>pasuk</i> of fearing G-d

Rashi explains (in a comment on the Gemara) that the warning of “fear your G-d” in the *pasuk* relating to *onaas devarim* serves as a warning. A person may try to explain his hurtful words by saying that he meant to admonish the other person for his own good, or that when he went into the store he really was thinking of making a purchase. The Torah warns such a person to fear G-d: G-d knows what was

in your heart when the statement was made and what your true intentions were when you entered the store.

The Gemara goes on (Bava Metzia 58b-59a) to describe the severity of the *lav* of *onaas devarim* in the sense of causing pain or embarrassment to another. It cites a statement from Rabbi Chanina: “Everyone rises from Gehinnom except: (i) one who has relations with a married woman; (ii) one who causes his friend’s face to turn white (from embarrassment) in public; and (iii) one who calls his friend by a derogatory name.” The Gemara continues that is preferable to (i) have relations with a *safek eishes ish* (woman of uncertain marital status) or (ii) throw oneself into a burning furnace than to embarrass someone in public.

The Gemara stresses that in addition to being extremely careful when talking to a *ger* (convert) or others mentioned in the list of examples of *onaas devarim*, a husband has to be very careful when talking to his wife. The Gemara points out the severity of making one’s wife cry from shame or embarrassment with a statement from Rav Elazar that “from the date of the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash, the gates of *tefillah* were locked... but the gate of tears remains open.” Similarly, it is written that G-d responds with justice swift and sure to messages that arrive through this gate of tears. While one certainly should always be careful about what one says, one should be extra careful with those who are in a weakened or vulnerable state.

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