

Human Dignity, Human Embarrassment, & Humiliating Oneself

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There is no controversy in Judaism regarding the concept of human dignity. It is universally recognized as an important idea, with the issues discussing only how important dignity is in the hierarchy of Jewish values and why it is so important. Indeed, it is vital to ascertain which Jewish values are less significant than human dignity and which are more important. The sources themselves reveal an attitude marked with great Jewish sensitivity toward the individual person.

HURTING SOMEONE ELSE'S FEELINGS

There is a general consensus, even among secular people, that it is somehow improper to insult another human being, hurt his or her feelings or cause any psychological discomfort. Judaism¹ similarly counts one of the 613 mitzvot-commandments as an imperative to treat every person as one would treat himself or herself, to speak only positively about another person and even to care about the monetary assets of another person as much as the person would about one's own finances. This is based on the Mishna² which instructs a person to treat another human being with the same respect as he or she treats himself. But when it comes to the reasons behind these generally held attitudes, it is there that secular society and Judaism part company. The Midrash³ says that each time you embarrass another human being, you are also "diminishing" G-d Himself, as if it were, since the human being is created by G-d in His image.⁴

Based on this concept, we can understand a series of Jewish laws which are very different from those found in secular society, regarding the embarrassment of another person. For example, the second part of the verse,⁵ is perfectly understood and logical: "Do not put a stumbling block before a blind person." One can readily comprehend that a stumbling block placed before a blind person (literally or figuratively) will cause that blind person harm when he or she trips upon it and falls. However, the first commandment in that same verse says, "You shall not curse a deaf person." Here, it is difficult to understand what kind of harm can possibly come to a deaf person who is cursed. Since he or she will not hear the curse, and no one will know or get hurt by this curse, why is it prohibited? But, if the reason is viewed in the context of the Midrash referred to earlier, it can be readily understood. While the deaf person is not being harmed through the curse, the Creator of that deaf person, G-d and His image is certainly "belittled" through that curse.

By the same reasoning, Jewish law states that a person may not even curse himself or herself.⁶ On

1 Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 6:3

2 Avot 2:10

3 Midrash Beraishit Rabbah 24:7

4 Genesis 1:27

5 Leviticus 19:14

6 Mishnah, Shavuot 4:13

the surface one may question why this should be forbidden. One can easily understand why an individual may not make others feel bad, but why are you not allowed to harm yourself? But since you, too, are a creation of G-d, He is still “demeaned” if you curse yourself. Even if you do not personally mind, G-d, your Creator does mind. It is for that same reason that a person may not cause harm to his or her body.⁷ It really belongs to G-d, not to the individual, and even if the person does not mind, G-d, the owner does mind. This aspect of embarrassment will be explored more deeply later in the chapter.

This reasoning, that embarrassing or hurting an individual is prohibited because it also “hurts” G-d as Creator, in no way minimizes the other reasons for this prohibition -- that it also causes pain to the other person. Judaism certainly recognizes the severity of this component of the transgression as well. A person who publicly embarrasses another loses his or her share in the World to Come.⁸ This Mishna is codified as law by Maimonides as part of Jewish law.⁹ Thus, while a murderer does not necessarily lose his or her share in the World to Come, a person guilty of embarrassing does lose his or her share of the World to Come, demonstrating that embarrassing another person, in a certain sense, is more severe than murder. Clearly, Judaism looks upon psychological damage to a human being as even greater than physical damage.¹⁰ Why is the punishment for causing psychological pain more severe than that for causing physical pain, according to Jewish law? There are two reasons. First, physical pain can often heal and usually abates over time. Psychological pain of embarrassment, especially in public, can sometimes last forever, and usually takes a much longer to heal than physical pain, if it heals at all. Second, psychological pain cannot be easily assuaged, while physical pain can often be reduced or even eliminated entirely through pain killing drugs or eliminated through surgery. Nothing the person says after publicly embarrassing another individual can possibly undo the damage. Apologies, even publicly, do not remove the pain.

Both injured parties, the person who has been insulted as well as G-d Himself, are part of the teshuva (repentance) process in Judaism. Although a sinner has to repent to G-d for all sins (both those between man and G-d and man to man), the process of man to man teshuva is not complete (even after one has done Teshuva to G-d) until amends have been made to the injured party and forgiveness has been received from him or her.¹¹ Thus, a person's hurt goes even beyond the hurt felt by G-d and is a separate component of the sin of demeaning a person's dignity. This dual aspect of sin can be seen in a general philosophic argument between Ben Azai and Rabbi Akiva.¹² In describing which verse encompasses the general and essential principle of the Torah, Rabbi Akiva states that it is, "Love you neighbor as yourself."¹³ Ben Azai, however, disagrees and states the all-encompassing principle is, "This is the story of humanity, when G-d created the first human being in His image."¹⁴ While Rabbi Akiva places the greater emphasis on the relationship between man and man, Ben Azai feels that the essence of how man should behave towards his fellow man is based on the concept that man is created in G-d's image. Both principles are valid and not

7 Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 1:4

8 Avot 3:11

9 Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 3:7

10 Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 5:9

11 Maimonides, Hilchot Teshuvah 2:9

12 Bereishit Rabbah 24:7 and Sifra on Kedoshim 4:12

13 Leviticus 19:18

14 Genesis 5:1

incompatible. Embarrassing another human being does violate both these concepts.

HOW IMPORTANT IS PRESERVING SOMEONE'S DIGNITY?

Since this mitzvah-commandment is so important, it will be shown that both the Torah and the rabbis went to great lengths in order to preserve a person's dignity. The Talmud¹⁵ says that maintaining dignity is so important, that one may even violate a negative mitzvah for the sake of preserving dignity. Later authorities rule that a person may violate any Rabbinic (not Biblical) injunction rather than violate and individual's dignity.¹⁶ Since most of Jewish law is Rabbinic, not Biblical in nature, therefore most practices in Judaism can be violated if fulfilling these Jewish laws would necessitate violating a person's dignity. When, for example, a Jew has to choose between fulfilling the mitzvah of reading the Megillah on Purim and burying the dead (where no one else is available to bury), the Talmud inquires which takes precedence -- the dignity of the human body (even after death) or publicizing the miracle of Purim, to fulfil one's Jewish legal obligation? The Talmud¹⁷ clearly states that the dignity of the dead takes precedence. The Talmud goes on to say that this mitzvah, burying the dead and not letting the body remained shamed unburied, is so important, that even a High Priest, who may not willfully become impure by going to the grave of even his closest relatives, must become impure and bury this stranger if he is the only person around. How much more so must Jews be sensitive to the dignity of those still alive.

The Torah itself shows its sensitivity to the concept of not embarrassing anyone. The verse¹⁸ says that the place that the burnt offering is offered should be the same place in the Temple that the sin offering (for accidental sins) is brought. The Talmud¹⁹ explains that the Torah is trying to protect the identity of those who brought a sin offering, so that no one could tell by looking at a particular place in the Temple if the people were sinners or not.

When the offering of the First Fruits (*Bikurim*) were brought to the Temple, a number of verses had to be read along with the offering of the first fruits. Since not everyone could read the words perfectly, the Rabbis²⁰ instituted a rule that there should be permanent readers to read for everyone. It would not suffice merely to have readers for those who could not read, since their illiteracy would be obvious and highlighted. By having a permanent reader, no one would know who could and could not read, avoiding embarrassment. This is the practice adopted today in most Ashkenazic synagogues regarding Torah reading on Shabbat. In a similar manner today, since most Ashkenazic Jews cannot read the Torah with the proper melody, a Torah reader is designated to read for everyone, even those who can read, in order to avoid embarrassment. In the same way, it was the custom in earlier times to bring food to a Shiva house (house of Jewish mourning). However, the poor used to bring food in plain baskets while the rich brought in fancier baskets, which caused embarrassment to the poor. Therefore, the Rabbis²¹ instituted a custom that

15 Berachot 19b

16 Maimonides, Hilchot Kelayim 10:29

17 Megillah 3b

18 Leviticus 6:18

19 Sotah 32b

20 Mishnah, Bikurim 3:7

21 Mo'ed Katan 27a

everyone must bring food in a plain basket to the house of mourning. (It is interesting to note that by the First Fruit offering, where the rich and poor baskets were of different quality, the Rabbis did not institute a similar provision making all the baskets the same. The reason for the distinction, according to the Tosafot Yom Tov, is that there is a principle in the Temple²² that there is no greatness in the place of the Temple. This either signifies that since everyone is either overwhelmed by the grandeur of the Temple, and, thus, the poor are not embarrassed any more than others, OR since the spirituality of the Temple is so overwhelming, the poor [like others] were concerned only about spiritual matters in the Temple [like proper reading] and not concerned with the physical differences of the baskets.) The Rabbis, taking their cue from the Torah, instructed that the essence of prayer, the Amidah, be a silent prayer, so that when people enumerated their personal sins in the prayer, they could not be overheard.²³ Jewish law is often more sophisticated and sensitive than the courts of the twenty first century. One of the five categories of payment for damages is for embarrassment, based on a Torah verse.²⁴ Even though this payment was subjective and according to strict tables of embarrassment,²⁵ nevertheless, the Talmud²⁶ states that even the "lowest" poor person still was paid significantly for embarrassment since he or she is a member of the Jewish people, automatically giving him or her stature and dignity.

In another effort to protect the identity of the poor and not embarrass them, it was a custom on the fifteenth of the month of Av for all the eligible young women to dress up, and for the eligible bachelors to meet them. Since it would be embarrassing if the poor women put on their best clothes next to the rich women who put on their best clothes, the edict was issued that all the girls would exchange their best dresses with each other, so that no man would know who was poor and who was rich, avoiding any unnecessary embarrassment.²⁷ On a daily level, the manner in which a person properly fulfills the mitzvah of tzedaka (Jewish charity) depends on maintaining the dignity of the poor person. The entire eight-step hierarchy of giving tzedaka, according to Maimonides,²⁸ depends on embarrassing the poor person as little as possible. That is why the highest level of tzedaka is giving the poor person a job or a loan (this idea is expanded upon in the chapter about "Tzedaka-Jewish Charity").

The sensitivity in preserving a person's dignity in the synagogue can be seen in two separate instances, one which we follow in Jewish law and one we do not. If a person had a father who was known to be a terrible sinner and is an embarrassment to the son, then when the son is called up to the Torah, he should not be called up as the son of that sinner, since that would compromise his dignity, but rather he should be called as the son of his grandfather.²⁹ However, if he had been previously called up in his father's name and now people would be sensitive to this changed name, thus calling attention to the father and causing embarrassment, then it is preferable to call him up by his father's name. The second case involves the Torah reader. In many synagogues today, Jews are very careful to make sure every word is pronounced

22 Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat 62b

23 Sotah 32b

24 Deuteronomy 25:11

25 Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 3:1 and 3:7

26 Bava Kama 90b

27 Taanit 31a

28 Maimonides, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:7-14

29 Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 139:3, Ramah

properly. In order to fulfill the obligation to read the Torah properly, according to Maimonides,³⁰ the reader must repeat any error in reading, even a grammatical mistake, and he must return to the original place of the mistake and reread the verse. However, Tur³¹ cites another opinion of the *Manhig* who says that if a Torah reader makes a mistake, even if he mispronounced *Aaron* as *Charan* (changing the meaning entirely), the congregation does not make him go back at all because this would be undignified and embarrassing to him (calling attention to his poor reading). Although we do not follow this view today in Jewish law, this opinion indicates that care and dignity and proper sensitivity not to hurt someone's feelings must be taken into account for all public Jewish servants.

SEVERITY OF THE SIN

The Jewish view about those who do not retain the dignity of another person is extremely severe. When the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva (all great Torah scholars in their own right, as students of Rabbi Akiva) did not respect each other properly, they all died in a plague because of this sin.³² The Talmud³³ proves from the Torah story about Tamar and Judah that it is better to die in a furnace than embarrass someone. Tamar was willing to die rather than reveal publicly that her father-in-law, Judah, had sexual relations with her.³⁴ (Of course, at the end, Tamar was able to convey to Judah who she was through a code, so that he was thus not publicly embarrassed.) This concept is further demonstrated in a Talmudic story³⁵ in which Mar Ukva used to secretly supply food for a poor man. One day, when the poor man sought to find out who was doing this great deed, and rather than be "caught" (which would embarrass the poor man), Mar Ukva jumped into a furnace and burned his feet. He later stated that it is preferable to be burned in a furnace than embarrass anyone publicly. This comment and the story of Mar Ukva is not mere hyperbole, rather it is meant to let Jews know intellectually how serious this sin is. The Tosafot commentary³⁶ rules this way in Jewish law! They say that avoiding embarrassment actually takes precedence over a person's life. And the only reason that this is not publicized as one of the "Big Three" sins/commandments that one dies rather than violate, is that human dignity and embarrassment are not spelled out in the Torah. Nevertheless, Tosafot rules that preserving human dignity supersedes human life.

EVEN THE DIGNITY OF SINNERS

Judaism is so sensitive to preserve a person's dignity, that it goes out of its way even to preserve the dignity of sinners, such as protecting the identity of those who brought the sin offering in the Temple and in the institution of the Silent Prayer, as noted above. However, other examples abound. When a person was a cold-blooded killer who was warned and then convicted by witnesses, the Jewish court killed and then hung this person. Nevertheless, even this person's dignity had to be preserved as the Torah³⁷ forbids hanging the body for too long, as a sign of humiliation.³⁸

30 Maimonides, Hilchot Nesi'at Kapayim 12:6

31 Tur, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 142

32 Yevamot 62b

33 Berachot 43b

34 Genesis 38:24-25

35 Ketuvot 67b

³⁶ Tosafot commentary on Sotah 10b, s.v. "Noach"

37 Deuteronomy 21:22-23

38 Sanhedrin 46b

A thief is obligated to pay back four times the value of a stolen calf but five times the value of a larger animal stolen such as an ox.³⁹ When the Talmud⁴⁰ asks why the different amounts, Rabbi Yochanan says that Judaism even cares about the dignity of the thief. Since he had to carry the calf on his shoulders (an undignified act), he pays only four times the value, but as the ox could walk under its own power, the thief pays back five times the amount.

Even when sinners in the Torah had to be killed, they died, where possible, in a manner that would embarrass them least. According to one explanation in Rashi on the verse about leaving Egypt,⁴¹ only one-fifth of the Jews left Egypt, while the other four-fifths were sinners and perished during the plague of Darkness. It is believed that they died then so that they would not be unnecessarily embarrassed to die publicly – when the remaining Jews as well as the Egyptians would be aware of their deaths. In a similar comment, when Moses asks for Elders to help him rule,⁴² Rashi⁴³ asks where were the original Elders from Egypt. He explains that they had sinned by not showing proper respect at Mount Sinai⁴⁴ and should have died then. But G-d waited for many months until a plague was brought to kill other sinners,⁴⁵ and the Elders then died as well, so that they were not needlessly embarrassed in public, drawing attention specifically to them.

Thus, the importance of maintaining a person's dignity in Judaism cannot be overstated. One commentary⁴⁶ calls this quality of human dignity the most endearing and beloved quality in all of Judaism. Of all the blessings to choose in exalting another Talmud scholar, one Torah sage blessed another sage⁴⁷ by praying that "You never cause anyone else embarrassment and may you never be caused any embarrassment yourself". May all Jews follow this dictum.

DWARF TOSSING -- RENOUNCING ONE'S OWN DIGNITY

What in the world is "Dwarf Tossing"? It is a recent recreational competition, popular in some bars, in which little people wearing special padded clothing or Velcro costumes are thrown onto mattresses or at Velcro-coated walls. (The terms "dwarfs" and "little people" may be used interchangeably in this chapter since the sport is called "dwarf tossing.") Participants compete to determine who can throw the dwarf the farthest. In the 2004 *Dodgeball* film comedy, a magazine titled *Obscure Sports Quarterly* featured midget tossing. But this sport is not mere fantasy. In 2011, Peter Dinklage, who won as best supporting actor at the Golden Globes Awards for his role in the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, ended his acceptance speech with an unusual acknowledgement. He thanked "the usual folks — his wife, mom, newborn daughter," and then he mysteriously added to

39 Exodus 21:37

40 Bava Kama 79b

41 Rashi commentary on Exodus 13:18

42 Numbers 11:14

43 Rashi commentary on Numbers 11:16

44 Exodus 24:11

45 Numbers 11:1

46 Malbim commentary to Berachot 19b

47 Moed Katan 9b

that list “a gentleman in England I’m thinking about, Martin Henderson.” Rather than elaborate, he implored the viewing audience to ‘Google him.’ Within minutes, Martin Henderson was a trending topic on Twitter as people learned about the British dwarf and the vicious attack on him. Henderson was an aspiring actor who appeared as a goblin in two of the *Harry Potter* films and was left badly injured after a drunken stranger picked him up and threw him to the ground outside a pub in England last October. Since suffering tissue damage to his back, he has been unable to walk properly.

What, then, is this topic doing in a book about Jewish values? Apparently, because it is a popular sport and many little people cannot get other work, they willingly participate because it provides them with a sizable income. If they voluntarily take part in the activity, unlike Martin Henderson, is there any moral problem? The ethical issue involved is that the act of dwarf tossing, or an offshoot called “dwarf bowling,” is highly degrading to the little people. The question, then, is that if a person willingly degrades himself (for a paycheck or for any other reason), should society and Judaism allow him or her to do so?

Efforts have been exerted to ban this activity specifically because it is humiliating, even if the little people are willing and active participants. As far back as 1990, the Governor of New York, Mario Cuomo, signed a bill banning dwarf tossing. But the law limited the ban only to bars serving alcohol. In Ontario, Canada, the Dwarf Tossing Ban Act was introduced by MPP Sandra Pupatello in 2003. This private member's public bill did not proceed beyond its introduction to second or third readings, nor did it receive royal assent, and therefore died at the close of the 37th Legislature. The mayor of the small French town of Morsang-sur-Orge prohibited dwarf tossing. On September 27, 2002, the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights judged that the decision was not discriminatory with respect to little people. It ruled that the ban on dwarf tossing was not abusive, but necessary to protect public order, including considerations of human dignity. Nevertheless, dwarf tossing is not prohibited outright in France. The *Conseil d'État* decided that a public authority could use gross infringement on human dignity as a motive of public order to cancel a spectacle, and that dwarf tossing constituted such a gross infringement. However, it is the responsibility of individual authorities to make specific decisions regarding prohibition.

What does Judaism believe about this or any other activity which clearly abuses human dignity (even the willing little people participants are not proud of what they do), but the people being abused do not mind the humiliation, especially if they are paid well?

There are two main ethical, moral and legal issues in Judaism concerning an activity such as this one. One is the question of whether a person is allowed to intentionally harm himself (or allow others to harm him). The other question is whether a human being has an ethical right to demean himself or herself.

CAN A JEW HARM HIMSELF OR HERSELF INTENTIONALLY?

Before discussing the ethics of degrading oneself from a Jewish perspective, the first issue that needs to be addressed is if a Jew may intentionally harm himself or herself. It seems to be a dry

Jewish law question, but there are actually many Jewish values involved in investigating this issue, and in the final analysis, the Jewish law in this area is not so clear-cut.

When the Torah allowed Noah to eat meat for the first time (until that time man was commanded to be a vegetarian), the verse says that man can spill the blood of an animal but not the blood of a human being.⁴⁸ Rashi comments⁴⁹ on this verse that not only can we not spill another human being's blood, but we may not spill even our own blood. This not only refers to the prohibition of suicide, but even to "literally" spilling one's own blood by intentionally hurting oneself. Rashi makes this comment as if this prohibition is a foregone conclusion, but this issue is actually based on an argument by two Tanaaim (rabbis in the Mishna).⁵⁰ Rabbi Elazar says it is permitted for a person to harm himself, while Rabbi Eliezer HaKappar says it is forbidden, since a person may not even deny himself any enjoyment in this world. Thus, the pain caused by hurting oneself would be forbidden.

On this Talmudic passage, Meiri commentary says this sin of harming oneself is only rabbinically forbidden but not prohibited by the Torah.⁵¹ Maimonides seems to agree with this view,⁵² citing the case where a Jew makes an oath that he will not harm himself, and he rules that the oath is valid. It is an established Jewish law that any oath that prohibits an action already forbidden to a Jew (because the Torah forbade it) is an invalid oath.⁵³ Thus, the fact that Maimonides considers this oath to be valid proves that this law of not harming oneself is not a Torah law, but only prohibited by the rabbis. A commentary on Maimonides explains this concept, and clearly says that the prohibition of harming oneself is rabbinic, based on a *Drash*-inference in the verse, but not a Torah law.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, whether forbidden rabbinically or by the Torah, Maimonides rules that it is prohibited for any Jew to harm his or her body intentionally. This applies to minors or adults, men or women. Just as it is prohibited for a person to harm someone else's body and cause injury, it is likewise forbidden to damage one's own body.⁵⁵ Based on this ruling, it should be clear that a little person may not have his body intentionally damaged, even for money, and that dwarf tossing would be forbidden as well for the customers in the bar who intentionally throw the little person and cause damage to his or her body. But two inferences in this law quoted by Maimonides cloud the issue somewhat.

Why not? Since every person is the master of his or her own body, why can't each individual decide to damage or not damage that body? One commentary⁵⁶ explains that if a person's body truly belongs to himself or herself, then self-incrimination for a sin, which would bring about a punishment

⁴⁸ Genesis 9:5-6

⁴⁹ Rashi commentary on Genesis 9:5

⁵⁰ Bava Kama 91b

⁵¹ Beit HaBechira on Bava Kama 91b

⁵² Maimonides, Hilchot Shavuot 5:17

⁵³ Maimonides, Nedarim 3:7

⁵⁴ Radvaz commentary on Maimonides, Hilchot Shavuot 5:17

⁵⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 5:1

⁵⁶ Radvaz commentary on Maimonides, Hilchot Sanhedrin 18:6

on the body, such as lashes, would certainly be permitted. But since a human being does not own his or her body, and it belongs to G-d, G-d does not permit that person to intentionally bring pain (punishment of lashes, for example) on that which does not belong to him or her. A Jew can decide to damage his or her own property, but one's body is not one's property in Judaism. Therefore, a Jew is forbidden to incriminate himself in a Jewish court, since this would bring punishment on that body which is not his to begin with. This (in addition to similar laws) teaches us that a person's body is not his or hers to do with what he or she wants. Our bodies are only loaned to us by G-d, and we can use them in a reasonable manner as any borrowed object may be used by the borrower, but not unreasonably. Harming "G-d's property" -- i.e., our bodies -- is forbidden. That is the reason that just as it is forbidden to harm someone else's body (which does not belong to him), a Jew is forbidden to harm his or her body (which is likewise not one's property). G-d emphasizes the notion that all bodies actually belong to him in a verse in Ezekiel.⁵⁷

OPINIONS THAT MAN CAN HARM HIS OWN BODY – WHEN AND WHY

Although Maimonides clearly forbids anyone, including little people, from harming their bodies intentionally, Tur⁵⁸ rules that a person can indeed damage himself or herself, based on the alternative opinion in the Talmud cited above, and one of the later commentaries.⁵⁹ According to this (minority) view, "dwarf tossing" might indeed be permitted. An interesting Talmudic passage seems to support this idea. Rabbi Chisda used to have to walk through a very thorny garden every day in order to arrive at a certain place. The Talmud records⁶⁰ that he used to lift his clothes while walking through this garden and intentionally let his body become cut from the thorns, rather than cut his clothes, as he reasoned that the cuts would eventually heal, but the damaged clothing would have to be repaired each time, which would be costly. Thus, Rabbi Chisda intentionally let his body be cut and harmed. A later commentary says that we rule like Rabbi Chisda, who was a noted Talmudic rabbi (against the view of Maimonides above).⁶¹ A modern Jewish law authority⁶² rules that a Jew can indeed harm himself if he has a legitimate reason to do so (like Rabbi Chisda did), which includes the permissibility to have cosmetic surgery. This seems to be supported in the Shulchan Aruch, Code of Jewish law,⁶³ which discusses the case of a son (who normally is forbidden to strike or harm his father or mother) who is a doctor, and is needed to operate on his parent. If he is the only person available to do the surgery, it is permitted -- even though it violates this prohibition -- because the harming and damage in this case is for a positive purpose. Therefore, if a little person were to argue that a sizable paycheck is a legitimate reason to let himself be harmed, it may be possible to say that in this particular case, according to these latter minority opinions, this reason might be enough of a justification to permit such an action and to allow this controversial occupation. This point remains a disagreement between later decisors of Jewish law. Rabbi Joseph Babad (1800-1874)⁶⁴ agrees with

⁵⁷ Ezekiel 18:4

⁵⁸ Tur, Choshen Mishpat 420

⁵⁹ Beit Yosef commentary on Tur, Choshen Mishpat 420

⁶⁰ Bava Kama 91b

⁶¹ Shita Mekubetzet commentary on Bava Kama 91b

⁶² Responsa Chelkat Yaakov, Choshen Mishpat 31

⁶³ Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 241:3

⁶⁴ Minchat Chinuch, Mitzvah 48:3

this last Jewish position, and says that if a person requests that another individual to hit him or her, it is perfectly permissible, both for the person who will be hit as well as the person who will be doing the hitting or throwing (as in our case). Thus, from his perspective, dwarf-tossing might indeed be permissible in Jewish law. However, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe, in his book of Jewish law, vehemently disagrees.⁶⁵ Because our bodies do not belong to us, it is forbidden for to us to decide how they should be used or misused, and he prohibits anyone to strike anyone else, even if the person requests or even begs the other individual to hit him. According to this opinion, therefore, not only would the little person in the bar be forbidden to let himself be intentionally damaged, but the person tossing the dwarf and doing the damage will also be committing a sin.

CAN A JEW INTENTIONALLY DEGRADE OR HUMILIATE HIMSELF OR HERSELF?

After discussing above whether a person has the right to harm himself or herself intentionally, another crucial issue to be analyzed is whether a person can intentionally perform an act which is clearly undignified to himself, merely because he or she wants to. Can a person decide to humiliate himself if he or she desires to do so? If a person is not (psychologically) hurting anyone but himself, is there anything morally wrong with self-degradation? Although many people might argue that morally each person has the right to do what he or she wants, as long as he/she does not injure or offend someone else, would Judaism agree with this premise? Is there any Jewish value preventing someone from degrading himself or herself?

On the surface, it seems that a person can indeed humiliate himself if he wants to do so. The Torah⁶⁶ tells the Jew to love his fellow man as much as he loves himself. If he does not love himself, it seems that he should be able to "dislike someone" as much as he dislikes himself. In a similar manner, the Mishna states⁶⁷ that a friend's dignity or honor should be the same as one's personal dignity or honor, implying that it is certainly permitted for a person to desist from honoring himself. Moreover, Avot DeRabbi Natan seems even clearer:⁶⁸ if a person does not want others to dishonor him, then he should not dishonor others. If a person does not want others to speak badly about him, he should not speak badly about others. The clear inference is that if a person does not care about his own honor or dignity, it might be permitted to dishonor others.

In fact, the Talmud discusses this very question: may a person renounce his honor, his dignity? After a long discussion about a king, Maimonides rules⁶⁹ that a king may not renounce his dignity, because the office must be respected regardless of the person. But it seems that this law is only in regard to a Jewish king because of that office. It seems that every other kind of Jew can indeed renounce his or her honor. Thus while a king's honor must be preserved, the Talmud states⁷⁰ that a

⁶⁵ Shulchan Aruch Harav, Hilchot Nizkei Guf ViNefesh 4

⁶⁶ Leviticus 19:18

⁶⁷ Mishna Avot 2:10

⁶⁸ Avot DeRabbi Natan 15

⁶⁹ Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishna, Sotah 7:8

⁷⁰ Ketuvot 17a

Nasi-president or head of a Rabbinic college may indeed renounce his honor. Even parents may renounce their honor expected from their child, but a rabbi may not renounce his dignity because of the holiness of Torah which the rabbi represents.⁷¹ Later authorities in Jewish law did confirm that a parent may indeed renounce his or her dignity or honor.⁷² Based on all of the above, it seems clear that a dwarf who wants to humiliate himself or herself may indeed do so. And yet, this Jewish idea is not so clear-cut.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PERSON'S HONOR AND A PERSON'S HUMILIATION

In explaining the ruling of the Tur regarding who is permitted and who is forbidden to renounce his honor, Rabbi Yosef Karo⁷³ differentiates between the Hebrew word discussed until now, *kavod*, which we have translated as honor or dignity, and the Hebrew word *bizayon*, which is translated as humiliation. *Kavod* is the positive honor that people usually bestow upon parents, elected officials and rabbis. It is that positive honor that is debated in the Talmud – i.e., whether each individual may legally relinquish it or not. But even if these symbols of honor may be renounced, it is never permitted in Judaism to humiliate any of these people. In fact, we will show that no human being may ever be humiliated at all, no matter what his status in life (or death).

As cited above, the Mishna says that anyone who humiliates any other human being in public loses his or her share in the World to Come.⁷⁴ This includes not humiliating a rabbi, president, parent or any human being. The expression for humiliation in the Talmud is to “*Malbin Pnai Chavero*-whiten someone's face” because when a person is embarrassed or humiliated, the blood rushes out from the face, leaving a person looking pale. Maimonides codifies this idea, and rules that someone who humiliates or embarrasses someone publicly indeed loses his or her share in the World to Come.⁷⁵ The seriousness of the sin of humiliating others was demonstrated above. Humiliating oneself seems to be no less forbidden and no less serious.

HUMILIATING ONESELF – WHY IT IS FORBIDDEN

Just as it is forbidden for the dwarf to curse himself because cursing oneself also humiliates G-d, so too it is forbidden for that dwarf or little person to humiliate himself or herself. In addition to the degradation of that human being, the humiliation also degrades G-d, the Creator of that little person. No matter how much a person might claim to the contrary, every person certainly feels degraded when he or she is used as a bowling ball or an object to be thrown. Thus, while people may choose to forgo their honor, they can never decide to forgo their dignity. Humiliating oneself, even for money, would be forbidden in Judaism as an act that disrespects both the person and G-d.

⁷¹ Kiddushin 32a

⁷² Tur, Yoreh Deah 240, Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 143:17

⁷³ Beit Yosef commentary on Tur, Yoreh Deah 334

⁷⁴ Mishna Avot 3:11

⁷⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Chovel Umazik 3:7

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