Our parashah contains a rather vague and general prohibition against mistreating other people: “Do not wrong one another, but fear your God, for I the Lord am your God” (Leviticus 25:17). This verse appears immediately after the laws governing the jubilee year, which takes place every fifty years in the land of Israel. The Torah teaches that anyone who sells land must adjust the price of the land based on the number of years that remain in the jubilee cycle, before the fiftieth year comes and the land is restored to its original owners. The Talmud, in considering the injunction not to wrong one another as it appears in this context, offers insight into the various ways we hurt and harm one another, and how we might be more honest and honorable instead.

At first the Talmud assumes that the Torah’s injunction not to wrong one another relates to financial exploitation. After all, we have just read about the appropriate way to price land during the jubilee cycle. But as the rabbis note, the Torah stated just three verses earlier, “When you sell property to your neighbor, or buy from your neighbor, you shall not wrong one another” (25:14). Surely the Torah would not repeat the same injunction twice, and thus our verse—verse 17—must refer to some other kind of mistreatment. The rabbis explain that our verse refers to verbal wrongdoing, because “just as there is exploitation in buying and selling, so too is there exploitation in statements” (M. Bava Metzia 4:10). We can cheat and defraud another person financially, but we can also do so verbally. The Mishnah offers two examples of verbal mistreatment, and in the long Talmudic passage that follows (Bava Metzia 58b-59b), the rabbis offer several examples and illustrations of each kind of behavior and its theological ramifications.

The first kind of verbal mistreatment mentioned in the Mishnah is deception. The rabbis teach that a person may not enter a store with no intention of buying anything and nonetheless say to the store owner, “How much does this cost?” To ask such a question raises the seller’s hope of making a sale. Moreover, as the Meiri explains, if anyone else were in the store at the time, he or she might assume that the item is not worth its price, and thus the merchandise would become devalued in the eyes of potential customers. Rabbi Yehuda, in commenting on this Mishnah, notes that it is not even appropriate to “window shop” when a person has no money to make a purchase, because it is not fair to the seller who is displaying his wares in the hope of making a profit. Finally, the Talmud offers an additional example of deception, explaining that if donkey drivers ask a person if they might purchase his grain and he has none, he may not refer the donkey drivers to someone else if he knows that other person does not have grain for sale. It’s always nice to refer someone elsewhere when we turn them down, but it must be a legitimate referral.

The Talmud notes that all these kinds of deception can take place without anyone else ever knowing that we are hurting another person willfully. After all, any outside observer might think that perhaps we really were considering buying that teddy bear in the store window.
And perhaps we really thought our fellow grain seller (or babysitter or lawyer or substitute teacher) would be able to help out in our stead. Only we know the truth, which is why this form of deception is so tempting, and so treacherous. As the Talmud puts it, “the matter is given over to the heart,” since only we know the true intentions of our hearts. The Talmud explains that it is for this reason that our verse about verbal mistreatment reads, “Do not wrong one another, but fear your God, for I the Lord am your God.” God knows the true intentions of our hearts, and thus in matters that are “given over to the heart,” only the fear of God will ensure that we act appropriately.

The second kind of verbal mistreatment mentioned in the Mishnah is shaming. The rabbis teach that if a person is a Ba’al Teshuva—a penitent—it is forbidden to remind him of his past behavior, and if he is the child of converts, it is forbidden to remind him of his ancestors’ behavior. The Talmud adds that if a convert comes to learn Torah, it is forbidden to make him feel inadequate by referring to his past: “What, you want to learn Torah? Does the mouth that ate non-kosher meat and repugnant creepy-crawly animals wish to study Torah that was stated from the mouth of the Almighty?” When we shame a person in such a way, we prevent them from being able to reinvent themselves through the act of repentance.

The rabbis illustrate this injunction by means of a story about King David, a highly flawed leader who nonetheless—at least in the rabbinic imagination—repents. The rabbis imagine King David studying in the Beit Midrash with the rabbis and learning the laws of leprous sores and corpse impurity when suddenly, in a total non sequitur, the rabbis turn to David and ask, “If one engages in intercourse with a married woman, which form of the death penalty does he get?” In this imagined scenario, the rabbis are of course shaming David for sleeping with Batsheva, the wife of Uriah. But fortunately David has a witty comeback prepared: “One who engages in intercourse with a married woman is executed by strangulation, but he still has a share in the World to Come. But one who shames another person in public has no share in the World to Come.” As David reminds the rabbis, their act of verbal shaming is even more heinous than the sin he committed with Batsheva.

The rabbis add that shaming another person may also have nothing to do with that person’s past, but rather with the person’s present situation. They explain that if a person is struck by terrible misfortune—if he is terribly ill, or forced to bury his children—then one may not speak to him in the way that Job’s friends spoke to Job, telling him that he is being punished for his sins. The appropriate response to another person’s distress is not to try to play God and judge that person, but rather to sit with them in their sorrow and offer the comfort that comes from genuine empathy and concern. Shaming is so egregious, say the rabbis, that it is tantamount to murder: “Anyone who shames another person in public – it is as if he has spilled that person’s blood” (Bava Metzia 58b). When we shame someone else, we cause all the blood to drain from their faces – as if we have spilled their blood.

Just as only God can know whether we willfully deceive another person, only God is receptive at all times to the tears of the humiliated. The rabbis explain, amidst their discussion of shaming, that “even though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are never locked” (Bava Metzia 59a). It is as if tears have the power to grease the hinges of the heavenly gates, allowing them to swing open. God knows the true intentions of our hearts, and God is intimately familiar with the tears of the distressed. While we may be able to deceive ourselves, there is no deceiving God.
For the Land is Mine  
Vered Hollander-Goldfarb

This year (5782) is a Shmitah year.

**Text: Vayikra 25:1-23**

1And the Lord spoke to Moshe on Mount Sinai, saying, 2“Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a Shabbat to the Lord. 3Six years you shall sow your field, … 4but in the seventh year there shall be a Shabbat of solemn rest for the land, a Shabbat to the Lord. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard… 6And the shabbat produce of the land shall be food for you: …and for the stranger who dwells with you, 7for your livestock and the beasts that are in your land…

8And you shall count seven Shabbats of years for yourself, seven times seven years… 9Then you shall cause the trumpet of the Jubilee to sound…

13In this year of Jubilee, each of you shall return to his possession…

23The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me.

* Verses 1-7 detail the mitzvah of Shmitah but the Torah gives the year a different name. What is it called? What idea does the name convey regarding this year?

* Along with the Shmitah and Jubilee years comes a general prohibition against the permanent sale of land (it can be leased.) Why? How is land ownership viewed? How does the term “Shabbat” help us understand this ownership?

**Commentary: Rashi Vayikra 25:2**

*A Shabbat to the LORD –* For the sake of the LORD, as it is said in the Shabbat of Creation.

- What should be the purpose of keeping the year of Shmitah?
- What does the comparison with Shabbat of Creation (which is the basis of our weekly Shabbat) do for our understanding of the idea underlying the observance of Shmitah?

**Commentary: R. Samson Raphael Hirsch Shemot 23:10**

*By observing the mitzvah of Shmitah an entire nation declares to the world that its land belongs to the LORD and that He is the one and only Master of the land. In the seventh year, the nation avoids fulfilling its claim to the land, and humbly returns its land to the Master of the World. By doing so, the people in the nation recognize that they are sojourners in their land and are dwelling in it only by the kindness of the true Owner. Then the arrogance that brings people who feel confident on their land to become cruel and hard-hearted in their behavior towards those who lack land will give way to love and kindness towards the stranger and the poor. The animals of the field, as creatures created by the LORD, are considered to have rights in the land of the LORD, on which everyone must dwell together.**

- Based on R.S.R. Hirsch’s understanding of Shmitah, what dangers does the observance of this mitzvah come to address?
- How does this idea regarding Shabbat as an equalizing and humbling factor manifest itself in our weekly Shabbat?
As beautifully expressed in the musical, Hamilton, “there are moments that the words don’t reach / there is suffering too terrible to name.” Jeremiah tends to find himself in such moments. He is our prophet through the destruction of Judah, Jerusalem, and the First Temple. Jeremiah’s calling is to let us know that the end of our homeland is coming. He did not want the job to begin with and he finds himself in all sorts of terrible situations as a result of doing his job well - he suffers death threats, imprisonment, and exile to Egypt, among other things. In these moments, these moments beyond comprehesion, Jeremiah’s speech fails him as well. There are moments that the words don’t reach.

Jeremiah is aware that sometimes there is nothing to say. When God first speaks to him, telling him that he has been chosen as a prophet, Jeremiah replies, “Ahhhhh! My Lord, God! Look, I don’t know speaking.” And although Jeremiah is, according to Jewish tradition, the writer of Lamentations, the one who turns the greatest suffering of our people into a series of acrostic poems addressed to God, Jeremiah retains always the ability to lose coherence, to abandon words when nothing can be said to improve a situation.

In these moments, we find interjections such as “ahhh,” “hoy,” and “oi.” As the great Biblical Hebrew grammian Wilhelm Gesenius defines them, interjections are “vocal gestures.” Speech, the tool of our intellect, is demoted to a tool of the body. We make sound instead of sense.

But the sounds ripped from our body carry great meaning. There are times for “ahhh” and times for “oi.” In Biblical Hebrew, we tend towards “ahhh” as an expression of sorrow, regret and fear. “Oi” usually covers grief, despair, and anguish. It means something when we progress from an “ahhh” to an “oi.” But most important, these noises are made for the person expressing them. They are not a form of outward expression; they do not serve as communication. Rather, they allow the speaker a moment of pure existence, of feeling, of living, before the speaker has to face the world once more.

In our haftarah, Jeremiah is commanded to purchase the field of his kinsman even as all the fields are seized by the invading Babylonian army. God intends this purchase as a sign that there will be a time when life will go back to normal, when we will return to exile and live again in our land. Jeremiah does as he is commanded. But he takes a moment. Before he prays to God, praising God’s power and trying to understand this thing God has commanded him to do, Jeremiah opens his mouth to noise. He begins with an “ahhh.” Because sometimes, allowing ourselves a primal scream, a moment of return to the world pre-speech and pre-action, is all that it takes to get us through to the moments where we can once again use speech to create the world we want to live in.