

How to Respond

IF someone is being bullied, we can't just ignore it. Bullying is both a physical and a psychological danger and the Torah tells us: *Do not stand idly by when another person is in danger; I am G-d (Leviticus 19:16)*. Rashi on this verse explains that we are speaking of a case where the bystander is able to intervene and save him – and G-d knows whether or not a person could have safely gotten involved!

In general, we should try not to let bullies provoke us into losing our cool. After all, they're trying to get to us and that just gives them what they want! *As Proverbs 12:16 tells us: Everyone can tell when a fool is upset, but a wise person is able to conceal it.*



So, what should we do? There's a very specific *mitzvah* in the Torah that tells us how to deal with people who are acting out: *Do not hate your brother in your heart. Rather, you should correct his behavior, even many times, and do not bear a sin because of him (Leviticus 19:17)*. Rashi makes an interesting comment on this verse: *"Do not bear a sin because of him" – Do not embarrass him publicly.* Even though we must correct the actions of others, we also have to be careful not to humiliate them while doing so.

Correcting a bully's behavior is not only for the victim's benefit, it's a favor for the bully. It's especially beneficial if he's fallen into a bad crowd. The very first line of Psalms tells us: *Happy is the person who doesn't follow the advice of evil people, stand in the path of the sinful or sit in the company of troublemakers (Psalms 1:1).*

It behooves us for the sake of all involved to correct the behavior of bullies and to remove them from bad influences before it's too late.

The Bottom Line

WHEN a bully has targeted someone for abuse, it can be incredibly painful and distressing. There is no one magic course of action that will immediately solve the problem. When undergoing such trials and weighing one's options, it may be helpful to remember the words of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov:

The world is like a very narrow bridge. The most important thing is not to be afraid.

Crossing a narrow bridge that spans a deep chasm can be incredibly harrowing. But when all is said and done, the reality is that you ARE on a bridge that reaches all the way to the other side. Don't look behind you and don't look down - just keep your eyes on your destination and you WILL get there!



NCSY TORAH ON
ONE FOOT 2.0



BULLYING

compiled by Rabbi Jack Abramowitz
designed by Renée Rosenfeld



NCSY is the youth movement of the Orthodox Union

www.ncsy.org

Eleven Broadway, New York, NY 10004

The Prohibition Against Bullying

THE TORAH tells us (*Exodus 2:13*): *Moses went out and saw two men fighting. He said to the evil one, "Why will you strike your fellow?"* Rashi cites the Midrash on this verse: Even though he has not yet struck him, he is called evil simply for raising his hand.

We may not even strike someone we feel "deserves" it. *Deuteronomy 25:3* speaks of someone sentenced by the courts to a punishment of lashes. The Torah tells us: *Forty*

you shall strike him and no more. If you were to strike him beyond this, your brother would be degraded in your sight.

The maximum penalty is 40 lashes. One may not strike even a convicted offender beyond the scope of his sentence.

Rashi points out: *This prohibits striking any innocent person.* He continues: *Previously (in verses 1 and 2), he is called "wicked." Once his punishment has been given, he is once again "your brother."*



Words Hurt

IT'S not only physical bullying that's prohibited by the Torah. Verbal abuse and causing emotional distress are also forbidden! The Torah tells us (*Leviticus 25:17*): *Do not oppress another and be in awe of Hashem your G-d.* Rashi clarifies: This refers to **verbal oppression** ("*ona'as devarim*"), namely that a person may not antagonize another, nor give him bad advice in order to benefit himself. And if you were to ask "Who would ever know my secret intentions?" the verse ends with "fear G-d," the One Who knows all. The Talmud in *Baba Metzia* gives some examples of *ona'as devarim* (58b):

What are some examples? If he was a ba'al teshuva, one may not say, "Remember your previous deeds!" If he was descended from converts, one may not say, "Recall the deeds of your ancestors!" If he himself is a convert, one may not say, "Yesterday you were eating all kinds of non-kosher food and now you want to learn Torah?" If he's suffering from afflictions, one may not suggest that his own deeds brought it upon him. If donkey drivers ask where to buy grain, one may not send them to someone they know doesn't have any. Rabbi Yehudah says one may not even inquire about an object he is unable to purchase because this will cause pain to the seller (when he's disappointed).

Two very severe forms of *ona'as devarim* are shaming someone publicly and calling him by a derogatory nickname. The Talmud continues:

All who descend to Gehinnom are able to ascend except for three: a person who has adulterous relations with another man's wife, one who embarrasses another person in public, and one who calls another by a derogatory nickname. But isn't calling someone by a derogatory nickname the same as embarrassing him? No, this refers to calling him by a bad nickname by which he has already become known (even so, it's forbidden).

Emotional Distress

THERE are many, many cases where the Torah specifically prohibits hurting others' feelings. Foremost among these are those who are already oppressed by their circumstances: widows, orphans, converts and the financially destitute. (A convert is considered "oppressed" because he doesn't have the support system of a Jewish family.) In all these cases, G-d has said that He will stand in on behalf of the oppressed person and fight their battles for them.

Following are just a few of the literally dozens of examples in the Torah.

WIDOWS AND ORPHANS: *Do not mistreat a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to Me, I will hear their cry and My anger will be aroused. I will kill you with the sword so that your wives will become widows and your children will become orphans.* (*Exodus 22:21-23*)

CONVERTS: *Do not mistreat or oppress a convert. (You know what it feels like) because you were strangers in Egypt.* (*Exodus 22:20*)

THE FINANCIALLY NEEDY: *Do not oppress a hired laborer who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or a stranger in your land, inside your gates. Give him his wages when due; don't let the sun go down without doing so because he is poor and he's relying on it. If he cries out against you to G-d, it will be counted against you as a sin.* (*Deut. 24:14-15*)

Not only may we not intentionally aggrieve others, we must go out of our way to avoid even unintentionally causing them distress:

Rav Dimi said: How do we know that if one person lends another money and he knows that the borrower does not have the ability to repay, that he may not pass by him? Because the Torah says (*Exodus 22:24*) "don't treat him like a collection agency." (*Talmud Baba Metzia 75b*)

He lent his friend money but *he's* the one who mustn't pass by so as not to make his friend feel harassed—that's how concerned the Torah is with not causing other people emotional distress!

Even playing "keep-away" with a person's possessions is a serious matter:

The Torah says "do not steal," which means "do not steal even as a joke meant to annoy and bother the owner of the property, after which you intend to return it." (*Sefer HaMitzvos Negative 244*)

So, aside from causing others pain, depriving someone of their property—even temporarily—violates the Torah's prohibition against stealing!

Humiliating Others

Here are some quotes from the Talmud on the subject of shaming others:

- One who embarrasses another person publicly does not have a portion in the World to Come. (*Talmud Baba Metzia 59a*)
- It would be better for a person to cast himself into a hot furnace than to embarrass

FRIENDS



So What Should We Do?

ONE of the most famous verses in the Torah tells us: *Love your neighbor as yourself* (*Leviticus 19:18*).

And yet, as important as this ideal is, our Rabbis tell us that there's one still greater:

"Love your neighbor as yourself" – Rabbi Akiva says that this is a great principle of the Torah. Ben Azzai says that an even greater principle is (*Genesis 5:1*) "This is the book of the generations of Adam." (*Sifra, parshas Kedoshim*)

What's so important about "This is the book of the generations of Adam?" It's easy to focus too much on the "neighbor" part of "love your neighbor" and justify hating those we feel are not our neighbor. "This is the book of the generations of Adam" reminds us that we all come from the same ancestors and, when it comes down to it, we're really all one big family.

- someone publicly. How do we know this? From Tamar (who was willing to be burned rather than embarrass Yehuda in *Genesis 38*) (*ibid.*)
- Anyone who embarrasses another person publicly is like a murderer. (*Baba Metzia 58b*)

OPPRESSED

