

HURTFUL WORDS PART 3

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

In the past weeks we have discussed the prohibition of causing pain through speech. This includes speaking harshly to someone even in private. However, the commentaries write that speaking in such a way to someone in front of other people, and thereby embarrassing him, is considered even more lowly than normal hurtful speech. They go so far as to say that to embarrass someone is considered in a certain respect like killing them.

We further learn about the seriousness of embarrassing others from the story of Yehuda and Tamar. Tamar was about to be executed for a sin that she did not in fact commit. She had the ability to exonerate herself but in the process she would cause great humiliation to Yehuda. She preferred not to openly embarrass him, rather she gave him the opportunity to speak up himself¹. The Gemara learns from here that a person should rather let himself be killed than embarrass his fellow man².

The halachic authorities discuss as to whether this Gemara should be applied in actual law³, but regardless, it teaches us a great deal about the Torah's attitude to causing others pain. The Torah places great concern for our emotional and psychological well-being: When a person is humiliated in public his self-respect is severely effected, this is akin to taking his very lifeblood away from him and is comparable to actually taking away his physical life.

Whilst joking about other people is often in and of itself forbidden, this is even more true when it will cause embarrassment to the victim. This also applies to disciplining children (or students). They also have a right to maintain their self-respect and are likely to feel greatly hurt by being punished or shouted at in public. There may be rare occasions where it is permitted to rebuke them in front of the other children, in order to convey a message. However, this is rarely the case, and if a person finds themselves continually embarrassing their children in front of other people then he must realize that this is unacceptable and can cause them great damage. It is far more recommended to take the child aside and calmly discuss his misdemeanor in private. This way, he will not feel attacked and he can maintain his self-respect.

Another situation relevant to this discussion is when a person may see certain failings in his friend that require candid discussion and perhaps rebuke. Again, it is forbidden to do so in front of other people.

Human beings are made in the Image of G-d and deserve to be treated in such a way. In the vast majority of instances it is forbidden to cause a person to lose his self-respect by humiliating him in

public.

¹ See Parshas Vayeishev for the full account of this story.

² Bava Metsia, 58a-59b.

³ See Mishpatey Shalom, p.92-3.

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