



Humiliation: Judiasm's Fourth Cardinal Sin?

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In Jewish ethics, humiliating another person is regarded as an extraordinarily grave offense, one which we should avoid committing, some scholars insist, even if our lives depend on it. The Talmudic Sages learn that lesson from two striking stories in the book of Genesis, each of which, they insist, has dramatic ethical implications.



Parashat Vayeshev tells the story of Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). Tamar finds herself in an impossible situation, with her life on the line, and the Sages are awed by the way she handles herself.

Tamar is married to Judah's first son Er, who dies without having had a child. Because of the requirements of Levirate law (*Yibum*), Er's brother Onan then marries Tamar, but, realizing that any child he and she have will be his brother's heir rather than his own, he carefully avoids impregnating her, and he, too, soon dies. Judah worries that maybe his first two sons have died as a result of their common wife, Tamar, so he tells her to go and wait in her father's house until his third son Shelah is old enough for marriage. But as both she and we are given to understand, he has no intention of ever giving his youngest son to her. She is tied down and seemingly helpless—at once forbidden to marry outside Judah's family and prevented from marrying inside it.

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Tamar takes matters into her own hands. When Judah has completed the mourning period after the recent death of his wife, she poses as a prostitute, accepts his request for sex, and conceives in the process. (Subtly,



the text criticizes Judah: just as soon as he is permitted, he goes looking for sex, the possibility of which he has indefinitely taken away from her).¹ At Tamar's request, he leaves his seal, cord, and staff with her (which Bible scholar Robert Alter calls the ancient equivalent of all a person's major credit cards)² until such time as Judah can pay her with a kid from his flock. Judah sends a friend to find the prostitute and settle his debts, but the people of her town insist that there has been no such woman among them.

Eventually, Tamar begins to show. Judah hears that she is pregnant and condemns her to death by fire. The Sages were preoccupied with what happens next. Tamar has evidence that would incriminate Judah and exonerate her—and yet, at least as the Sages understand the story, she takes the risk of sending the signs to Judah privately, asking: “See, please (*haker na*) if you recognize to whom these belong.” Taking responsibility, Judah acknowledges that Tamar has behaved better than he (*tzadkah mimeni*), and her life is saved (38:25-26).

The Sages were profoundly moved by Tamar's clear choice: she would rather die than humiliate her father-in-law. Her father-in-law has treated her badly over a long period, and has now condemned her to death—and yet still she will not humiliate him, even at the price of her own life. From this, a Sage (there is some confusion about his exact identity) concludes that “it is preferable for a person to throw herself into a fiery furnace rather than humiliate another person” (BT, Bava Metzia 59a).

This startling principle of Jewish ethics is almost always associated with Tamar. But another Rabbinic Sage derives the same conclusion from this week's parashah. Seemingly still angry at his brothers for long ago selling him into slavery, the now enormously powerful Joseph has made their lives extremely difficult, accusing them of crimes they have not committed and making demands he knows they will find it all but impossible to meet. Finally, Joseph

¹ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), p. 8

² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, p. 9.



orchestrates a scene whereby Benjamin, his younger brother and Jacob's new favorite, will be imprisoned on trumped up charges. For Judah, this is the last straw, and he throws himself upon Joseph's mercy: if Judah and his brothers return to their father without their youngest brother in tow, their father will die of grief, a burden they simply cannot bear. Judah goes so far as to beg to be enslaved in Benjamin's place (Genesis 44:33-34).

Seeing how Judah, who had hatched the plan to sell him into slavery, now stands ready to do anything at all to help Benjamin avoid a similar fate, Joseph is overcome with emotion. What he does next strikes a Talmudic Sage as exceedingly strange: "Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, 'Have everyone withdraw from me!' So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers... Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?'" (45: 1, 3). Given his brothers' past history of hatred and violence towards him, is Joseph not acting recklessly? Perhaps, before identifying himself, he ought to have called more attendants into the room rather than sending away the ones already present. R. Samuel b. Nahman comments: "Joseph put himself in grave danger, because if his brothers had killed him, no one would have known whom to blame. So why did he say,

'Have everyone withdraw from me?'

This is what Joseph thought: better that I be killed than I humiliate my brothers in front of the Egyptians"

(Midrash Tanhuma, Vayigash 6).³

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Joseph, like Tamar just a few chapters earlier, would rather die than humiliate another person. Those whose feelings he wants to protect have hurt him immensely and caused him great pain and suffering. Perhaps, in learning from these biblical models, we are meant to

³ But cf. the very different interpretation of the story attributed to the same Sage in Genesis Rabbah 93:9.



reason as follows: 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 so must we subdue the impulse to shame and humiliate. We have likely not been condemned to death or sold into slavery, nor is the choice before us shaming another or facing possible death. The message of the Sages seems clear: humiliation is a heinous offense and there is rarely—if ever—an excuse for it.

Just how literally is this prohibition meant to be taken? Are we really supposed to submit to death rather than bring shame upon another person? At first glance, this seems like a beautiful idea, potentially even a life-transforming one, but undoubtedly also a homiletical one. Our Sages want us to know just how serious a crime it is to shame and humiliate another person, so they wax hyperbolic, telling us that we should prefer to be killed rather than commit such an egregious crime. In any case, the expression “it is preferable” to act in a certain way sounds much more like advice than like law. And yet, amazingly, some of the most significant figures in the history of Jewish law insist that our principle is not hyperbole at all, but rather a simple and straightforward statement of legal obligation: we are required by law to die rather than humiliate another person.⁴ Ask a reasonably knowledgeable Jew and she is likely to tell you that there are three cardinal sins in Judaism, three offenses one should prefer to die than commit: idolatry, sexual immorality, and murder. But according to these scholars, stunningly, humiliation appears to be a fourth.⁵

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⁴ R. Isaac Alfasi (Rif) to Bava Metzia 59a; Tosafot to Sotah 10b, s.v. Noach; and R. Yonah, *Sha'arei Teshuvah*, 3:139. But cf. R. Menachem HaMeiri to Berakhot 43b.

⁵ Technically, as will become evident in the next paragraph, R. Yonah subsumes humiliation under the broader category of murder.



Why is Judaism so preoccupied with avoiding humiliation? Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1263) suggests that humiliation has “shades of murder” to it (*avak retzichah*). If this strikes you as far-fetched, close your eyes for a moment and imagine the moment in your life when you have felt most deeply humiliated. Your body, your blood flow—everything feels terrifyingly off-kilter, almost like a mini-death. How many people have found themselves wishing they could die rather than be humiliated in the same way again? In a similar vein, R. Eliyahu HaKohen of Izmir (1659-1729) suggests that humiliation is actually worse than murder: murder happens all at once and then it’s over, he says, but humiliation takes place slowly, and is torturously painful. Moreover, murder happens once, but when someone is humiliated, he is humiliated anew each time he sees the people who witnessed it, and it is like being killed over and over again.⁶

Why do so many influential rabbinic figures maintain that there is a legal requirement to die rather than humiliate another person despite the fact that the Talmudic statement is couched in the language of counsel rather than law?

Taking inspiration from the examples of Tamar and Joseph, the Sages want us to live as if the dignity of the people we meet is the most important thing in the world.

Everybody knows that people, often despite themselves, tend to take concrete legal obligations more seriously than inspired ideas and high-minded ideals. These legal decisors want the prohibition on humiliation to have teeth, to take hold of us and orient the way we carry ourselves in the world and interact with other people. To state the obvious, though, even those who do not think our statement has the status of law still assign it tremendous importance. There is no question that one may not humiliate another person; the debate is really over whether the prohibition is so serious that one should choose death rather than

⁶ R. Eliyahu HaKohen, *Midrash Eliyahu*, Chapter 8.



violate it. According to a variety of Jewish sources, the honor of a person is in many ways akin to the honor of God. The prohibition on humiliation is really just the culmination of Judaism's obsession with human dignity more broadly.

But there is another reason, too. All too often, we tend to rationalize the act of embarrassing people. Sometimes, after speaking abusively to another person, we can almost hear ourselves saying, "It's not like I killed them, is it?" Actually, Jewish ethics reminds us, it is.

Taking inspiration from the examples of Tamar and Joseph, the Sages want us to live as if the dignity of the people we meet is the most important thing in the world. Because, according to Jewish theology, it just might be.

Shabbat shalom.

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