

You Always Hurt the Ones You Love

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For the music buffs and aficionados among us, you will undoubtedly recognize a song written all the way back in 1944 by Allan Roberts and Doris Fischer. The reason that anyone under 70 would recognize it is that this song has been recorded and remixed an astonishing number of times by an eclectic variety of musical artists from the Mills Brothers to Willie Nelson; Fats Domino to Connie Francis; Ringo Starr to Richard Chamberlain; Spike Jones to Michael Buble; in 2010 Ryan Gossling sang this song in a scene in the movie *Blue Valentine*. It's called: *You always hurt the one you love*. Unlike other re-recordings of older songs, nearly every one of these singers preserved the ballad-like quality of the original score, hardly changing the tempo or rhythm. To my knowledge there are still no techno or rap versions of this song.

It's a catchy tune, and the truth is there are only four stanzas in the whole song, so it's pretty easy to memorize and sing along with. But as appealing and memorable as this song is, I have to believe that its recurring popularity is attributable to its own agonizing truth: You always hurt the one you love, the one you shouldn't hurt at all... You always break the kindest heart with the hasty words you can't recall... So if I broke your heart last night, it's because I love you most of all."

Hmmm. I don't know about you, but I'm not sure I want to blast those words in my car or on my stereo or in earshot of my children, and especially not my wife! What's the message, the closer you get to someone, the more susceptible you are to being hurt by them or spoken to callously by them? That is exactly the message of the song, and I think it points to a certain timeless truth about our closest relationships. People are often described as having an outside personality and an inside personality; or that they behave a certain way in public and rather differently in private. We often say this about our kids, who are so incredibly polite, and courteous, and would never think of putting an elbow on the table during the meal or getting up from the table without taking their plate to the kitchen; who always say please and thank you...that's of course whenever they are guests in someone else's house, right. But in the confines of their own home and family, let's just say they aren't always such angelic creatures. But it's not just kids... When we adults

present ourselves to our co-workers and clients and patients and customers, we are polite and collaborative and professional. But how often do we walk across the thresholds of our own homes and the tie is loosened or the heels are kicked off, and we tend to interact with our spouses and family members in ways that would be rather surprising to outsiders. It seems that this kind of inside/outside dichotomy has been going on for a very long time because ages before Alan Roberts and Doris Fischer wrote their pop standard *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, the Torah in our parasha this morning addressed the very same phenomenon: *Lo tonu ish et amito*, do not deliberately or intentionally hurt another person. The truth is that's an imperfect translation. An 'amit,' or 'amito' is not just any other person... an *amit* is someone with whom you are especially close; a partner, a spouse, a dear friend. Don't deliberately hurt the people closest to you, commands the Torah in Leviticus 25:17. And the hurt being referred to here has historically been understood by our tradition as *ona'at devarim*, or verbally hurting another person, wounding them with words.

The Rambam, one of Judaism's consummate philosophers and interpreters, gives a number of examples¹ of this verbal wronging...For example, he says, if a person has repented or reformed or overcome something negative or undesirable or challenging in his or her past, you should never bring up to that person, Hey remember what a bum you used to be...or remember how ridiculous you used to act back then...Remember how you succumbed to this temptation or that vice?

To remind someone of a past they have struggled mightily and successfully to overcome is to shame them and unfairly harness their identity to that particular part of their past.

If someone is in the midst of suffering the Rambam says, you shouldn't speculate with them about why they have come upon such misfortune or what they must have done to cause it...Don't be like Job's friends...Remember the epic tragedy of the Book of Job; The story of a pious, righteous guy who nevertheless loses everything important to him? A major part of that book is the dialogue between Job and his so called friends who, like religious people even to this day, have ready, memorized answers to everything. Job, they say, you must have done something to deserve this? God would not punish you unjustly...probe your thoughts and deeds,

¹ Rambam, *Sefer Ha'Mitzvot*, Negative Commandments 251-252

and you'll come up with the answer. Of course Job refuses. I hear people attempting to explain loss or suffering in hospital rooms and shiva houses all the time. And I understand the need to get a grip on the chaos, to say something, anything that might bring some comfort or explanation. But usually those seemingly innocent explanations end up being more hurtful than helpful.

The Rambam continues: You should never say to a convert, hey remember how you used to worship idols or how your favorite food used to be pork wrapped in bacon with a side of shrimp? You can't make a Jew-by-choice, a convert feel any less Jewish or humiliate them by bringing up what they used to do then but would never do now. It's insensitive, it's judgmental, and it's embarrassing.

And finally, you can't feign interest in buying something from a salesperson when you really have no interest in buying the product at all. All of these acts involve the damaging use of words and speech. And we all do it.

Sometimes we may think we're joking around or poking a little fun, but in fact the joking and poking can touch the nerve of some deep insecurities and sensitivities that are very hurtful. Sometimes these words add insult to injury, such as when people try to unravel the source of another person's pain or suffering. And sometimes, dear friends, people are just being downright cruel...whether dashing the hopes of a seller, or intentionally pointing out or exacerbating flaws and imperfections in another person. My sense is that a person who does such things is actually at war with themselves. That consistently criticizing or shaming or disparaging another person reveals a deep unhappiness in one's own life. If you catch yourself saying such things, take a moment to ask yourself what the real source of your antagonism. What's going on inside of you that urges you to level such criticisms on others?

The last line in that song I shared with you bears repeating: "if I broke your heart last night, it's because I love you most of all." Who do we love most of all in our lives? I hope your answer is your spouse, if you have one. Now I want you to listen to the words of Rabbi Yosef Caro, the author of the Shulchan Aruch, the preeminent 16th Century Code of Jewish Law. He writes: *Tzarich lizaheir b'yoteir be'ona-at ishto...* You must exercise extra special attention and care

regarding the words, the potential to verbally wound your wife, or for our purposes your spouse.² Why? Why does he say that...Think of our song. *She'dimata metzuya*, a phrase that means "because her tears are ready." What can that mean? A spouse's tears are more ready than other people's tears? I think what it means, in light of our song, is that a spouse is the most susceptible to harmful effects of *ona'at devarim*, of hurtful words. A spouse is a best friend, a confidant, a lover, a life partner...the person with whom you are the most real and also the most vulnerable. And because you have the inside scoop, because you have been entrusted with details about that person that perhaps no one else knows, therefore *tzarich lizaheir be'yoteir*, you must be the most careful about the words you use with the people closest with you. The song *You Always Hurt the Ones You Love* could not be more in conflict with Jewish values.

Once upon a time there was a most outstanding yeshiva bocher...a really exceptional student of Torah. One day this student came home and declared to his wife, I am no longer going to take out the garbage! His wife looked at him in shock and disbelief...What do you mean you're no longer going to take out the garbage? Her husband responded, you know I am the most advanced student in the entire yeshiva. The rabbis praise me for my sophisticated questions, and my fellow students marvel at my ability to understand the most esoteric concepts. I just don't think it's befitting of someone like me to do something as menial as taking out the garbage. His wife was stupefied, utterly dumfounded. So the next day she went to the yeshiva to speak to the rosh yeshiva, the head of the yeshiva. She explained to the great rabbi what her husband said to her the day before. The rabbi sat and thought, and after a few moments of silent deliberation said to the woman, you know what, your husband is right, he shouldn't take out the garbage. Well, the woman was infuriated and she went home totally enraged and disappointed. The next morning the student and his wife were sitting and having breakfast. You could cut the tension between them with a knife! All of a sudden there is a knock at the door. The husband got up, opened the door, and who is standing there? None other than the head rabbi of the yeshiva himself! "Honored rebbe," the husband said, "I am so privileged to have you as a guest in my home. Please come in!" The rebbe stepped inside the house and momentarily his eyes met those of the wife. The student said, "Great rebbe, can I offer you some tea, or perhaps a cup of coffee? Something to eat? Please, take off your coat and your hat, and sit down..." The rebbe said, "No

² Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat, Hilchot Ona'ah 228:3

thank you. I did not come to have a drink or to have breakfast, or even to talk. I came to take out the garbage.”

Dearest friends, the people who are closest to you...your family, your close friends, your spouses and children, your fellow congregants, should be the ready recipients of your love and respect, not your anger and frustration. *Lo tonu ish et amito*, never hurt the people who are closest to you in your life. Instead care for them and honor them more than you care for and honor yourself.

Shabbat Shalom