Sticks and stones...REALLY?

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We know, and perhaps have even on occasion invoked, the adage:

Sticks and stones will break my bones
But **words** will never harm me.

or the variation:

Sticks and stones may break my bones
But **names** will never hurt me.\(^1\)

I have been wondering if saying something like this in response to teasing and verbal abuse reflects a degree of true inner strength that allows the victim to totally ignore the taunting of others, or are these words mere bluster, with the nasty comments and non-physical attacks actually taking a heavy toll. From the title of a number of recent websites and articles, it would appear that the latter is the case, at least these days.

In one of the “Brain Sense” columns of *Psychology Today*,\(^2\) entitled “Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones... **But Words Will Cut Me Deeply**”, Faith Brynie quotes Patricia Evans as stating,

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The entry in William and Mary Morris, *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* (3rd edition, Harper Collins, New York, 1973, p. 551) reads as follows: “sticks and stones will break my bones but names will never hurt me”. This is puzzlement. We went confidently to Bartlett’s *Quotations*, sure we would find there the source of this old saying. No luck. Then on to Stevens’ compendious *Home Book of Quotations*, Again, no trace of the saying. And so on and one, until we realized with dismay that this expression which both of us have known since earliest childhood seemed to have escaped all the people who put together reference books.

But not quite all. The *Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* had found room for it but records it as first appearing in a book published in 1894 called *Folk Phrases*. The fact that it was in such a collection, of course, indicates that it is much older and that nobody knows who said it first. The listing reads: “**Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me**—said by one youngster to another calling names.”
“Words can be as damaging to the mind as physical blows are to the body. The scars from verbal assaults can last for years.”

On the Williamson Elementary (!) School website, under the heading “Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones But Words Can Kill Me”, apparently responding to the spate of suicides that have resulted of late from extreme bullying behavior, a reworking and expansion of the folk saying written in 1994 by Brendan Byrne, appears:

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words can also hurt me.
Sticks and stones break only skin,
While words are ghosts that haunt me.

Slant and curved the words-swords fall
To pierce and stick inside me,
bats and bricks may ache through bones,
But words can mortify me.

Pain from words has left its scar
On mind and heart that's tender.
Cuts and bruises now have healed,
It’s words that I remember.

Not only does verbal abuse occur in person, but the internet seems to have brought out much more extreme and wide-spread behaviors of this nature, particularly with respect to

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3 Ben Ish Chai, in Ben Yehoyada on Bava Metzia Chapt. 4, explains that when one humiliates another, the experience continually repeats itself in the victim’s mind. Here is Eliezer Brody’s (Nafshi Tidom: A Tora Guide to Coping with Insults, Ashdod, 5762, pp. 209-10) summation of the commentator’s insight: “Every time the person who was hurt recalls the incident, he is embarrassed and upset on his own, and similarly every time he sees the perpetrator(s), he once again experiences the humiliation. Consequently, the one who has embarrassed another, ‘spills the blood of the victim’ (Bava Metzia 58b compares causing humiliation with murder, at least figuratively; on a physiological level, when the victim blushes or is face turns white, there has been a literal “spilling of blood”) over and over.”

The constant reminders of one’s being embarrassed by others is made even more acute by the internet not only whenever someone logs on, but by virtue of the relatively indelible nature of what is posted and written on various types of social media.

4 http://www.williamsoncentral.org/elementary.cfm?subpage=663926

5 See for example the 1/7/13 article by Carl ToersBijns, “Bullying and Suicides—the Relationship” at http://www.corrections.com/articles/32297
adolescents. From a website devoted to Cyberbullying,⁶ here are three deeply disturbing statistics:

a) ⁹⁵% of social media using teens who have witnessed cruel behavior on social networking sites say they have seen others ignoring the mean behavior; ⁵₅% witness this frequently (Pew Internet Research Center, FOSI, Cable in the Classroom, 2011).

b) One million children were harassed, threatened or subjected to other forms of cyberbullying on Facebook during the past year. (Consumer Reports in 2011).

c) ⁴₃% of teens aged 13 to 17 report that they have experienced some sort of cyberbullying in the past year (Harris Interactive Trends and Tudes, 2007).

Cecelia Kang in a Washington Post article,⁷ cites Amanda Lenhart, a co-author of Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project, as trying to account for adolescents’ greater involvement in tormenting peers via the internet:

Lenhart and other experts on social media said teenagers see themselves differently online than in the real world. Some assume a sort of “alter ego” on the Web, engaging in conversation with more bravado and taking more risks than they do when face to face with a peer, she said.

Attempting to account for the phenomenon of cyberbullying in terms of neurological research, Jennifer Beer, of the University of California, Davis, reports as follows:

The orbitofrontal cortex receives inputs from all the sensory modalities: gustatory, olfactory, somatosensory, auditory, and visual. Visceral information is also received by the orbitofrontal cortex...⁸

Jacqueline Olds and Richard Schwartz apply this insight to our topic at hand:

In less technical language, the orbitofrontal cortex uses all of the senses, all the physical information available, to monitor and modulate social behavior. Our

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⁶ http://www.internetsafety101.org/cyberbullyingstatistics.htm
brains appear to be wired to make getting along with other people an inherent physical enterprise. No wonder it is so easy to get it wrong by e-mail. We also begin to understand why the telephone, which at least gives us tone of voice, works better than e-mail, but not nearly as well as sitting together on the front porch. ⁹

Emily Bazelon, author of the best seller, Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy, in a March 2013 article in The Atlantic, “How to Stop the Bullies”, ¹⁰ describes her investigation of three strategies for dealing with on-line bullies. Many of the attacks occur on Facebook, which has a “Hate and Harassment Team” that assesses bullying complaints that are submitted by subscribers, in order to determine if the content deserves to be removed. She quotes, Dave Willner, manager of content policy, to the effect that,

It’s slippery to define, and it’s even harder when it’s writing instead of speech.
Tone of voice disappears...

While Facebook’s policy is to take the word of someone who claims to have been victimized by cyberbullying and immediately remove the offending content, if someone else complains, the account is treated as a “third-party report” which has to be refereed. When the author asked how long each report was studied in order to make a determination of whether the situation required intervention, she was told,

We optimize for half a second. Your average decision time is a second or two, so thirty seconds would be a really long time.

It is certainly understandable that given the incredible volume of users, there must be a dizzying number of reports submitted; nevertheless, it should be obvious that especially when the wording of the attacks might be considered ambiguous or unclear, snap judgments such as these will make it highly likely that no intervention will be undertaken with respect to “third party reports.”

Bazelon then describes the work of Henry Lieberman, an MIT computer scientist who is working on creating algorithms that could anticipate bullying language and at least flash a message to the author whether he should reconsider posting what he has written, as well as some of the activities of the notorious hacker group Anonymous that have come to the aid of

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¹⁰ http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/03/how-to-stop-bullies/309217/
bullying victims by bombarding the bullies with all sorts of electronic messages. Nevertheless, it would appear that a workable solution to this problem is not going to be soon in the offing.

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A verse in this week’s Tora reading, Parashat BeHar, deals with verbal abuse. Or perhaps more accurately, the Rabbinic interpretation of a particular verse in BeHar is defined as prohibiting such activities. In VaYikra 25, two verses command us not to engage in “Ona’a”:

VaYikra 25:14, 17
And if thou sell aught unto thy neighbor or buy of thy neighbor’s hand, “Al Tonu” (ye shall not wrong) one another...
“VeLo Tonu” (and ye shall not wrong) one another; but thou shalt fear thy God; for I Am the LORD your God.

Some biblical commentators who emphasize a more literal approach to understanding the Tora text, see v. 17 as emphasizing the same theme as that expressed in v. 14, i.e., specifically in monetary matters, people should deal fairly with one another, e.g.,

Ibn Ezra
A warning to the purchaser, because the first verse (v. 14) is addressing the seller.

R. Yosef Bechor Shor
To sell in accordance with what the real estate is worth, for excessive profit will have to be returned. And even though in general there is no Ona’a with respect to real estate, here (with respect to the purchase of real estate in the land of Israel—see the previous verses in Chapter 25) there is Ona’a, because one who purchases land in Israel only purchases the harvests, as in VaYikra 25:16... (since in the Jubilee year all land returns to its original owners [Ibid. 13]).

Ohr HaChayim

11 The reason why one can establish what a fair price is for most objects is because there are many of them and therefore one can establish a market standard against which a particular price can be compared. However, each piece of real estate is considered unique and incomparable to any other. Therefore ordinarily an objective price cannot be arrived at and accusations of either price gouging or paying too little, which are the manifestations of Ona’a, would not apply.
12 According to the multitude of the years thou shalt increase the price thereof, and according to the fewness of the years thou shalt diminish the price of it; for the number of crops doth he sell unto thee.
13 In this year of jubilee ye shall return every man unto his possession.
...According to the simple meaning of the text, the intention is that even though above (v. 14) it has already been stated “Al Tonu”, and it is immediately clarified that the verse is dealing with Ona’a as it pertains to moveable objects and not with respect to real estate, this verse (17) is concerned that one could err and think that when it comes to real estate (even outside the land of Israel) Ona’a is permitted, for this reason it is stated “Lo Tonu”, and it says “but thou shalt fear thy God”, i.e., even if technically there is no prohibition of Ona’a regarding real estate, this is in terms of being able to take legal action in this world, however, there nevertheless is a prohibition of Ona’a in terms of real estate.  

However, the Mishna and Talmud, because they assume that a second verse in Chapter 25 dealing with monetary oppression would be superfluous, as well as the usage of the verb “Yud-Nun-Heh” in a non-monetary context in two earlier verses, categorically interpret VaYikra 25:17 as dealing specifically with verbal abuse:

Bava Metzia 58b

MISHNAH. JUST AS THERE IS OVERREACHING IN BUYING AND SELLING, SO IS THERE WRONG DONE BY WORDS. [THUS:] 1) ONE MUST NOT ASK ANOTHER, ‘WHAT IS THE PRICE OF THIS ARTICLE?’ IF HE HAS NO INTENTION OF BUYING. 2) IF A MAN WAS A REPENTANT [SINNER], ONE MUST NOT SAY TO HIM, ‘REMEMBER YOUR FORMER DEEDS.’ 3) IF HE WAS A SON OF PROSELYTES ONE MUST NOT TAUNT HIM, ‘REMEMBER THE DEEDS OF YOUR ANCESTORS,’

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14 E.g., Bava Kamma 56a

Is there not the case of a man who does work with the Water of Purification or with the [Red] Heifer of Purification, where he is similarly exempt according to the judgments of Man but liable according to the judgments of Heaven? Again, is there not the case of one who placed deadly poison before the animal of a neighbor, where he is exempt from the judgments of Man but liable according to the judgments of Heaven? So also is there not the case of one who entrusts fire to a deaf-mute, someone intellectually challenged or a minor [and damage results], where he is exempt from the judgments of Man but liable according to the judgments of Heaven? Again, is there not the case of the man who gives his fellow a fright, where he is similarly exempt from the judgments of Man but liable according to the judgments of Heaven? And finally is there not the case of the man who, when his pitcher has broken on public ground, does not remove the potsherds, who, when his camel falls does not raise it, where R. Meir indeed makes him liable for any damage resulting therefrom, but the Sages hold that he is exempt from the judgments of Man though liable according to the judgments of Heaven?

15 Shemot 22:20

And a stranger “Lo Toneh” (shalt thou not wrong), neither shalt thou oppress him; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt.

VaYikra 19:33

And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, “Lo Tonu” (ye shall not do him wrong).
BECAUSE IT IS WRITTEN, (SHEMOT 22:20) “LO TONEH’ (THOU SHALT NEITHER WRONG) A STRANGER, NOR OPPRESS HIM.

GEMARA. Our Rabbis taught: (VaYikra 25:17) “Ye shall not therefore wrong one another” Scripture refers to verbal wrongs. You say, ‘verbal wrongs’; but perhaps that is not so, monetary wrongs being meant? When it is said, (Ibid. 14) “And if thou sell aught unto thy neighbor, or acquirest aught of thy neighbor [ye shall not wrong one another]”, monetary wrongs are already dealt with. Then to what can I refer, “ye shall not therefore wrong each other”? To verbal wrongs. E.g., 2) If a man is a penitent, one must not say to him, ‘Remember your former deeds.’ 3) If he is the son of proselytes he must not be taunted with, ‘Remember the deeds of your ancestors. 4) If he is a proselyte and comes to study the Torah, one must not say to him, ‘Shall the mouth that ate unclean and forbidden food, abominable and creeping things, come to study the Torah which was uttered by the mouth of Omnipotence!’ 5) If he is visited by suffering, afflicted with disease, or has buried his children, one must not speak to him as his companions spoke to Job, (Iyov 4:6 ff.) “Is not thy fear [of God] thy confidence, And thy hope the integrity of thy ways? Remember, I pray thee, whoever perished, being innocent?” 6) If donkey drivers sought grain from a person, he must not say to them, ‘Go to so and so who sells grain,’ whilst knowing that he has never sold any. R. Judah said: 1) One may also not feign interest in a purchase when he has no money...

Abaye asked R. Dimi: What do people [most] carefully avoid in the West [sc. Palestine]? — He replied: putting others to shame. For R. Hanina said: All descend into Gehenna, excepting three. 'All' — can you really think so! But say thus: All who descend into Gehenna [subsequently] reascend,\(^\text{16}\) excepting three, who descend but do not reascend, viz., He who commits adultery with a married woman, publicly shames his neighbor, or fastens an evil epithet [nickname] upon his neighbor. 'Fastens an epithet' — but that is putting to shame! — [It means], Even when he is accustomed to the name.\(^\text{17}\)

Accepting the Talmud’s assumption that VaYikra 25:17 is prohibiting numerous forms of verbal abuse, it is pertinent to therefore ask what strategies does the Tora propose to influence

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\(^{16}\) Once their sins have been purged and they have achieved atonement.

\(^{17}\) The equation of “mocking” nicknames, as opposed to nicknames of endearment, with other forms of verbal abuse, should give many of us pause who while avoiding aggressive teasing and verbal abuse, nevertheless engage in what we consider “harmless” disparaging references to others. If the Tora is calling for the maintenance of human dignity on behalf of all people, then there has to be consistency and no tolerance of exceptions. Whereas the one giving the name may think that it is innocent, the butt of the nickname may not think so, even though he is loath to express his displeasure, at the risk of incurring further teasing.
people to refrain from engaging in such practices? The two rationales provided by the verses defining Ona’a as a transgression\textsuperscript{18} are informative in that regard.

When Shemot 22:20 warns against oppressing a Ger (sojourner, stranger), the Tora states, “...\textit{for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt}”.\textsuperscript{19} The Egyptian experience may have been the paradigm of our suffering at the hands of majority and native cultures, but due to the many years of exile and lack of political autonomy, Jewish history offers a great many lessons of how a minority can be mistreated and humiliated at the hands of others. Consequently, an individual who oppresses others has dramatically failed to learn the lesson of Jewish history that the Tora demands that we internalize.

\textit{VaYikra} 25:17, on the other hand, emphasizes a theological rather than historical and psychological basis for not making others feel badly, verbally and otherwise: “\textit{but thou shalt fear thy God; for I Am the LORD your God}.” The Tora in \textit{VaYikra} explicitly attaches a similar warning to several of the Tora’s Mitzvot,\textsuperscript{20} and even when the concept is not specifically articulated, it implicitly underlies every Commandment, i.e., why should you fulfill positive Commandments and avoid transgressing negative ones? Because God’s Will is that you comply with His Law, and the manner by which you illustrate your respect and devotion to Him is by complying with the entire corpus of Divine Rules and Regulations. Consequently, it could be

\textsuperscript{18} Although different forms of Ona’a are discussed in four verses altogether (Shemot 22:20; \textit{VaYikra} 19:33; Ibid. 25:14; and Ibid. 17), only two of them state reasons for why these transgressions are to be avoided, i.e., Shemot 22:20 and \textit{VaYikra} 25:17.

\textsuperscript{19} It would be irrelevant to argue that one has never been to Egypt, let alone a stranger there. The statement in the Mishna in Pesachim, which has been incorporated in the Pesach Haggada:

\textit{Pesachim} 116b
\begin{quote}
\textit{IN EVERY GENERATION A MAN IS BOUND TO REGARD HIMSELF AS THOUGH HE PERSONALLY HAD GONE FORTH FROM EGYPT, BECAUSE IT IS SAID, (SHEMOT 13:8) “AND THOU SHALT TELL THY SON IN THAT DAY, SAYING: “IT IS BECAUSE OF THAT WHICH THE LORD DID FOR ME WHEN I CAME FORTH OUT OF EGYPT”}
\end{quote}
indicates that we are to employ our imaginations to vicariously relive the experiences of Jewish history. Consequently, even those who live lives free of persecution and anti-Semitism are expected to deeply empathize not only with fellow Jews who have unfortunately experienced such treatment down through the millennia, but people today who are subject to discrimination, abuse and other forms of ill-treatment.

\textsuperscript{20} E.g., \textit{VaYikra} 19:14

\begin{quote}
Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling-block before the blind, but thou shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.
\end{quote}

\textit{Ibid.} 32

\begin{quote}
Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head, and honor the face of the old man, and thou shalt fear thy God: I am the LORD.
\end{quote}

\textit{Ibid.} 25:36

\begin{quote}
Take thou no interest of him or increase; but \textit{fear thy God}; that thy brother may live with thee.
\end{quote}

\textit{Ibid.} 43

\begin{quote}
Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor; but \textit{shall fear thy God}.
\end{quote}
argued that a litmus test of the extent to which an individual possesses true “Yirat Shamayim” (fear of Heaven), an attitude that some sources claim is the key to the Jewish religious life, is the extent to which he adheres consistently and resolutely to all of the Torah’s Commandments, certainly including never abusing others verbally.

And yet, special religious emphasis is placed upon not violating the prohibition against Ona’a, particularly when the victim is brought to tears of frustration, in light of the following Talmudic passage:

Bava Metzia 59a
R. Eleazar said: Since the destruction of the Temple, the gates of prayer are locked, for it is written, (Eicha 3:9) “Also when I cry out, He Shutteth out my prayer.” Yet though the gates of prayer are locked, the gates of tears are not, for it is written, (Tehillim 39:13) “Hear my prayer, O Lord, and Give ear unto my cry; Hold not Thy Peace at my tears”...

R. Hisda said: All gates are locked, excepting the gates [through which pass the cries of] wrong [Ona’a], for it is written, (Amos 7:7) “Behold the Lord Stood by a wall of wrongs, and in His Hand were the wrongs.”

Rabbeinu Bachaye on VaYikra 25:17 explains:

And the reason is that the one who suffers, experiences tremendous pain, and it makes his mind weak, and his heart is demoralized because of his trouble, and he prays from a worried heart with great concentration and focus, and for this reason, he is heard.

21 E.g., Shabbat 31 a-b
Rabbah b. R. Huna said: Every man who possesses learning without the fear of Heaven is like a treasurer who is entrusted with the inner keys but not with the outer: how is he to enter? R. Jannai proclaimed: Woe to him who has no courtyard yet makes a gate for same! Rab Judah said, The Holy One, Blessed be He, Created His world only that men should fear Him, for it is said, and (Kohelet 3:14) “God hath done it, that men should fear before Him.”
R. Simon and R. Eleazar were sitting, when R. Jacob b. Aha came walking past. Said one to his companion, 'Let us arise before him, because he is a sin-fearing man.' Said the other, 'Let us arise before him, because he is a man of learning.' 'I tell you that he is a sin-fearing man, and you tell me that he is a man of learning!' retorted he. It may be proved that it was R. Eleazar who observed that he was a sin-fearing man. For R. Johanan said in R. Eleazar’s name: The Holy One, Blessed be He, has nought else in His World but the fear of Heaven alone, for it is said, (Devarim 10:12) “And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God Requires of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God?” and it is written, (Kohelet 7:17) And unto man he said, Behold [“hen”], the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom”, and in Greek, one is “hen”. That proves it.
Unless an ostensibly religious individual engages in compartmentalization, whereby he separates one set of behaviors from those that are informed by his religion, it shouldn’t be necessary to resort to Facebook’s Hate and Harassment Team, computer scientists, or hacker organizations. The checks and balances provided by the Tora’s Mitzvot should be all that is needed to alleviate cyberbullying and its like. Perhaps this is a topic that should be covered in depth from a religious perspective in every Jewish day school.