

Why is Hitting So Bad?

What does Moses teach us about violence?

Hitting a Jew?

Earlier this week, I was reminded of a Chassidic story told of the Chidushei Harim, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Ger, who lived one hundred and fifty years ago. One day, as he returned from the Beis Midrash to his study, he told one of his attendants to prevent the Chassidim from entering his room after him. Indeed, many pushed and tried to enter, but since he had received an explicit order from the Rebbe, the attendant held everyone back.

A young chassid clung to the door hinges with all his might to prevent the door from closing, but the attendant was expressly commanded to not let anyone in, so he slapped the young man on the face, shoved him hard and shut the door.

Late that afternoon, the Chidushei Harim asked the attendant to bring nine people into his room, as he wanted a minyan for mincha. The attendant went out and collected eight people, him being the ninth, and brought them into the room.

He went to the Rabbi and said: "Rebbe, there is a minyan in the room. You can start praying."

The Rabbi looked at him in astonishment: "How is there a minyan?"

“We are nine, and the Rebbe is the tenth,” responded the attendant.

The Rebbe looked around. “I see only eight here in the room...”

The attendant was frightened and did not know what to say.

The Rebbe looked at him and continued: “You probably think that you too, are a part of the minyan, but how can you join my minyan after you slapped another person today?”

The attendant apologized and said that he had done so to fulfill the Rebbe’s wishes.

The Rabbi replied, “And that it is my will? Hitting a Jew for me?”

The Gladiator Teaching About Violence

What indeed is the rule regarding someone who hits his friend: is he allowed to join a minyan?

The Code of Jewish Law states, “Anyone who hits his friend is excommunicated... and he should not be joined with a minyan for holy matters until a Jewish court absolves him” (Hilchos Guf V’Nefesh 1,1).

Moreover, the Talmud says: “Reish Lakish said: One who raises his hand on his friend, even if he did not hit him, is called a rasha., a wicked man” He takes it one step further: you are considered a rasha not only if you actually hit someone, but even if you raise your hand *in order* to strike someone — you are already considered evil.

Where did this sensitivity in Reish Lakish come from?

To understand his statement, we first need to understand his background:

According to some opinions, Reish Lakish studied Torah in his youth, but due to his difficult financial situation, he left Torah study and sold himself to Ludiyim, gladiators who wrestle in arenas with dangerous animals for the entertainment of the spectators. That was his livelihood, and due to his physical prowess, he became very successful. At one point, he decided to escape from this group, and then came a moment that changed his life:

Rabbi Yochanan was one of the greatest rabbis in the Land of Israel; he was the editor of the Jerusalem Talmud. The Talmud relates (Bava Metzia 84a) that one day, Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan river when Reish Lakish (his childhood friend) saw him and jumped into the river after him. Rabbi Yochanan told him, "*Cheilach l'oyraisa*, Your strength should be dedicated for Torah." He used the opportunity to bring his childhood friend back to the Torah; "You have so much power, you can use it to study the Torah."

Reish Lakish replied: "Your beauty should be for women." Rabbi Yochanan was a very handsome man, and Reish Lakish felt his beauty should be utilized to attract women.

Rabbi Yochanan answered, "If you come back and start studying Torah, I will convince my sister to marry you — and she is more beautiful than me." Reish Lakish agreed, and Rabbi Yochanan taught him Torah, Mishnah and Talmud, and made him into a great scholar, to the point that he was almost Rabbi Yochanan's

equal.

This Reish Lakish is the source of the statement: “Reish Lakish said: One who raises his hand on his friend, even if he did not hit him, is called a rasha.”

He came from a place of violence, so he knew that the way to combat violence is not only to punish those who have already been violent with others, but to take preventative measures; to teach that even purporting to hit someone is already an act of evil.

Moses’s Resume

Reish Lakish did not invent this idea; he learned it from the story of Moses.

When we read about Moses in Parshat Shemot, we find very little about his early life. We read about his birth and how Yocheved placed him by the river, and how he was rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter. A few verses later, we are already reading about the burning bush, when Moses is already eighty years old.

Only fifteen verses separate the birth of Moses from the story of the bush, in which the Torah actually explains why G-d chose Moses as the leader of the Jewish people. Those fifteen verses are his entire resume.

What do those fifteen verses say?

The first story is about Moses reaching adulthood.

“And Moses grew up, and he went out unto his brethren, and

saw their affliction” (Exodus 2:11).

The Rebbe explains that Moses was a prince who grew up in the home of the most powerful man in the world, the leader of the world superpower. This is a boy whom Pharaoh adopted and he was willing to give him everything, and yet, “he went out to his brethren.” He did not go out for a stroll; he went out for the express purpose of seeing how his people were faring. He showed his care and concern for his people (Sichos Kodosh 5740 Vol. I p. 487)

And what did Moses see? An Egyptian who wants to kill a Jew. Immediately, “He turned here and there and saw that there was no person,” he looked around to see if anyone would stand up to protect the Jew, but he realized that nobody cared. So he killed the Egyptian and saved the Jew.

The next day Moses goes out again, and this time he notices two Jews fighting, “He saw two Hebrews arguing and he said to the wicked, ‘Why do you beat your fellow?’”(2:13)

The Hebrew answered him: “Who appointed you to be our minister and judge?” Who appointed you here as a policeman? Why are you mixing in? Do you want to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?

“Moses became afraid; he said, ‘indeed, the matter has become known.’”

From the words of Moses, Reish Lakish gleaned his statement: Moses did not say, “Why did you hit,” he said, “Why do you,” i.e., it was before the fact. And nevertheless, the Torah calls him

'evil.'

The Rebbe asks: Why does Reish Lakish point out that raising your hand is worse than using a different part of the body, like your foot? After all, the verse speaks about someone who is hitting — not necessarily with his hand.

The Rebbe explains:

“In doing an undesirable act, there is a difference between simply doing an undesirable deed, and doing an undesirable deed by *using something whose purpose is the very opposite*. When you take something whose purpose is to do good, and use it for the opposite, it is far worse than simply doing an undesirable deed.

This is emphasized in the case of raising your hand on a fellow: The purpose of your hand is to do good and kindness for others. In the words of the Alter Rebbe in Tanya: Your hand should be “A hand which distributes charity to the poor.” The goal of your hand is to give charity.

That was the problem. Instead of using a hand for its purpose — to further the cause of goodness and kindness — he used the hand for the opposite, to try and hit his fellow Jew.

This is, in a way, worse than hurting your friend with a foot, for example, since the purpose of the foot is to walk and bring the person from place to place (and not to give charity); hurting someone with your foot does not contradict its very existence, while using a hand negatively is turning the whole purpose of the hand on its face.

That is why a person who raises his hand — specifically — on his friend, even without hitting, is called wicked.

And this brings us to this week's Torah portion, Tazria, which speaks primarily about the plague of leprosy.

Famously, the leprosy in the Torah comes from the sin of lashon harah. The Rebbe continues in the same talk quoted above: "Lashon harah, too, is about using something in direct contrast to its purpose. The purpose of speech is for good words, and words of Torah, so lashon harah is the very opposite of its purpose of creation" (Hisvaaduyos 5748, vol. 1 pg. 410)

Don't Argue!

We are now two weeks before Pesach. We each have the opportunity to invite people to our Seder night, especially those who we know will have no place to go. This is an opportunity to use our hands, feet and mouths for Ahavas Yisrael (just don't quarrel at the Seder table...).