

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Acharei Mot-K'doshim — Monitoring your Heart's Intake

Shabbat Acharei Mot-K'doshim | 8 Iyar; May 1-2, 2009

All of us have been sick and taken medicine. We all appreciate that small, repeated ingestion of certain substances can have significant effects. The same pattern and effect occurs in the accumulation of negative feelings. Therefore, the Torah teaches “you shall not hate your brother in your heart; you shall surely reprove your fellow and not bear a sin because of him. You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people.” (Leviticus 19: 17-18).

In this passage we are prohibited from three different forms of enmity: Sina, hatred, N'kama, revenge, and N'tira, bearing a grudge. Sina refers to simple, reactive, hatred. We immediately hate someone who is very disagreeable to us or subjects us to suffering. This is, however, often a temporary condition, like getting one's foot stepped on. Our hatred generally dissipates, especially if the offender expresses some regret.

The matter gets more complicated when he shows no apology or remorse. Then a cycle can be initiated. N'kama, vengeance can occur if the aggrieved party decides to pay back the original offender in some way, which can be physical, emotional or social. N'tira, bearing a grudge, is more aggravated and prolonged. In N'tira we seriously deepen the conflict. We respond not only with immediate “payback” but also by fostering a series of interactions meant to diminish the humanity of the original offender.

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, who lectures about the ethics of inter-personal relationships, reports that he often asks those in his audience who are estranged from some other family members to raise their hands. Many hands go up. He then asks who can remember how the conflict started. Few hands go up.

There is a child in each of us who wants the world always to be fair. At some point, however, conflicts must be neutralized. In “Anonymous” recovery groups, members try to achieve “the serenity to accept that which cannot be changed, the courage to change that which can be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference”.

Or, as the Talmud would have it: “There are four types of character types: Easy to provoke and easy to pacify – their gain is cancelled by their loss; difficult to provoke and difficult to pacify – their loss is cancelled by their gain; difficult to provoke and easy to pacify, this is the pious person; easy to provoke and difficult to pacify – this is the wicked person” (Pirke Avot, Ethics of the Fathers, 5:14).