

# On Revenge & Bearing a Grudge

Acharei Mot Kedoshim

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The first part of one of the Torah's most quoted verse is often ignored. Leviticus 19:18 famously states:

וַיִּקְרָא פֶּרֶשֶׁת קְדוּשִׁים פֶּרֶק יט  
(יח) לֹא תִקֵּם וְלֹא תִטּוֹר אֶת בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ וְאֶהְבֶּתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק:

“You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the members of your people; you shall love your fellow as yourself – I am the Lord.”

In the Mishneh Torah, the Rambam distinguishes between the two prohibitions – not to take revenge and not to bear a grudge – through concrete examples (based on the Sifra).

In regard to taking revenge, the Rambam writes:

“A person who takes revenge against a colleague transgresses a Torah prohibition, as [Leviticus 19:18] states: ‘Do not take revenge.’ [...]”

What is meant by taking revenge? A person's colleague asks him, ‘Lend me your hatchet.’ He responds, ‘I refuse to lend it to you.’ On the following day, the person [who refused] needs to borrow a hatchet from his colleague. He asks him: ‘Lend me your hatchet.’ The latter responds, ‘Just as you did not lend it to me, I will not lend it to you.’ This is considered as taking revenge. Instead, when he comes to ask him for it, he should give it to him with a full heart, without repaying him for what he did” (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Deot, 7:7).

Building upon this example, the Rambam defines the prohibition to bear a grudge in the following way:

“What is meant by bearing a grudge? Reuven asked Shimon, ‘Rent this house to me,’ or ‘lend this ox to me,’ and Shimon was not willing [to do so]. A few days later, Shimon came to borrow or rent something from him. Reuven told him, ‘Here, it is. I am lending it to you. I am not like you, nor am I paying you back for what you did’” (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Deot, 7:8).

It is critical to note that the elucidation of both of these mitzvot is included in *Hilkhot Deot*, a section in the Mishneh Torah that focuses on the need to remedy “the morally ill” and to seek “healing” and “wisdom” concerning one’s bad traits (see Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Deot, 1:1). This indicates that for the Rambam these mitzvot are primarily internal or psychological.

Thus, while the Rambam gives a practical explanation for the prohibition to bear a grudge noting that, “As long as he brings the matter to mind and remembers it, there is the possibility that he will seek revenge” (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Deot, 7:8), his explanation for the need to refrain from seeking revenge is ultimately spiritual and psychological. Accordingly, the Rambam explains that the need for revenge must be quelled by cultivating an understanding that regards “all these things as vanity and emptiness.”

After more than a year of experiencing a global pandemic, the Rambam’s insight is one we should take to heart. This year forced us to understand that many things in life, which perhaps we once deemed as essential, turned out to be secondary matters of “vanity and emptiness.” Seen through this lens, the pandemic might have helped us loosen our hearts and released us from any grudges. Hopefully, such a release might have led us towards a measure of reconciliation in challenging relationships, and family or social dynamics.

The Rambam’s important insight does not address head on the concluding and more famous part of this verse. The Jerusalem Talmud (Nedarim 9:4) however offers a remarkable allegory:

“This is likened to a person chopping meat who accidentally cuts one of his hands with his other one. Should that person then seek revenge for the cut arm by cutting his other arm as well?”

In his commentary, the “*Korban Haedah*” notes, “We are one body. It is only logical that we refrain from seeking revenge from one another. For one who harms another [as an act of revenge] it is as though he is avenging his own body.”

This too is certainly an important lesson that can be drawn from our experience of this global pandemic. Our society, and indeed our entire world, is deeply interconnected. We are “one body.” If only we could hold on to this insight by continuing to see the other as ourselves, we would be rid of feelings (and actions) that perpetually weigh us down.