

As she was taken out, she sent [word] to her father-in-law, saying, “By the man to whom these belong I am with child.” (38:25)

Interweaved within the narrative of Yosef’s sale as a slave and eventual arrival in Egypt, is the story of Yehudah. At first, it seems misplaced, since it does not appear to have any relationship to the Yosef narrative. *Chazal*, however, explain that Yehudah was deposed from his position as leader over them, because he was not forceful enough to prevent the sale. Had he demanded that Yosef be released, he would have prevailed. Yehudah only saved him from death. For not completing his task, he was punished by Hashem with the eventual passing of his sons, Er and Onan. In the midst of this story, we meet Tamar, one of the true heroines of *Klal Yisrael’s* long history. Very little is recorded of her pedigree and past – the Torah only relates her present, which dominates the narrative to such an extent that it is no wonder that she was to become the maternal progenitor of *Moshiach Tzidkeinu*.

What did she do to earn such distinction? The answer to this question is not what she did – but what she did **not do**. The Torah relates that Tamar was originally married to Er, Yehudah’s eldest son, who was evil in the eyes of Hashem. He was punished with Heavenly excision. Yehudah instructed Onan, his second son, to perform Levirate marriage, by marrying the young widow. This would preserve Er’s name. Realizing that a child born into this marriage would be regarded as belonging to Er, Onan took great care not to impregnate Tamar. This is a sin, so Onan was also prematurely called to his rightful place in the next world. Fearing that Shailah, the next brother, would also die, Yehudah told Tamar to wait until Shailah grew up. However, even after Shailah grew up, Yehudah had not yet given her to him as a wife. Tamar realized that Yehudah had no intention of risking his third and last son.

Tamar was an *agunah*, stuck between a rock and a hard place. She could not marry anyone, since she was bound by law to the next brother. Shailah, who should have become her husband, was being held back by Yehudah. What could she do? Tamar decided on a daring course of action. She dressed herself up as a woman of ill-repute, and, when Yehudah went by on his way to the sheep-shearing, she negotiated with him concerning a liaison. Clearly, there was much more to the story than meets the eye, but, for present purposes, we will leave it as is. After their negotiations, Tamar insisted on a security, which was provided by Yehudah. The next day, Yehudah sent a friend with a goat to redeem the pledge, but she was gone – disappeared!

Three months later, word got out that Tamar, who was legally bound by the code of Levirate marriage, had had a relationship with someone and was pregnant. Yehudah, the leader of the community, was informed about his daughter-in-law’s “indiscretion” and declared, “Take her out to be burnt.” In an attempt to save her life and spare Yehudah any shame, Tamar surreptitiously sent the security to Yehudah, saying, “I became pregnant from the one who owns these things.” Suddenly, it all became clear to Yehudah. He realized his error and came to the conclusion that

Tamar was a woman of exemplary character. She was prepared to die, rather than bring shame upon him. This took enormous courage and strength of character.

Her behavior became the model for future generations of how a Jew should act. Her conduct was the origin for the *Talmudic* dictum, "It is better for a person to throw himself into a fiery furnace, than to shame his neighbor in public." Indeed, much of Rabbinic thought on the subject of sparing another Jew shame is based upon Tamar's acute sensitivity to Yehudah.

We can derive much from the incident of Tamar and Yehudah. She was a woman who, for all intents and purposes, was situated on the extreme edge of society, but who was prepared to die, rather than to shame her father-in-law. This episode was the precursor of David *Ha'melech's* birth and dynasty. His dynasty was founded on the principle that **emotional** pain is at least as harmful as **physical** pain. Offending another Jew is like mortally wounding him. She understood that the loss of one's esteem is tantamount to the loss of life. Such a woman can – and did – infuse her descendants with respect for human dignity. For all generations, we are cognizant of the significance of moral greatness as taught by Tamar.

Stories abound concerning our sages' extreme concern for feelings of a fellow Jew. *Horav Meir Bergman, Shlita*, related the following episode: A famous *Maggid* lectured in Yerushalayim one *Shabbos* afternoon. Since the *drashah*, discourse, was to begin in the very late afternoon, all of those assembled *davened Minchah* before the speech. One distinguished *Rav* had forgotten to *daven Minchah* before attending the lecture. As he saw the sun begin to set, he became increasingly nervous. What options did he have? If he were to stand up and walk out, it would cause a commotion. To remain in his place meant missing *Tefillas Minchah*. He compromised by standing up and, with his face turned toward the speaker, he inched out very slowly. Disturbed about his actions and worried that he had acted improperly, the *Rav* decided to visit the *Chazon Ish* to ask his opinion.

He presented his query to the *Chazon Ish* in a simple, straightforward manner: What does one do if he is attending a lecture and realizes that he had not yet *davened Minchah*? The *Chazon Ish* responded emphatically: "What is the question? To leave in the middle of the lecture is an insult to the speaker and a humiliation of a Torah scholar. Clearly, *Tefillas Minchah* does not override such a transgression. One remains in his seat until the conclusion of the speech!"

When we hurt a fellow Jew, we often ignore our actions, not maliciously, but rather, because we are unaware that we have caused someone pain. Either the victim has been proficient in concealing his pain, or our own indifference to the humiliation has allowed us to believe that we did not hurt him. Regardless of the reason, as long as one does not ask for – and receive – forgiveness, he is not absolved. Heaven must now intervene.

The following episode underscores this idea: A fellow, whom we will call *Reb Shmuel*, stood at the entrance to *Har HaZeisim* and surveyed the cemetery with his eyes. He was an individual to whom

the cemetery was quite foreign. He rarely visited but, this time, the circumstances demanded that he do something unusual, something out-of-the ordinary. He was fortunate to have a large family, each one of his children being a source of much *nachas*. So, why was he here? It was his abject poverty. He just could not take it anymore. Another wedding was coming up, and he had no money. The shame for him and his family was simply too much to tolerate. As a final effort, he would visit his grandfather's grave. *Reb Shmuel* had been especially close with his *sabba*, grandfather, taking care of him during his twilight years. From clothing and feeding him, to taking him outside, he was always there. Perhaps his grandfather would intercede on his behalf.

It was not as if *Reb Shmuel* did not work. He was one of the premier *rebbeim* in the Yerushalayim educational system, but a single paycheck, a houseful of children, medical expenses and everything else had taken their toll. He approached his grandfather's grave, and the torrent of tears began in earnest. Amidst the weeping, he attempted to articulate his needs, entreating his grandfather's soul to please intercede in Heaven on his behalf. As he stood lost in grief, he dozed off and began to dream.

In his dream, *Reb Shmuel* saw a vision of his grandfather standing before him. He immediately began to weep incessantly, beseeching his grandfather's assistance. In response, his grandfather presented a picture of *Reb Shmuel's* family. Before him stood his children, sons and daughters. The picture seemed perfect, except for the image of one of his younger sons. It appeared to have been airbrushed, hardly noticeable, very unclear. Something was wrong. *Reb Shmuel* began to shudder with fright. What was his grandfather telling him?

"My dear grandson," his grandfather began, "this is what was decreed against you. Yes, your dear son, *Yankele* (not his name), was summoned to return to his Source. When I heard this, I began to intercede on your behalf. How could I forget the years of your life which you devoted to my care? Day and night, you were there. *Shabbos*, *Yom Tov* – a day did not go by that you did not avail yourself to me. I prayed and begged. The Heavenly Tribunal listened. Instead of taking your *Yankele*, it was decided that you should instead suffer from poverty. The forlorn, wretched feelings which have been a part of your life are a "replacement" for the grief you would have sustained with the loss of your child.

"Are you prepared to exchange poverty for *Yankele*?" asked his grandfather. "No! No! Heaven forbid!" screamed *Reb Shmuel*. "Under no circumstances. Whatever I have has suddenly become wonderful. Thank you! Thank you! But I have one question: What dreadful sin did I commit that warrants such punishment? I cannot remember anything that earthshattering in my life," said *Reb Shmuel*.

"Let me tell you," his grandfather said. "Years ago, when you were still a *bachur*, unmarried, you offended one of the fellows in your *chaburah*, social group. You never asked his *mechilah*, forgiveness."

What a frightening story. Because of a “harmless” insult or attitude of indifference to another Jew, one may lose everything.

There is more. When Yehudah attempted to dissuade his brothers from harming Yosef, he said, “What gain will there be if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?” (*Bereishis* 37:26). *Horav Yehudah Assad, zl*, explains that Yehudah was intimating that if their hands were soiled with innocent blood, their power of prayer would be abrogated. He cites the *pasuk* in *Yeshayah* 1:15: “When you spread your hands [in prayer], I will hide My eyes from you; even if you were to intensify your prayer, I will not listen; Your hands are replete with blood,” indicating that the prayers offered by one who has blood on his hands is worthless.

In the *Talmud Bava Metzia* 58b, *Chazal* compare the prohibition of humiliating someone to murder. “If anyone makes his friend’s face turn white from shame in public, it is as if he has spilled his blood.” In both cases, blood is caused to rise then fall. One who is embarrassed loses his natural color and turns white. Yet, we have no problem putting people down and going to *shul* immediately thereafter to offer our prayers. Indeed, the humiliation even takes place in *shul*! Yet, it does not seem to deter anyone. Perhaps, if we stop to think of the ramifications of our actions, we will think twice before saying or doing something that is inconsiderate of – or offensive to – others.