

Tamar – The Savior of Human Dignity

It has become commonplace in our society to publicly humiliate and denigrate others in the name of free speech. Public bashings can be found in many venues. They are a staple of late night comedy, an agenda of politicians, and a common theme of every news channel. As we are constantly bombarded with such extreme insensitivity to human dignity, it is important to take a step back and analyze the Torah's perspective on human dignity and public denigration.

In this week's Parsha (38:25), Tamar is being taken out to be killed, and she sends a message to Yehuda saying, "I am pregnant from the man that this belongs to." She could have saved herself by explicitly stating, "I became pregnant from Yehuda." However, she refrained from doing this, so as not to cause Yehuda embarrassment. It is from Tamar's actions that our Sages derived that one should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than to embarrass someone publicly.

This lesson derived from Tamar by our Sages, is often understood to be a halachic directive. It is viewed as instructing us of the right thing to do when presented with a similar situation. We should give up our life to avert embarrassing someone. However, the Seforno tells us, that if one would give up his life not to embarrass someone merely because that is the halacha, it would not be a complete fulfillment of the lesson derived by our Sages from Tamar. The Seforno (38:25) states, "Even though Tamar was in danger, she did not want to embarrass Yehuda, like our Sages say, 'One should throw themselves into a fiery furnace rather than to embarrass someone publicly.'" According to this Seforno, our Sages are expressing that a person should emulate Tamar, and not want to embarrass someone, to such an extent that he would give up his life to avoid it.

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Based on the Seforno, we are not only being told what to do, but what we should feel. Fulfilling the statement of our Sages requires one to be motivated to give up his life from an extreme resistance to shaming another person; a feeling that can only stem from a deep recognition that man is created in the image of G-d and deserves to be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. According to our Sages, we need to work on ourselves to value another person's feelings, to such an extent that embarrassing someone would be harder than taking one's own life.

It is evident from the lesson our Sages derive from Tamar, that the Torah's perspective with regards to human dignity is in stark contrast to the world's point of view. We are entrenched in a society that often promotes embarrassing someone to advance one's career or position. It is only natural to be impacted and influenced by our surroundings. It is therefore critical that we focus on this story as a source of inspiration, so we too can place human dignity above all else.