

Revenge: Sweeter than Honey

לֹא־תִקֶּם וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר

One of the classic Jewish texts of character-development, “The Path of the Just” (Chp. 12), describes revenge as ‘sweeter than honey’. Moreover, the Rambam, says that when a person is spurred to take revenge on some infraction which was committed against him, his inner core finds no respite until he can retaliate in at least some capacity. Therefore, it certainly takes great self-restraint to overcome ones natural inclination towards revenge. One of the greatest tools we have at our disposal to be able to withstand this challenge is to learn the *halachos*, the laws, of this Torah-prohibition, in depth. Aside from attaining clarity as to the specific parameters of this mitzvah, the actual learning-process itself accustoms one to the mitzvah; personalizing the subject, and bringing it ‘close to home’. In this sessions, we’ll explore the following issues regarding revenge and bearing a grudge:

- What are some of the underlying reasons why taking revenge and bearing a grudge are prohibited?
- Under what circumstances do these prohibitions apply exactly?
- Are there exceptional scenario’s in which revenge and bearing a grudge are allowed?
- Do these prohibitions depend on ones intentions?
- What are tools one can use to withstand the temptation to take revenge and bear a grudge?

1 – PRIMARY SOURCES: VERSE & TALMUD

Source 1. Vayikra 19:18

Don't take revenge and don't bear a grudge, and you shall love your friend as yourself, I am G-d	לֹא-תִקֶּחַם וְלֹא-תִטֹּר אֶת-בְּנֵי עַמּוֹךְ וְאֶהְבֵּתָ לְרֵעֶךָ כַּמּוֹךְ אֲנִי יְהוָה
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Pretty straight forward: don't take revenge, and don't bear a grudge. Everyone knows that ☺

But what does this mean exactly?

The Talmud provides us with a clear example, as well as some other intriguing aspects to this discussion.

(NOTE: THIS IS A CHALLENGING GEMARA. TAKE YOUR TIME TO THINK IT THROUGH THOROUGHLY, AND GET THE GIVE-&-TAKE CLEAR. A NUMBER OF IMPORTANT PRINCIPLES WILL EMERGE DIRECTLY)

Source 2. Yuma 22b-23a

<p>R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Shimon the son of Yehotzedek: any Torah-scholar who does not take revenge and bear a grudge like a snake is not a Torah scholar.</p> <p>[Question] But it says in the verse “don't take revenge and don't bear a grudge”!?</p> <p>[Answer] That's referring to monetary matters, as in the following Baraisa: What's an example of revenge, and what's an example of a grudge? Revenge is when one says to another “Please lend me your axe?” He responds “No.” The next day, the 2nd person asks the 1st “Please lend me your lawn-mower?” He responds “I'm not lending it to you, just as you didn't lend to me.” This is revenge. What's a grudge? One says to another “Please lend me your lawn-mower?” He responds “No.” The next day, the 2nd asks the 1st “Please lend me your jacket?” He responds “Here ya go...I'm not like you, who doesn't lend things!” This is bearing a grudge.</p> <p>[Question] And by personal insult no?! Behold, it's taught in a Baraisa “The ones who are insulted, but do not insult; who hear their disgrace, but do not respond; who act with love and rejoice in suffering, about all these the verse says ‘His beloved ones (to G-d) are like the rising sun at in its full strength’”?</p>	<p>אמר ר' יוחנן משום ר' שמעון בן יהוּצדק כל תלמיד חכם שאינו נוקם ונוטר כנחש אינו תלמיד חכם.</p> <p>והכתיב לא תקום ולא תטור</p> <p>ההוא בממון הוא דכתיב דתניא איזו היא נקימה ואיזו היא ונטירה נקימה אמר לו השאילני מגלך אמר לא לאו למחר אמר לא הוא השאילני קרדומך אמר לו איני משאילך כדרך שלא השאלתני זו היא נקימה. ואיזו היא נטירה א"ל השאילני קרדומך אמר ליה לא למחר א"ל השאילני חלוקך אמר לו הילך איני כמותך שלא השאלתני זו היא נטירה.</p> <p>וצערא דגופא לא והא תניא הנעלבים ואינם עולבין שומעין חרפתן ואינם משיבין עושין באהבה ושמחין ביסורין עליהן הכתוב אומר ואוהביו כצאת השמש בגבורתו</p>
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<p>[Answer] He maintains it in his heart (<i>i.e. correct: he does not immediately respond in any way, but, rather, remembers the iniquity in his heart in order to 'pay back' accordingly at a later time. Maharsha</i>)</p>	<p>לעולם דנקיט ליה בליביה</p>
<p>[Question] But wait, Rava taught: Anyone who overcomes his natural inclinations, they (in heaven) will 'overcome' his mistakes.</p>	<p>והאמר רבא כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו</p>
<p>[Answer] That's referring to after he's been appeased (<i>i.e. apologized to</i>).</p>	<p>דמפיסו ליה ומפיס</p>

A number of points seem to emerge from this Gemara:

1. A clear example of taking revenge & bearing a grudge (Henceforth referred to as "R&G" – Revenge & Grudge)
2. The prohibition of R&G only exists in response to an affront in monetary matters, as opposed to an affront to one's self (*i.e. emotional, physical, etc.*)
3. There's a special exemption for a Torah Scholar
4. There's an element of sometimes going 'beyond the letter of the law'

2 – QUESTIONS

Let's focus on 2 glaring questions which arise from this Gemara:

Question #1 – What is the difference between an affront in monetary matters and an affront to one's self?
(*Why does the prohibition of R&G only apply to the prior, and not the latter?*)

Question #2 – Why is there an exemption for a Torah Scholar?
(*Why should he not be expected to go beyond the letter of the law, like anybody else?*)

What do you think??

First things first, we'll tackle Q₁ by examining the commentary of one of the great medieval sages, the Sefer HaChunuch

3 – ACKNOWLEDGING THE DIFFICULTY

A - The Surprising Opinion of the Chinuch

Source 3. Sefer HaChinuch #241

<p>“Don’t take revenge”, that is to say, that we’re prohibited from taking revenge. The concept is the following: if someone mistreats or bothers his friend <i>in any way whatsoever</i>, the customary response by most people in the world is to not rest until he’s found some way to ‘pay back’ accordingly, or to cause him to suffer as he has suffered. Regarding this (response) that Almighty has commanded us “Don’t take revenge”</p>	<p>שלא לנקום, כלומר שנמנעו מלקחת נקמה מישראל. והענין הוא כגון ישראל שהרע או ציער לחבירו באחד מכל הדברים, ונוהג רוב בני אדם שבעולם הוא שלא יסורו מלחפש אחרי מי שהרע להן עד שיגמלוהו כמעשיו הרע או יכאיבוהו כמו שהכאיבם. ומזה הענין מנענו השם ברוך הוא</p>
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If we look closely at the words of the Chinuch, he seems to include in the prohibition of R&G responding to *any* affront from another person, not differentiating between ones possessions as opposed to one’s self. This, of course, is difficult to reconcile with the Gemara we learned earlier, which seemed to clearly make this distinction! [See footnote below for a resolution of this problem]¹

If that wasn’t surprising enough, the following comments by the Chinuch are truly earth-shattering...but will provide us with a foundational principle in R&G, and human nature in general.

B – “I Am Not a Rock!”

Source 4. Sefer HaChinuch #338

<p>It seems to me that it’s inconceivable that if another comes and ‘starts up’, aggravating his fellow with negative words, that the listener should not respond. For it is impossible for a person to be a rock, with nothing that turns it over. Moreover, his silence would be somewhat of an admission to the disgracing words. In truth, the Torah never commanded a person to be a rock – silent to those who curse him just as those who bless him. Rather, we’re obligated to distance ourselves from bad character traits, and not to start fights with others or to disgrace them with our words. If one acts in this fashion, he’ll be saved from all this, for if one does not ‘start up’ with others, others will not disgrace him (except for totally crazy people, but we needn’t pay attention to them!)</p> <p>We can learn this idea, (that one is permitted to retaliate to fools), along the lines of that which the Torah permits killing one who breaks in to another’s house: clearly,</p>	<p>ואולם לפי הדומה, אין במשמע שאם בא ישראל אחד והתחיל והרשיע לצער חבירו בדברים הרעים שלא יענהו השומע, שאי אפשר להיות האדם כאבן שאין לה הופכין, ועוד שיהיה בשתיקתו כמודה על החירופין, ובאמת לא תצוה התורה להיות האדם כאבן שותק למחרפיו כמו למברכיו, אבל תצוה אותנו שנתרחק מן המדה הזאת, ושלא נתחיל להתקוטט ולחרף בני אדם, ובכן ינצל אדם מכל זה, כי מי שאינו בעל קטטה לא יחרפוהו בני אדם, זולתי השוטים הגמורים, ואין לתת לב על השוטים...</p> <p>ויש לנו ללמוד דבר זה, שמותר לנו לענות לכסיל, לפי הדומה, מאשר התירה התורה הבא במחירת להקדים ולהורגו, שאין ספק</p>
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¹ The Chofetz Chaim [ספר ח"ה פתיחה, לאוין ח' וט' בבאר מים חיים] explains that, according to the Chinuch, the gemara’s distinction between an affront to ones monetary possessions and ones self was only an *attempted* answer to the Gemara’s original question. However, since this answer still required further development – namely, the subsequent challenge from “Those who are insulted but don’t insult” – the original answer (between money & self) no longer exists.

<p>one is not expected to suffer potential damage from another, rather, he has every right to defend himself. So too from the defamatory words of another: he can save himself by any means necessary.</p> <p>There is, however, a group of people whose righteousness is so great that they simply do not want to use this leniency – to retaliate to their defamers – lest anger overcomes them, and they may respond with more force than necessary. About them, the Sages said “Those who are insulted, but do not insult...”</p>	<p>שלא נתחייב האדם לסבול הנזקין מיד חבירו, כי יש לו רשות להנצל מידו, וכמו כן מדברי פיהו אשר מלא מרמות ותוך, בכל דבר שהוא יכול להנצל ממנו.</p> <p>ואולם יש כת מבני אדם שעולה חסידותם כל כך שלא ירצו להכניס עצמם בהוראה זו להשיב חורפיהם דבר, פן יגבר עליהם הכעס ויתפשטו בענין יותר מדי, ועליהם אמרו חז"ל "הנעלבים ואינן עולבים..."</p>
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Amazing! The very same Chinuch who prohibits R&G under all circumstances (both monetary & personal), teaches us that there's one major exception: in *the heat of the moment*². Then, **all** prohibitions are off – hit, hiss, curse...you name it!

Why?

Because I am not a rock, with no feelings. I'm a human being!

Although one should strive to not respond at all, even in the heat of the moment (as it says “*Those who are insulted, but do not insult...*”), the Torah recognizes the feebleness of basic human nature, and absolves a person from responsibilities of his actions performed under duress of the ‘heat of the moment’.

[QUALIFICATION: THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT THERE IS AN OPEN EXEMPTION TO ANY RESPONSE, BUT, RATHER, ONLY THAT WHICH IS PROPORTIONATE TO THE PERCEIVED ‘ATTACK.’ IN OTHER WORDS: ONLY ‘TIT FOR TAT’³]

With this principle of the Chinuch in mind, we'll now be able to understand the difference between a monetary and personal attack.

Let's think: under which circumstance is it more difficult to restrain one's natural inclination to R&G, an affront to one's possessions, or an affront to oneself? Clearly the latter.

Therefore, for the very same logic that the Chinuch explains that the prohibition of R&G does not apply in the heat of the moment (i.e. I am not a rock!), the dissenting opinions hold that this reasoning always applies concerning an affront to oneself, even after the ‘heat of the moment’⁴!

Nevertheless, one should strive to overcome his natural tendency, and be amongst those who are “insulted, but do not insult”.

² What's considered the ‘heat of the moment’ may indeed be somewhat subjective to each individual. For one, it may take only a few moments to calm themselves, whereas for another it may take significantly longer, perhaps even days. This is discussed by the poskim.

³ כן הסביר לי מו"ר הגרש"מ שליט"א, ואח"כ מצאתי שכן מבואר בספר לרעך כמוך דף 350 ס"ק פ"ז

⁴ כן הסביר הרה"ג דוד אריאב שליט"א בספרו "לרעך כמוך" חלק לא תקום ולא תטור פ"ד ס"ק פ"א, וכענין זה הסביר לי מו"ר הגרש"מ שליט"א בדרך זכות 'תערומת' שנמצא מחז"ל

4 – PERSONAL VENDETTA

We questioned earlier why there is a unique exemption for a Torah Scholar in the prohibitions of R&G. The following penetrating insights of R' Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the Ramchal, will be enlightening:

Source 5. Messilas Yesharim

Hatred and revenge are very difficult to save oneself from. For, when someone is embarrassed a person feels this very strongly, and it causes him much pain, and the revenge is to him sweeter than honey, since it is his only respite. Therefore, if he does find it in his power to ignore that which his nature tends towards, and overcomes his character traits, and does not feel animosity towards he who aggravated him, and does not take revenge on him when the opportunity to do so presents itself, and he does not bear a grudge, but rather, he removes it all from his heart, as if it never happened – he's indeed a strong and mighty man!! This is easy only to the heavenly angels, who do not have these character traits, but not for the dwellers of this physical world, who are rooted in the dust. Nevertheless, it is the Kings decree, and the verses are explicit: "Don't hate your brother in your heart, don't take revenge, and don't bear a grudge."

The concept of revenge and grudge are well known. Revenge – to abstain from doing a favor to one who did not do a favor for him, or who did bad to him in some way. A grudge – to recall, at the moments he is doing a favor to one who'd done something wrong to him – any semblance of the misdeed which he'd previously committed. Since ones evil-inclination is constantly working, and burning in one's heart, he (the evil-inclination) constantly seeks out to leave over at least some memory of the infraction, if not a great one, then at least a slight memory. He'll say to a person, for example: "If you want to help that person, who did not help you when you needed, at least don't help him with a smile on your face, and if you don't want to harm him in any way, at least don't do a big favor for him, and if you want to do a big favor for him, at least don't do it in front of him, or at least don't be his friend – it's enough that you've forgiven him and resolved not to be his enemy! But if you still want to be his friend, at least don't show as much affection towards him as you had in the past. This, and many other tactics like this, is how the evil inclination attempts allure people's hearts.

השנאה והנקימה קשה מאד להימלט ממנה לב הותל אשר לבני אדם, כי האדם מרגיש מאד בעלבונותיו ומצטער צער גדול, ונקמה לו מתוקה מדבש, כי היא מנוחתה לבדה. על כן לשיהיה בכחו לעזוב מה שטבעו מכריח אותו ויעבור על מדותיו, ולא ישנא מי שהעיר בו השנאה, ולא יקום ממנו בהזדמן לו שיוכל להנקם, ולא יטור לו, אלא את הכל ישכח ויסיר מלבו כאילו לא היה – חזק ואמץ הוא. והוא קל רק למלאכי-שרת שאין ביניהם המדות הללו, לא אל שוכני בתי חומר אשר בעפר יסודם. אמנם גזרת המלך היא, והמקראות גלויים באר היטב, אינם צריכים פרוש "לא תשנא את אחיך בלבבך, לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך".

וענין הנקימה ונטירה ידוע, דהיינו: נקימה, למנע מהטיב למי שלא רצה להטיב לו או שהרע לו כבר. ונטירה, להזכיר בעת שהוא מטיב למי שהרע לו אזה זכרון מן הרעה שעשה לו. ולפי שהיצר הולך ומרתיח את הלב ומבקש תמיד להניח לפחות איזה רושם או איזה זכרון מן הדבר ואם לא יוכל להשאיר זכרון גדול, ישתדל להשאיר זכרון מועט, יאמר דרך משל לאדם, אם תרצה לתן לאיש הזה את אשר לא רצה הוא לתת לך כשנצרכת, לפחות לא תתנהו בסבר פנים יפות, או אם אינך רוצה להרע לו, לפחות לא תטיב לו טובה גדולה ולא תסיעהו סיוע גדול, או אם תרצה גם לסייעו הרבה, לפחות לא תעשהו בפניו, או לא תשוב להתחבר עמו ולהיות לו לריע, אם מחלת לו שלא תראה לו לאויב, די בזה, ואם גם להתחבר עמו תרצה, אך לא תראה לו כל כך חבה גדולה כבראשונה, וכן כל כיוצא בזה ממיני החריצות שביצר מה שהוא משתדל לפתות את לבו בני אדם.

Why does a person feel the strong urge to retaliate or bear animosity? It gives him a sense of inner peace, which he so deeply desires as a result of feeling offended. It's a *personal* vendetta.

It follows, then, that when the purpose for one's retaliation is not personal, but rather, for some other reason, this is simply not called "taking revenge, or bearing a grudge".

For example:

1. Rebuke – If the intention behind one's response is to teach the other person a lesson (for his own benefit), this is not R&G
2. Guard Oneself – If the intention behind one's response is to guard oneself from potential damage (monetary, emotional, physical, business, etc...), this is also not R&G

“Nothing Personal!”

The same principle applies to a Torah Scholar:

A Torah Scholar is someone who represents the Almighty. An affront to him, then, is an affront to no less than G-d Himself.⁵

Therefore, his 'revenge' and 'grudge' is not for his own personal vindication, but, rather, for the sake of the Almighty.

Moreover, not only is he *allowed* to retaliate, but, since he's doing it to stand up the Creators' name, (so to speak) he *must* respond, like a snake! (See Maharsha on Yuma for an explanation of this analogy)

⁵ The Ritvah qualifies that this would only apply in 'heavenly matters' (מילי דשמיא) – for example, he's made fun of in regards to his Torah-knowledge or observance. Similarly, the Rambam qualifies that this also only applies if he was mistreated publically (פרהסיא), which, at its root is really the same idea of the Ritvah – any disgrace to a Torah scholar done publically is by definition מילי דשמיא!

5 – TOOLS FOR BATTLE

Let's get practical. Until now, we've clarified some of the parameters of the prohibition of R&G.

However, given the extremely difficult nature of fulfilling these mitzvohs, what are tools one can use in order to conquer his natural inclination to 'get back'?

The great Jewish sages throughout the generations have offered their wise advice of how to conquer this challenge:

Tool # 1 – “Is this really worth it?”

Source 6. Rambam, Hilchos Deyos 7:7

One who takes revenge on another has transgressed a negative prohibition, as it says in the verse “Don't take revenge.” Even though there's no physical punishment for this, it's a very bad character trait. Rather, its proper for a person to overcome his natural inclination in regards to all matters of this physical world, since, for an intelligent individual, everything in this world is illusory and fleeting, and its simply not worthwhile to take revenge over such trivial things.

הנוקם מחבירו עובר בלא תעשה
שנאמר לא תקום. ואע"פ שאינו לוקה
עליו דעה רעה היא עד מאד. אלא ראוי
לו לאדם להיות מעביר על מדותיו על
כל דברי העולם שהכל אצל המבינים
דברי הבל והבאי ואינן כדי לנקום
עליהם

Our time is short. One has to ask himself: is this really worth it?

Tool # 2 – Get the Message

Source 7. Chinuch #241

The root of this mitzvah is for a person to understand, and recognize in his heart, that everything which happens to him –good or bad – is coming from Hashem. Whether from a stranger, or from his brother, nothing ever happens which is not the direct will of Hashem.

Therefore, when one person pains, annoys, or causes another any sort of frustration, one should realize that his own mistakes have brought this about, and that Hashem has decreed this. He should not consider taking revenge, for the 'offender' is not the source, but, rather he himself is the cause.

משרשי המצוה, שידע האדם ויתן אל לבו
כי כל אשר יקרהו מטוב עד רע, הוא סיבה
שתבוא עליו מאת השם ברוך הוא, ומיד
האדם מיד איש אחיו לא יהיה דבר בלתי
רצון השם ברוך הוא, על כן כשיצערהו או
יכאיבהו אדם ידע בנפשו כי עוונותיו גרמו
והשם יתברך גזר עליו בכך, ולא ישית
מחשבותיו לנקום ממנו כי הוא אינו סיבת
רעתו, כי העוון הוא המסבב

There are 2 critical points for one to realize:

1. There are no coincidences. An affront from another person was designed for me, intentionally, directly from the all-knowing, all-loving, and all-capable Creator of the universe. Even though it may sting, this is for my best.

2. Moreover, this negative experience may very well be the result of my own mistakes⁶. Therefore, the *practical* response to an affront from another person is not to focus on the other person, but, rather, to focus on oneself, and ask “perhaps I’m doing something wrong, and the Almighty is trying to get my attention; what’s He saying?”

Tool # 3 – Love your neighbour!

Source 8. Rabbi Akiva!!!

<p>The Sages have said, “Whatever is hateful to you, do not do to your friend.” In the Sifri, it is stated that Rabbi Akiva said, “This is a fundamental principle in the Torah,” meaning that many commandments are related to this one, in the respect that one who loves his fellow will not steal his belongings, nor be unfaithful with his wife, nor will he defraud or insult him, nor trespass upon his property, nor cause him damage in any way. Thus, the fulfillment of many other commandments is dependent upon the fulfillment of this one. This is well-known to any thinking individual.</p>	<p>ואמרו זכרונם לברכה [שבת ל"א ע"א] דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד. ואמרו בספרי, אמר רבי עקיבא זה כלל גדול בתורה, כלומר שהרבה מצוות שבתורה תלויין בכך, שהאזהב חבירו כנפשו לא יגנוב ממונו ולא ינאף את אשתו ולא יונהו בממון ולא בדברים ולא יסיג גבולו ולא יזיק לו בשום צד. וכן כמה מצוות אחרות תלויות בזה, ידוע הדבר לכל בן דעת:</p>
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Let’s not forgot R’ Akiva’s grand principle from the last session: love your friend as yourself! It’s very hard to feel animosity towards those whom we love.

The Yerushalmi Talmud [??] give a powerful illustration of this: imagine a person who did something wrong with their left hand. Can we envision a scenario in which this misdeed would be so serious that they would actually go and cut off their left hand?! Certainly not! Why? Because it’s part of them!

⁶ Even though the words of the Chinuch are that one should realize this is happening because of his own transgressions, it is inconceivable that his intention is that this is definitely the reason one is suffering the affront of the other: only G-d Himself could possibly know this.

The intention of the Chinuch, rather, is that although there may be many reasons for which one has been subject to another’s misgiving, the practical initial response should be: “perhaps this is my fault.”

וכמו שאחז"ל בברכות ה. "אם רואה אדם יסורין... יפשפש במעשיו וכו'..." . הבנה זו בדברי החנוך אמרתי למו"ר הגרש"מ שליט"א והסכים אתי לגמרי.

EXAMPLES

1. Jeremy hired Peters Painter People (“PPP”) to come paint his new house. They asked for an advanced payment, which Jeremy reluctantly paid. Midway through the job, Peter and his painting people simply stopped coming to work, for, what Jeremy considered, an un-justified reason. Jeremy has now lost a lot of money, and is not happy. Is he allowed to “go get ‘em”? What should he do with that inner furnace which is burning so bright?

2. Rabbi Koch is the beloved Rabbi of the “Small-Town Shul”. In the middle of his Shabbos-morning d’var Torah, one of the new members of the shul, Asher, rudely interrupts, saying “Rabbi: just get to the point – yaddy yaddy yadda, we should all be good people! Got it! Now let’s get movin’ so we can go to the Kiddush!!”
How shall R’ Koch respond to this public embarrassment?

3. As the end of the work day arrives, Jacob is working tirelessly to get all of his paperwork done before tomorrow’s deadline. He asks his co-worker Paul if he’d mind taking a half-hour to help get things done. Paul apologetically responds in the negative, and runs off out of the office. The next day, Jacob, now relieved of the pressures of his big deadline, is planning on heading home a bit early. As he’s packing up, none other than Paul himself says “Hey, Jacob, would you be able to help me out for a bit?”
Is Jacob allowed to refuse?

4. Donald and Ted are both vying for the prestigious position of president of their high-school student council. During one of their public debates, Donald starts hurling personal insults at Ted. How should Ted respond?

5. Pt. 2 of Jeremy and his “PPP”: Some months after his initial ordeal with PPP, Jeremy is contacted by his buddy Mike, who himself is looking for some painters for his own new home. “How was Peter and his Paining People?” Mike asks, “Were you happy with their work? Would you recommend them?”
Jeremy’s just come home from his Torah 2.0 class about R&G, and feels in a bind as how to respond...what should he say??