

SHARE A FACE

by Rabbi Label Lam

If a man will have committed a sin whose judgment is death and he shall be put to death, you shall hang him (afterwards) on a wooden beam. His body shall not remain for the night on the wooden beam, rather you shall surely bury him that day, for a hanging person is an insult of G-d... (Devarim 21:22-23)

For a hanging person is an insult of G-d: It is a degradation of the King, for a man is made in the likeness of His image and Israel are His sons. This can be compared to two twin brothers who resemble each other. One became a king and the other became ensnared in banditry and was hung. Whoever would see him hanging would say "The king is hanging!" (Rashi)

Can it be? A human being, a criminal no less, who did something worthy of death, and who is dead already, can he be mistaken for "The King"? I suppose the answer is astonishingly "yes"! How much more so when one is alive, and living a wholesome and/or a holy existence can the comparison be more easily understood.

For this reason the sages of the Talmud say that a person should wash his face and his hands every day because of the "honor of his Creator". Why the face and hands? When Adam and Chava sinned the stature of humanity shrunk so dramatically that they became ashamed and felt the need to cover up with a fig leaf. The Holy One blessed is He determined that that was woefully insufficient. Therefore he made for them full garments. What was the purpose of clothing? The obvious light of G-dliness that man possessed prior to sin was so diminished that he might come to be mistaken for a common beast. Man's uniquely G-d-like attributes are neatly framed as his animal parts are covered. All one sees are helpful hands and a human face.

If the Mona Lisa would be on display in New York for one week lines would no doubt snake around the corner and great numbers of people would clamor and crush to capture a glimpse of the mystique that surrounds her countenance. People would jostle on line and while waiting. Thousands of passers-by would be shooting their glances at those waiting on line. Let's contemplate how absurd that whole scenario is in face of ultimate reality!

The Mona Lisa is only a two dimensional representation, albeit artistically done and priceless in monetary terms. The people on the line and those hustling past them are living beings with depth and wonder etched into every wrinkle and fold of their G-dly faces. Without this profound lesson deeply installed into our psyche it's easy to swap a life for still-life.

This past Tisha B'Av after the fast, a guest at the meal told the following incident, a recent occurrence he was very familiar with: It was Erev Shabbos and a fine Talmud scholar was returning to Lakewood New Jersey amidst the thickening rush hour traffic, when his car stalled out on the Outer Bridge leaving Staten Island. You can only imagine the frustration compounded by embarrassment as the inconvenienced motorists, one after the other, in their own way, paused long enough to wish him something that could not be mistake for "Good Shabbos!" One car stopped and a black man stepped out. After a brief evaluation he instructed the Jew to steer as he pushed him with his own car across the bridge.

Now on the other side, the stranger lifted the hood and began to tinker. In moments he was able to start the car and after the Rabbi expressed his heartfelt gratitude for the bold effort he grew in astonishment as the stranger insisted on following him all the way back to Lakewood New Jersey just to make sure he made it there safely! Back at home, he tried to offer but the man money but he refused. Beyond curious he asked him, "Why did you do all this for me?" He answered, "I have a boss! He's one of you guys and he's so generous and kind to me. I wonder what I can do for him. When I saw you stuck on the bridge I figured, that this is my chance to pay'm back." The Rabbi asked for the name of his boss and was able to contact him and thank him for the indirect rescue. That month his worker received a few extra hundred dollars bonus in his paycheck.

Remarkably this gentile fellow looked at one Jew as if he was the other. The conduct of one created the template of how he perceived and acted toward the other. It cuts both ways! What an awesome responsibility to wear the frame and **share a face!** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.