

Everyday Ethics: The Ethics of Revenge Rabbi Adina Lewittes

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I am the chief financial officer for a financial-services company, and I found our bookkeeper using the corporate charge card for her personal use. The misappropriation was approximately \$47,000 over a six-month period. She forged a partner's signature to acquire a card in her name. We fired her, and she paid back the funds in exchange for our not pressing charges. But I cannot get closure if she is not punished for this egregious betrayal. I recommended that we call her husband, as I think family humiliation would be punishment enough. Would this be ethical? NAME WITHHELD, NEW YORK

BIG JEWISH IDEAS

Mishle 10:12

שְׂנֵאָה תְּעוֹרֵר מִדְּנִים וְעַל כָּל פְּשָׁעִים תִּכְסֶּה אֲהָבָה.

Hatred stirs up strifes; But love covers all transgressions.

Pirkei Avot 4:1

בן זומא אומר: איזהו חכם? הלומד מכל אדם, שנאמר: (תהלים קיט צט): "מכל מלמדי השכלתי כי עדותיך שיחה לי". איזהו גבור? הכובש את יצרו, שנאמר (משלי טז לב): "טוב ארך אפים מגבור ומשל ברוחו מלכד עיר

Ben Zoma says: Who is the wise one? One who learns from all people, as it says, "I have acquired understanding from all my teachers" (Psalms 119:99). Who is the hero? One who conquers their desire, as it says, "slowness to anger is better than a mighty person and the ruler of their spirit than the conqueror of a city..." (Proverbs 16:32).

Devarim 32:35

לִי נִקְמָה וְשִׁלְמִים לְעֵת תִּמְוֹט רַגְלָם כִּי קָרוּב יוֹם אִיְדָם וְחָשׂ עֲתִדְתָּ לָמוֹ:

Vengeance and recompense belongs to Me, at the time that their foot falters. Yea, their day of disaster is near, and destiny rushes upon them.

JEWISH SOURCES:

1. Vayikra 19:17-18

לֹא־תִשְׂנֵא אֶת־אֲחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ הוֹכֵחַ תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חֲטָא: לֹא־תִקְדָּם וְלֹא־תִטַּר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמְּךָ וְאַהֲבֵת לְרֵעֶךָ כְּמוֹךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsman but incur no guilt because of them. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your country-folk. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD.

2. Rashi on Vayikra 19:18

לֹא תִקְדָּם YOU SHALT NOT AVENGE — If a person says to their neighbor “Lend me your sickle”, and the neighbor replies, “No!”, and the next day the same neighbor says, “Lend me your hatchet”, and the first person retorts, “I am not going to lend it to you, just as you refused to lend me your sickle” — this is avenging. And what is “bearing a grudge”? If a person says to their neighbor, “Lend me your hatchet”, and they reply “No!” and the next day the same neighbor says “Lend me your sickle”, and the first person replies: “Here it is; I am not like you, because you would not lend me” — this is called “bearing a grudge נטירה because they retain (נוטר) enmity in their heart although they do not actually avenge themselves. (from Yoma 23a)

2. Rashbam on Leviticus 19:18

וְלֹא תִטַּר: not even in your heart, but train yourself to resist your natural impulse to get even.

3. Talmud Bavli, Yoma 23a

Those who are insulted but do not insult others, who hear themselves being shamed but do not respond, who act out of love for God, and who remain happy in their suffering, about them the verse states: “They that love God are as the sun when it goes forth in its might” (Judges 5:31)

4. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Teshuvah 2:10; Hilkhoh De’ot, 7:7

It is forbidden for a person to be cruel and not make amends; instead, a person should get appeased easily and get angry slowly. And at the moment when the sinner asks for forgiveness – forgive with a whole heart and a desirous soul. And even if one pained them and sinned against them many times, they should not take

revenge or hold a grudge -- that is the way of the Children of Israel and their correct hearts.

One who takes vengeance of their fellow violates the negative commandment of, "You shall not take vengeance" (Lev. 19:18); and, even though they are not flogged for the violation, it is an extremely evil tendency. It becomes a person to be indulgent in their ethical conduct in all temporal matters, for, to those who can reason, all worldly matters are vanity and absurdity, unworthy to call forth vengeance on their account...

When one who has wronged you comes to ask a favor, you should respond wholeheartedly, and not deal with them as you were dealt with. And so in all like matters. Even David expressed it in his good ethical ideas: "Have I repaid those who have done evil to me? Behold I have rescued those who hated me without cause" (**Ps. 7.5**).

5. Kitzur Shulhan Arukh 29

Anger is also a very evil trait, and it should be avoided it at all costs. You should train yourself not to become angry even if you have good reason to be angry. And when it is necessary to impress your authority on your children and your household, you may pretend to be angry in order to admonish them, while retaining your composure inwardly. [The Talmud relates] "Eliyahu said to Rabbi Yehudah, the brother of Rav Salla, the Pious: "Do not become angry, and you will not sin," [do not become angry, because anger will induce you to sin]...(Berakhot 29b). Our Rabbis of blessed memory said furthermore, "If anyone becomes angry it is considered as though they worship idols... The life of an angry person is no life. Therefore, [our Sages] ordained that a person should distance themselves from anger to the point that they can conduct themselves with utter disregard even for things that evoke [justifiable] anger. This is the proper path [to follow] and it is the way of the righteous, [as stated in the Talmud] "They suffer insults but do not insult, they listen to abuse heaped on them but do not answer, they are motivated by love in whatever they do, and they rejoice [even when] suffering pain." Concerning them, the Biblical verse says: "But those who love God are as the sun when it comes out in its might." (Judges 5:31)...

It is incumbent upon every Jew to love every fellow Jew as they love themselves, as it is said: "Love your neighbor as [you love] yourself." Therefore, you should relate [their] virtues and treat their property with [the same] concern as you have for your own property, or for your own honor. The person who glorifies themselves in their neighbor's shame, even though their neighbor is not present and the humiliation has not reached them, and even if they have not actually insulted them, but only compared their own good deeds and their own wisdom with the good deeds or wisdom of their neighbor, so that from their statement they will be rated an

honorable person and their neighbor as a despicable person, [this person] has no share in the World to Come unless they repent with perfect repentance...

Anyone who hates a fellow-Jew in their heart transgresses a negative commandment, as it is said: "Do not hate your fellow in your heart." If anyone has sinned against you, you should not hate them inwardly and keep quiet about it, as it is written concerning the wicked, "And Avshalom did not speak to Amnon either bad or good because Avshalom hated Amnon," but it is your duty to let them know [what you think of them] and to say to them, "Why have you done this to me, why have you sinned against me in this matter?", for it is said: "You must admonish your neighbor." If the offender regrets it and asks you to forgive them, you should forgive them and not be harsh, for it is said: "And Avraham prayed to God."...

A person is forbidden to pray for judgment from Heaven against their fellow who treated them wrongly. This applies only if their grievance can be settled in an earthly court. Anyone who prays for Divine punishment against their fellow will themselves be punished first. There are some authorities who hold that even if the case cannot be settled in an earthly court, they are not permitted to pray for Divine judgment against their fellow, unless they first let them know they intend to do so...

If someone sinned against you and you do not want to admonish them, or even mention it to them at all, and you forgive them wholeheartedly, and you do not hate them and do not admonish them, this is the practice of the pious, for the Torah's only concern is to banish hatred...

6. Rabbi Shmuel Haim Luzzatto on Pirkei Avot 5:10

All other transgressions against one's fellow man are objectively immoral, except for revenge, which seems like justice. Therefore, 'love your fellow as yourself.' Just like you don't want others to take revenge on you, so you should not take revenge on your fellow, even though you are in the right to take revenge. And so too in all other ways you should love your fellow as you love yourself.