

Oppression

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Tucked in amongst the legislation is the command “Al Tonoo” 25.14. The Talmud derives from this the laws of Ona’ah. Literally not to oppress people. And the Talmud divided this Torah principle into two separate issues. Ona’ah meant taking advantage of people in business. Where you knew that they needed something, you had to avoid taking advantage either by overcharging, misleading or holding up the deal out of spite. In other words, it referred to what we call ethical business practices, one of the most ignored of all Biblical laws even amongst the supposedly committed.

The second use of Ona’ah is “Ona’at Devarim,” not to use words, language, to oppress someone. This includes not just lying, bullying and raking up the past but it also means using language aggressively and brutally, the way so many politicians do nowadays. Speaking gently, softly with forethought and consideration is one of the core Biblical ideals. Brutality, physical, mental or verbal is a sign that such a person is not a good human being.