

SENSITIVE "TO A TEA"

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

And it was, when about three months had passed, that Yehudah was told: Your daughter-in-law has become pregnant through a forbidden marital relationship. And Yehudah said: "Taker her out and have her burned!" As she was being taken out, she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, "From the man to whom [the following] belong I am pregnant," and she said, "Identify, if you will, to whom this seal, this garment, and this staff belong." Yehudah recognized [them], and he said, "She is right - it is from me!" [38:24-26]

Even before examining the Gemara's representation of the story of Yehudah and Tamar, one is left questioning why Tamar chose to reveal the truth in such a roundabout way. She had been convicted of a grave sin, the punishment for which was death by fire (see Rashi). Yet she had critical information, in light of which she had not sinned at all (see Ramban as to why this is so). What would we do if the police knocked at our door, wrongly accusing us of a crime we never committed, and we had clear proof of our innocence? Most people, one imagines, would waste no time in screaming out, "You've made a mistake. I didn't sin. I'll prove it! Stop!!"

Tamar, seemingly, played things much cooler. She allowed herself to be "handcuffed." She was on her way to being executed. Calmly, she sends a cryptic message to her father-in-law, the gist of which is that, "I have not sinned. You are the father. If you so please, identify yourself."

From here, says the Gemara (Berachos 43b, Bava Metzia 59a, Sotah 10b), we see that, "It is preferable for one to cast oneself into a fiery furnace, in order not to publicly disgrace one's fellow." Tamar gave Yehudah the choice. "I will not publicly disgrace you by identifying you as the father. If you so desire, you can hide the fact, and I, and my fetuses, will perish."

Rabbi Yehoshua Leib Diskin zt"l, the Maharil Diskin, Rav of Brisk and later of Yerushalayim, was renowned for his brilliant mind. His flawless character, and sensitivity for others, however, were legendary in their own right. Every Motzei Shabbos, Rabbi Yehoshua Leib would deliver a discourse (shiur) regarding the coming week's parsha (Torah reading).

Each week, a glass of tea would be prepared, and R' Yehoshua Leib would sip the tea as he delivered the shiur. Due to his medical condition, plenty of sugar would be added to the piping-hot tea. One week, the man who prepared the tea mistakenly reached for the salt instead of the sugar, and generously poured spoonful upon heaping spoonful of salt into the Maharil Diskin's tea. At some point during the shiur, R' Yehoshua Leib reached for the tea, and pronounced the beracha. One can

imagine that, having tasted the salt-laden tea, his first instinct would have been to spit the undrinkable liquid out. Yet R' Yehoshua Leib did nothing of the sort. Instead, he continued to sip the tea as if nothing was wrong.

At some juncture, the person who had prepared the original glass of tea came back into the Maharil Diskin's kitchen to prepare another glass of tea. It was then that the Rebbetzin noticed what had happened. "That's the salt," she exclaimed, "not the sugar!" Immediately, it dawned upon her that in preparing her husband's tea the man had surely made the same mistake. She wasted no time, and, interrupting his shiur, whisked away the tea before her husband could finish it off. [His student's later got hold of the tea, and tried it for themselves. It was, in a word, undrinkable. They were completely flabbergasted by their rebbe's display of utter self-control!]

She wasn't finished. When her husband arrived home, she had a few words for him. "Do you realize," she said, "that drinking that tea could have endangered your health! I understand that you didn't want to publicly shame the man who prepared it, but doesn't the Torah say (Devarim 4:15), "You shall be extremely careful with your souls (i.e. health)!" Who gave you permission to put your life at risk??"

"My dear wife," R' Yehoshua Leib replied, "Chazal, our Sages, teach that it is preferable for one to cast oneself into a fiery furnace, in order not to publicly shame one's fellow. If, as a result, my health were to suffer - so be it."

In today's democratic political arena, public criticism and ridicule are the norm. Obviously, the Torah has a slightly different perspective (which is hardly surprising). It is worthwhile to spend a few moments reflecting upon our sensitivity to our peers, and make sure we have a Torah-true perspective regarding the dignity and respect expected of us when dealing with others.

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