

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

Vayigash. Judaism's Fourth Cardinal Sin

Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone withdraw from me!" There was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. (45:1-2)



Why did Joseph need everyone to leave? Why did he want this moment to be private one between himself and his brothers?

He could not bear that Egyptians would stand beside him and hear his brothers being embarrassed when he would make himself known to them. (Rashi)

The Midrash Tanchuma imagines that Joseph was taking a risk, sending his bodyguards out of the room and facing a malevolent Judah along with his brothers. They had tried to kill him once; who knows what they attempt this time if he were left alone with them? But he said:

"Better that I be killed than that I humiliate my brothers in front of the Egyptians"

Similarly, two weeks ago we read about Tamar who became pregnant from her father-in-law, Judah. She was sentenced to death by burning and at the critical moment she sent a private message to Judah with his personal effects, effectively notifying him that he was the father. Why did Tamar not announce her truth publicly? Why did she rely on Judah's integrity? She might have been executed!

She did not want to embarrass him ... She said, "If he confesses by himself, let him confess, and if not, let them burn me, but **I will not embarrass him.**" From this (our Rabbis) said, "**It is better for a person to be cast into a fiery furnace than to embarrass his fellow in public.**" (Rashi 38:25)

Rabbi Shai Held comments:

Joseph, like Tamar ...would rather die that humiliate another person. Those whose feelings he wants to protect have hurt him immensely and caused him great pain and suffering. ...If Tamar and Joseph, each nursing such deep wounds, nevertheless refuse to humiliate those who have aggrieved them, even at the price of their own lives, how much more must we subdue the impulse to shame and humiliate. ...The message seems clear: Humiliation is a heinous offence, and there is rarely – if ever – an excuse for it." (The Heart of Torah vol.1 99-103. I thank Rabbi Held of Yeshivat Hadar for his article, which provided the sources and inspiration for this week's Parsha Discussion.)

It is well known that Judaism has three sins which one must prefer to sacrifice one's life rather than transgress: murder, sexual prohibitions, and idolatry. Here, we have a fourth. Better to be killed than shame another person! The Rabbis call embarrassment "*halbanat panim* - whitening of the face" and they equate the act of shaming somebody with an act of murder. Rabbeinu Yona in his work "Gates of Repentance – *Shaarei Teshuva*" explains that humiliation is a type of death because:

The Parsha Discussion

TORAH TO DISCUSS WITH TEENS AND ADULTS AROUND YOUR SHABBAT TABLE

“First a person blushes and then the blood leaves his face and he turns white. Second, the pain of embarrassment is worse than death.”

This process is described in graphic detail by Rabbi Eliyahu of Izmir (1659-1721):

“This sin is worse than murder; after all, an act of murder kills a person there and then. But shaming another individual kills him bit by bit, as he remains in a state of humiliation. First, one’s blood rushes through the body and one cannot find a state of calm, then it rushes to the face causing a burning sensation, and then it flows to the entire body as one’s face whitens like a corpse, and one’s body becomes frigid ... and whenever the victim sees the people who caused that embarrassment, the individual reexperiences the humiliation, and feels their blood is being spilt yet again. Thus, murder is a single act, but to shame a person is to commit murder over and over.”

Please Discuss:

- Why is embarrassment so severe an offense in Judaism?
- In what circumstances have you experienced humiliation. How did it feel? What do you recall of the incident?
- Have you ever embarrassed someone else? What led you to do it? What do you feel when you look back at the encounter?
- Why is humiliation like death? Is this the only reason that Joseph might have wanted everyone to leave the room? Why else might Joseph have wanted his revealing of his identity to be a private moment, away from the Egyptians?
- Do you think that society takes humiliation too lightly? - Practical jokes, social media shaming, the press sometimes drawing conclusions before evidence has been verified. How can we as individuals create a kinder, fairer environment?

Shabbat Shalom!

To see several legal and halakhic applications of the prohibition to humiliate, and circumstances where other laws are altered so as not to cause embarrassment, see <http://www.daat.ac.il/mishpat-ivri/skirot/273-2.htm>