



## Sticks and stones

**RABBI DOVID GOLDMAN**  
Vayeshev, Genesis 37:1-40:23

Have you ever been publicly embarrassed by someone? Have you ever embarrassed someone else in front of others? If you answered "no" to either of these questions, I don't mean to embarrass you, but either you are not being honest with yourself or you have a lousy memory.

In our society, this is one of the unpleasant realities of life. For young people especially, much of their social advancement seems to come from drawing attention to the weaknesses of others - with as much humor and ridicule as they can come up with.

When they are really young and come home to Mommy saying so-and-so called me a name, they are probably taught the adage: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." In other words, it's not nice to make fun of someone, of course, but try not to let it bother you.

According to the Talmud, and cited in Jewish law, embarrassing someone in front of others is actually worse than assaulting them merely with sticks and stones; in fact, it is nothing short of murder (Bava Metzia 59a). And a choice made in this week's parsha is quoted as proof that a person should better hurl himself into a furnace than embarrass someone in public.

The source is the story of Yehuda and Tamar. It is too long to present here - you can read it in Genesis 38 - but Tamar is accused of a capital crime, and the only way she can prove her innocence will embarrass Yehuda in public. This is something she refuses to do. Instead, she sends him a cryptic message that reveals the key evidence to him alone. Yehuda understands and decides to reveal it to the court, choosing to suffer the embarrassment of his own accord in the name of justice.

So why the big deal? Is it really better for her to die than to make poor Yehuda uncomfortable for a little while until the whole thing blows over? Why such extreme sensitivity to people's feelings?

The Maharal of Prague, in Nesivos Olam, explains. He points out that when capital punishment is first introduced in the time of Noah, the Torah tells us why killing a man deserves such a penalty - "because man is created in the image of God."

This "image of God," the Maharal explains, is not exactly what it sounds like. It is seen not by way of the shape of your body but by the "light" of your "shining" face - especially when your smile is wide and your eyes are bright. That is where it is actually possible to behold the glorious miracle of your soul. That is where you are most expressive of yourself. That countenance, in every person, is a reflection of God emanating from the soul.

The expression in the Talmud for embarrassing someone is "changing the color of his face." The Maharal explains that at that moment, the "light" of the person's face is extinguished - and the image of God is no more. The person withdraws into himself, his expression in this world now absent. He has been "effaced."

He might fully re-emerge - but he probably won't. Some of that light never quite returns. Actual murder is punishable by death, because the victim was created in the image of God - and he is now gone. Embarrassing him is not that different after all.

One last magical little thought - think about it and I believe you'll understand. The opposite of embarrassing someone is smiling at him.

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