

This very short parashah, which in non-leap years is read together with Parashah Bechukotai, contains a prohibition that is highly relevant in today's increasingly polarized and contentious world: "When you make a sale to your fellow Israelite or make a purchase from the hand of your fellow Israelite you shall not wrong one another." (25:14) "And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Israelite and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord, your God." (25:17) The Hebrew root נגה forms words that mean to defraud, to swindle, to deceive, with connotations of exploiting, oppressing, distressing. The same root is used in Parashah Mishpatim: "And you shall not mistreat a stranger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Exodus 22:20) "If you oppress him, [beware], for if he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry." (Exodus 22:22) Repetition always denotes emphasis and/or a further aspect of the theme. In our parashah, these verses are about fair trade. How appropriate that in the *Daf Yomi* program (a daily page of Talmud) we are in the thickets of Tractate Bava Metzia, the second of the three tractates in the order of *Nezikin* (Damages), a tractate about commerce, property, and usury. Bava Metzia 58b discusses both commercial and verbal exploitation: "Just as there is a prohibition against exploitation [*ona'a*] in buying and selling, so is there *ona'a* in statements. One may not say to a seller, 'For how much are you selling this item?' if he does not wish to purchase it. ... If one is a penitent, another may not say to him, 'remember your earlier deeds.' If one is the child of converts, another may not say to him, 'Remember the deeds of your ancestors,' as it is stated, 'And a convert shall you neither mistreat nor shall you oppress him.' ... If one is a convert and came to study Torah, one may not say to him, 'Does the mouth that ate unslaughtered carcasses and animals that had wounds that would have caused them to die within twelve months [*tereif*], and repugnant creatures, and creeping animals, comes to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty?' If torments are afflicting a person, or illnesses are afflicting him, or if he is burying his children, one may not speak to him in the manner that the friends of Job spoke to him [Job 4:6-7]. If donkey drivers are asking to buy grain from someone who has none, he may not say to them, 'Go to so-and-so, as he sells grain,' if he knows about him that he never sold grain. ... One may not even cast his eyes on the merchandise at a time when he does not have money to purchase it." In other words, verbal exploitation is every bit as detrimental as monetary exploitation. Both prey upon the weakness of others. Verbal exploitation is a form of *lashon hara* (gossip, slander), so severe a misdeed that along with murder and treason, *lashon hara* is one of the three sins that cannot be rectified through repentance. Bava Metzia 58b goes on to say, "Anyone who humiliates another in public, it is as though he were spilling blood. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said to him, 'You have spoken well, as we see that after the humiliated person blushes, the red leaves his face and pallor comes, which is tantamount to spilling his blood.'" There is simply no truth in that old adage, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me." Likely based on Jesus' admonition in the Sermon on the Mount to "turn the other cheek" in the face of attack (Matthew 5:38-42, which has also given rise to tragic misunderstanding of the *lex talionis* – eye for eye, tooth for tooth), it was conceived as a defense against name-calling and verbal bullying. But we know that this well-meaning advice usually leads to severe, often irreparable psychological harm. And now, in the digital age, *lashon hara* in all its toxic permutations is a growing threat. Basilio's aria *La calunnia* in "The Barber of Seville," about his plans to discredit Almaviva through vicious gossip, is a timely commentary on the destructive power of words, which once said, can never be unsaid, and spread incrementally, leaving untold damage in their wake. Now, the digital world has magnified this danger immeasurably. Scammers are increasingly able to deceive the gullible, luring them with dubious offers and invading their devices with a locust plague of malware. Bullies have been around since the time of Cain and Abel, but internet bullying has opened a new, lethal dimension, driving some victims, especially the young, to suicide. The internet was supposed to unite us, but instead, it has driven us as far apart as we were before the advent of modern means of communication. A dizzying array of news and commentary sites offers something for everyone. From the safety of their own little bubbles, members of affinity groups peer out at the world with a mixture of distrust and loathing, just like their ancestors used to do. Impervious to outside information, they embrace a pernicious form of orthodoxy that deems anything that does not conform to the tenets of their group wrong, fake, and ultimately evil. Conspiracy theories, some of which reawaken ancient, often antisemitic, tropes, are giving rise to forms of violence we had hoped the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had eradicated. Time and again history teaches us the dangers of this willfully ignorant herd mentality, but we humans are pathetically slow learners. And we are also lazy. With an egregious lack of discernment, people enthusiastically champion causes about which they have not made the slightest effort to inform themselves. It is far easier to howl with the crowd and violently castigate those who dare to disagree. Yes, that repeated admonition do not oppress is more relevant than ever. Words, as well as sticks and stones, most certainly can break us. May we always be mindful of our words and our actions, in person and in the huge, wild digital world.

Shabbat shalom!