

The Limits of Politeness

Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Devarim*, God tells Moses:

Do not be at enmity with Moab, and do not contend with them in battle.

[Deuteronomy 2:9]

[I.e., don't go to war with Moab.]

and:

Do not harass [the Ammonites], nor contend with them. [Deuteronomy 2:19]

[I.e., don't even harass Ammon.]

Why the difference? The Talmud answers:

[Background: Lot's two daughters, thinking they were the only survivors in the world after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, sleep with their father to perpetuate the species, and have one son each: Moab and Ben-Ammi.]

Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba, citing Rabbi Yochanan, said: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, [rewards even polite speech]?

The elder daughter [of Lot] called her son Moab ["of my father"] [Gen. 19:37] and so the All-Merciful One said [to Moses]:

Do not be at enmity with Moab, and do not contend with them in battle.

[Deuteronomy 2:9]

Only war was forbidden, but they might be harassed.

The younger daughter, on the other hand, called [her son] Ben-Ammi ["son of my people", a more polite expression] [Genesis 19:38] and so [the Torah] says:

Do not harass [the Ammonites], nor contend with them. [Deuteronomy 2:19]

[The Ammonites] were not to be harassed at all.

[Nazir 23b]

God rewarded Ammon’s mother for giving her son a more polite name than Moab’s mother!

The Talmud says:

-Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: One should not utter a gross expression with his mouth... The School of Rabbi Ishmael taught: One should always express oneself in decent language. [Pes. 3a]

-[The Torah says:]

Vayikra el Moshe vaydabber Hashem elav -- And the Lord called Moses,
and spoke to him. [Lev. 1:1]

Why does the Torah mention the call before the speech? To teach us good
manners: A man should not address his neighbor without calling him first. [Yoma
4b]

Politeness in Judaism

Politeness is valued very highly in Jewish tradition, even to the point of
changing the language of the Torah! To wit, the Talmud says [Megillah 25b]:

Our Rabbis taught in a baraita: All [biblical] verses written in an indelicate manner
must be read by substituting refined phrasing. [Examples:]

-[Instead of reading] "You shall betroth a wife, and another man will rape her" [we
read] "You shall betroth a wife, and another man will lie with her". [Deut. 28:30]

-[Instead of reading] "The Lord will strike you with... hemorrhoids" [we read] "The
Lord will strike you with... abscesses". [Deut. 28:27]

(Abscesses can occur anywhere in the body, but hemorrhoids only in the
anus.) The Talmud continues with examples from the Book of Kings:

-[Instead of reading] "And there was a great famine in Samaria... and a quarter
kav of doves' excrements [sold] for five pieces of silver."
[we read] "And there was a great famine in Samaria... and a quarter kav of what
comes out of doves [sold] for five pieces of silver.". [2Kings 6:25]

[The Assyrian commander threatens Israel during the siege of Jerusalem:]

-[Instead of reading] "They will soon be eating their own feces and drinking their
own urine."

[we read] "They will soon be eating their own droppings and drinking the water of
their feet [penises].". [2Kings 18:27]

-[Instead of reading] "And they... broke down the house of Baal, and made it a
feces-hole."

[we read] "And they... broke down the house of Baal, and made it a latrine."
[2Kings 10:27]

However, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha says that the actual word "feces-hole"
[must be read] because it is a term of opprobrium for idolatry [and must not be
modified].

When speaking of idolatry, the Talmud suspends the rule of politeness:

Rabbi Nachman said: All foul and obscene language is forbidden except when directed at idolatry, in which case it is permitted [because even the Bible uses such language], as it is written [in Isaiah]:

[The idol] Bel squats [without even using a toilet]. [The idol] Nebo splatters and soils himself. [Isa. 46:1]

[I.e., the idols relieve themselves disgustingly and without restraint.]

...

Rabbi Huna ben Manoah said in the name of Rabbi Aha the son of Rabbi Ika: A Jew is permitted to tell [an idolater], "Take your idol and stick it up your rear end."

Rav Ashi said: It is permissible to abuse someone with the reputation of being an adulterer with the term "son of a harlot".

So you can leave politeness aside if you see someone doing something beyond the pale.

Euphemisms abound in the Bible

Instead of "to have sex with":

- To lie with [Lev. 20:18,20]
- To uncover the nakedness of [Lev. 18:7-17]
- To take [Lev. 20:21]

Instead of sex-related expressions:

- “The bread he eats” instead of “the woman with whom he has sexual relations” [Gen. 39:6]
- “She eats and wipes her mouth” instead of “she has sex and cleans herself”:
This is the way of an adulterous woman: she eats, and wipes her mouth, and says: “I have done nothing wrong.” [Prov. 30:20]

Instead of "penis":

- Private parts (mevoshim) [Deuteronomy 25:11]
- Feet:

And when Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain; and [Ruth] came softly, and uncovered his feet, and laid herself down. [Ruth 3:7]

Instead of "to defecate":

- To cover one's legs. [Judg. 3:24; 1Sam. 24:3]

Instead of "to urinate":

-To cover one's feet. [Judges 3:24; 1Sam. 24:3]

Instead of "to menstruate":

-To be after the way of women. [Gen. 18:11]

Instead of "to die":

-Enoch walked with God, then he was no more, for God took him. [Gen. 5:24]

-I will go down to She'ol. [Gen. 37:35]

-I will lie with my fathers. [Gen. 47:30]

-I am about to go the way of all the earth. [I Kings 2:2]

-They shall sleep an everlasting sleep and not wake. [Jer. 51:39,57]

-I shall go the way from where I shall not return. [Job 16:22]

Instead of "cemetery":

-House of his world. [Eccles. 12:5]

Instead of "cursing God":

-Blessing God. [1Kings 21:10,13; Job 1:5,11; 2:5,9]

Euphemisms abound in the Talmud

- "Sexual intercourse" is "usage of the bed". [Yoma 8:1, Ket. 65b]

- "Impotent" is "not conversant with the way of the world". [Git. 70a]

- "Anal intercourse" is "turning the table". [Nedarim 33b]

- "Oral intercourse" is "kissing that place". [Nedarim 33b]

- "Toilet" is "house of water" [Meg. 3:2] or "house of the chair". [Ber. 25a]

- "Defecation" is "having need of his apertures". [Git. 70a]

- "He died" is "he departed" [BB 16b], "his soul rested" [MK 25a-b, Ket. 104a], "he left the life for the living", or "he was uprooted from the world" [Suk. 45b]

- Tractate *Semachot* ("Happy occasions") discusses the laws of funerals and mourning.

- "Placed under cherem" (excommunicated) is "blessed".

- "*Dever acher*" ("something else") is for many things not mentioned openly:

- Leprosy [Pes. 76b, 112b; Shab. 129b; Git. 57b, 70a]

- Pig [Ber. 43b; Pes. 76b; Shab. 129b]

- Sex [Ber. 8b; Bezaḥ 22a]

- Immorality [Ket. vii. 5, 71b, 72a]

What are the limits of politeness?

- Politeness is inappropriate in situations eliciting your strong disapproval.
 - Talmud agrees (see above)
- Politeness can create ambiguity and uncertainty and lead to misunderstandings.
 - Did he mean exactly what he said or is he just being polite?
- Politeness can falsely reassure people when your intentions are malevolent.
 - Polite does not mean good.** Culture and civility do not prove goodness.
 - Nazis were (and Germans are) very polite and well-behaved. Yet they committed the worst atrocities in history.
 - Jewish sayings:
 - Politeness is the art of saying “nice doggie” until you find a rock.
 - Politeness is the art of telling someone to go to hell and make him feel happy to be on his way.
 - When politeness is just a deceptive cover, is honesty better?
- Politeness may deter people from questioning or disagreeing.
- What is “polite” is not universal. What is polite in one culture can be rude or eccentric in another.
 - British custom of ignoring people around them unless they have been “properly introduced”; vs American custom of smiling to them, saying “hi” or making a neutral comment acknowledging their presence.
 - Studies have shown that women are more likely to be polite than men.