Dear Research Fellows and Workers,

We are living in a time where our moral sensitivities and sensibilities are changing and hopefully growing. While certain moral principles have remained constant, the sphere of their application is expanding. Thus, while two thousand years ago Hillel taught:

"דעלך סני לחברך לא תעביד זו היא כל התורה כולה ואידך פירושה הוא זיל גמור"

He did not imagine that the “other” should include, for example, women.

As a society, we are elevating our moral standards, however, there remains a significant gap between the recognition that our moral responsibilities should be applied equally to all who are created in the image of God, on the one hand, and our actual behavior and policies, on the other. Movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter are playing an important role in pointing out to us all those gaps.

At the Shalom Hartman Institute, we are committed to working tirelessly on closing those gaps, be it in Israeli society at large, or in our own Institute, in particular. We cannot be a center which teaches Jewish values, and which advocates for moral excellence, if our own home does not serve as an exemplar of our teaching. We must and we will.

I remember some of the discourse when the sexual harassment laws were put into effect. “They are impossible to implement.” “They will make it impossible for men and women to work together.” “They are destroying natural interaction,” etc. Over the years these criticisms have been proven to be on the whole largely wrong. As a result of the legislation, we have succeeded in creating a work environment which is safer and more respectful for all. Where we fail, we have a mechanism to correct it.

I am writing because it is time for us to take the next step within the Institute, and remove overly aggressive and disrespectful speech which we too often direct at each other publicly, in particular cases which involve senior people and those who are more junior, and often men towards younger women.

Our tradition teaches us: "כל המלבין פני חברו ברבים כאילו שופך דמים"

We know the destructive power of words especially towards those who are more vulnerable, who need our approval, not to speak of when they are dependent on more senior people for their jobs, careers and livelihood.

One of the more beautiful features of a Beit Midrash is that it is a learning environment which strives to uncover the “truth” - the best reading of the text.

It believes that ideas matter, and as a result, it fosters heated debate and argument in the pursuit of these goals. But our tradition also teaches us that truth and peace must find away to balance each other. One without the other is incomplete.

We cannot not allow the Institute to give up its dedication to intellectual truth, but at the same time, we can no longer tolerate expressions of this pursuit which ignore our moral and religious commitment to peace and human dignity. There are no and must not be any grounds for the public humiliation and shaming of others, regardless of the purity of the cause. If you think someone is making an egregious mistake, there are ways to say it which allow the other to learn and grow. If the purpose is truly the pursuit of truth and not one’s own aggrandizement, then how one talks, and very often, where one talks, makes all the difference.

To shout and berate someone publicly, or to declare publicly and definitively, for example, – “you are wrong” – leaves the other little room to hear, let alone internalize. This is doubly true when the criticism is directly towards a more junior person. It is easy to simply add: “I think that you may be mistaken,” of “Maybe you want to think further about...” What would it hurt if after a person made a presentation, we started with: “Thank you, I appreciate your comments, but…” If one believes that the error is very significant, it is precisely then that the full critique should never be done in public in front of fellow colleagues.

If we truly care about the truth, then we must create a safe place to make mistakes for only thus is intellectual growth possible. But more importantly, if truth comes at the expense of our moral responsibilities, what type of truth is it? What value does it have as a Torat Hayim?

There is, I believe, a flaw in Hillel’s teaching of “What is hateful unto you do not do unto others.” Our responsibility is not to treat others as *we* would want to be treated, but to treat them as *they* need to be treated. We are not the same, and at different periods in our lives, and in different power dynamics, our susceptibility to harm and hurt changes.

I hope that this letter will do most of the necessary work, and that all of us, myself included, will begin to correct our culture of discourse – what we allow ourselves to say and how we say it. That when we cross the line, we will apologize and work to avoid similar failures in the future. As humans we are destined to fail. But as humans, we also have the ability to apologize and grow.

In order to facilitate this process, the Executive Committee of the Institute is appointing Shiri Mersel as the Institute’s Ombudsperson for verbal violence in the workplace in Israel. It will be her responsibility to ensure that egregious events don’t get swept under the carpet, something that often happens given the power imbalance that is a given in every social environment. The nature of the more egregious cases is that they are known and experienced not merely by the harmed party. When a complaint or an event comes to the Ombudsperson’s attention, she will investigate and ensure that a private and public apology is issued. If an individual is a recurring violator, sanctions will be enacted.

I do not believe that we will have to reach such a point, and that all of us will begin to adapt our behavior. I know that some of you will say: “It is impossible to implement.” “It will make it impossible for men and women to work together.” “It will destroy natural interaction,” etc. I do not believe that this is the case. I think all of us have to find a higher culture of discourse and that we can do so. I know that there are many pitfalls and difficulties in trying to regulate not to speak of police a culture of speech. However, because it is difficult, it does not mean that it is impossible. We know that mistakes will be made in the process, but we are committed to trying. As an Institute, we are choosing to err on the side of aspiring higher than on accepting the current status quo.

Our mission as an Institute is to work to ensure that Judaism is force for value and good in our world. Let’s begin at our home. Let’s begin today.