

Hurting With Speech - Ona'as Devarim:

The Mitzvah:

1. "Lo Sonu - Do not aggrive one another, and you shall fear Hashem."
2. It is forbidden to hurt people with words, just as it is forbidden to hurt people financially by defrauding them in business relationships.
3. In several ways, hurting others with words is a more severe transgression than cheating them financially:
 - Money can be returned; hurt feelings cannot always be restored.
 - Fraud only affects the person's belongings; hurting with words affects the person himself.
 - When someone has been hurt by words and he cries out to Hashem in his pain, he is answered instantly, and punishment is meted out quickly to the offender.
4. Since the interpretation of hurtful words often depends on the speaker's intentions, the Torah concludes the passuk with the words, "and you shall fear Hashem," - neither the victim nor the bystanders may know that you meant to hurt him, but Hashem knows your innermost thoughts and whether you really spoke innocently or not.
5. Men and women alike are included in this prohibition, which is incumbent at all times and in all places, in dealing with every Jew, young and old alike.
6. Children should be taught to be careful with their words from an early age, and should be made aware of the pain that words can cause.
7. Sometimes this is best taught when children themselves have been hurt.
8. This prohibition applies equally whether the words are directed to a child or an adult. This is especially important for parents and teachers to keep in mind; even when rebuke is necessary, it should not be given for the sake of hurting the child.
9. A man should be especially careful not to hurt his wife's feelings, since a woman is particularly sensitive to her husband's words, and can be easily moved to tears.

What Constitutes Ona'as Devarim?

1. General Definition: Any words or actions that embarrass, humiliate, hurt, frighten, cause anger or shock to another person - anything we might do that would cause the other person an unpleasant feeling - would be prohibited as *Ona'as Devarim*.
2. The prohibition may be violated at times without saying a word - merely by showing an angry face or hinting at something negative by using body language, or in other ways that do not use words. As long as we intend to hurt the other person.

Examples of Ona'as Devarim?

1. Asking merchant, "How much does this cost?" if you have no intention of buying the item.
2. It is permitted to ask the merchant if there is a chance that you might purchase the item.
3. If you make your intentions clear to the shop owner or worker before asking (e.g. you are asking out of curiosity, such as you already bought a similar object somewhere else or you plan on competing with him) , then your question is legitimate and no *Ona'as Devarim* is involved.
4. Asking a worker how much he charges when you have no plans of hiring him. you are leading him on and raising his hopes unfairly.

5. You may not say to a Ba'al Teshuva "Remember all those aveiros you used to do?"
6. Avoid mentioning facial blemishes or physical defects to those who have them.
7. Don't remind a Get or someone who comes from a family of Geirim about his or his family's past misdeeds.
8. Avoid mentioning sore points, shortcoming, or defects that exist in person's community, family, spouse, or children.
9. Do not tell person suffering from illness or tragedy, "Has anyone innocent ever suffered?" If you deem it necessary to convey such a message to arouse person to Teshuvah, it should be presented indirectly and very delicately.
10. Do not be part of a crowd of curious onlookers who gather around when you see a person who is ill or being carried into an ambulance.
11. Pranks or practical jokes such as sending a person, who asks, "Where can I buy such and such" to the wrong place. Calling a taxi or ordering a delivery to a non-existent place or order. Making anonymous prank calls. False call to fire apartment.
12. Frightening another person, such as sneaking up behind him and screaming or appearing beside him suddenly in dark alley.
13. Monetary compensation may be required man pranking with physical contact such as grabbing, blowing into an ear, pushing, or taking hold of clothes - even if it is Purim.
14. Putting someone "on the spot." e.g. asking a question regarding a particular area of knowledge, when you suspect he is ignorant about the topic. Similar types of questions to a Rabbi or teacher.
15. Don't look at person, who inadvertently asked a foolish question.
16. Belittling another person in order to aggrandize yourself in comparison, loses his portion in the World to Come - even if the other person is not present.
17. We should take precautions to keep our distance from anything that might lead us to cause even inadvertent pain to another. There is no excuse for ignorance of simple drench eretz and human decency. While the prohibition of *Ona'as Devarim* will not actually be violated unless these acts are done intentionally to hurt another person, we should certainly avoid doing them. Thoughtless *Ona'as Devarim* such as:
18. Opening the window on a bus on a cold day when most people would prefer it closed.
19. Davening a very long Amida in a spot that blocks others from taking their steps back or sitting down.
20. Waking someone up from one's sleep or keeping someone from sleeping by making noise, for no good reason.
21. Cutting in front of someone else in line.
22. Smoking in the presence of others.
23. Doing disgusting things in the presence of others.
24. If one does violate *Ona'as Devarim*, whether intentionally or not, once the offender has placated the victim and obtained his forgiveness, he will be spared severe punishment from Hashem.

Exceptions:

1. The prohibition does not apply towards a non-Jews, heretics, enemies of Hashem, or those who reject the authority of the Torah even if only relative to one sin. Although one must be careful not to cause a *Chilul Hashem* or other possible dangerous consequences.

2. If teacher sees that his students are slacking off in their learning, he is obliged to make show of anger and make them feel ashamed, the purpose being to sharpen their minds and induce them to try harder and maximize their learning potential. This only applies when the teacher honestly thinks that the student is not trying as hard as he can. otherwise, the teacher should not use biting remarks, but rather should exercise patience.
3. The Torah advises us to be especially careful not to hurt converts with words, nor to **oppress** or **distress** them personally or their property: "Do not hurt or oppress the convert." The Torah asserts that *Ona'ah* of a convert constitutes a violation of three negative Mitzvos, and oppressing him violates another three. The Torah warns us 36 times not to mistreat a convert. This is in addition to the basic prohibition of *Ona'ah* toward any Jew.
4. The Torah advises us to be especially careful with widows and orphans: "Do not afflict the widow and orphan." This is in addition to the basic prohibition of *Ona'ah* toward any Jew.
5. Anyone who teases them, angers them, causes them pain, takes advantage of them, etc. violates this extra prohibition. The Torah describes the punishment: "I shall become angry and kill you by the sword, and your wives will become widows, and your children, orphans.'
6. The prohibition is violated only if the oppressor is doing so for his own benefit. In certain cases, a teacher must be harsh with a student who is an orphan in order to teach him Torah or a profession, or to correct his conduct. then the teacher's actions are permitted; still, he should not treat him on par as the other children, but rather favor him and treat him with extra compassion and respect.
7. These extra precautions in *Ona'ah* apply to a child who has lost either a father or mother. The orphan retains this status until he is old enough to look after his own affairs like any other adult, without having to rely on others to look after and take care of him.
8. A widow is defined as any woman - young or old - who has lost her husband, even after many years have passed, as long as she has not remarried.
9. For widows, orphans, and converts, the prohibition applies even if they are not mitzvah - observant.

Employer Pressure:

1. The Torah says: "With your brethren, the children of Israel - a man with his brother - do not subjugate him through hard labor."
2. If as an employer, our relationship is such that the employee is afraid of what we might do to him, or if he is afraid or ashamed to refuse any request of ours, then we are not permitted to order him to do personal service for us, large or small, unless it is clear that he is willing and amenable to the request.
3. Similarly, we are not permitted to impose hard labor - open ended or unnecessary tasks - on our Jewish workers or family members.
4. When making request from a family member, even for a Mitzvah, we should always do so gently and politely.