

“People’s Feelings Matter”

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Amud 19b

In this week's *amud* we learned about human dignity and respect we are obligated to show others. *Rashi* (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki 1040-1105) teaches us that our Rabbis were so concerned for the prestige of every man that, at times, “*they forgave their own honor for the honor of a person*”. The specific case where this was discussed in the *gemara*, is when people are escorting a mourner back from a funeral and the mourner walks on a path which is Rabbinically forbidden for a Kohen to go. They should yield “*their honor*” regarding this prohibition for the honor of the mourner. Obviously, this *gemara* does not give us the license to decide what is a worthy situation to waive a *halacha*, be it biblical or rabbinic, but it does give us an idea of the extreme concern our sages had for human emotions and feelings.

The Rosh Yeshiva of the famed Mir Yeshiva in Jerusalem, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz (1902-1979), points out a fascinating example of this concept, not by our sages, but by Hashem Himself. He cites the story of *Bil'am*'s attempted curses of the Jewish nation. On the way, *Bil'am*'s trusted donkey didn't follow his directives three times, and *Bil'am* hit it for each time. Finally, after the third time *Bil'am*'s eyes were opened and he saw the angel that heretofore only the donkey had been able to see. The angel chastises *Bil'am* for striking his donkey and the donkey proceeds to converse with *Bil'am*, revealing *Bil'am*'s despicable behavior and embarrassing him in front of the Moabite officers traveling with him.

The *Medrash* tells us that *Bil'am*'s donkey died immediately after rebuking his master. *Rashi* explains that it had to die so people would not see it and say “this is the donkey that chastised *Bil'am*”. Hashem was concerned for the honor of *Bil'am* and caused the donkey to die. Why was Hashem concerned for *Bil'am*'s honor? He wanted to destroy the Jewish nation? Furthermore, when people would see this donkey, it would be a tremendous sanctification of G-d's name. This was the animal that set Bilam straight!

Rav Chaim Shmulevitz learns from this *Medrash* that, despite all there was to gain by keeping the donkey alive, it was not worth it. To G-d, a human being's honor, even a person such as *Bil'am*, is too dear to allow such degradation to happen.

Obviously, this concept does not absolve a person from consequences he may deserve because of his behavior, nor are we expected to accept such a person's actions or beliefs. However, we must realize that if G-d went such great lengths for *Bil'am*'s dignity despite his deserving of death for his terrible deeds, all the more so we are obligated to treat our fellow human beings with respect and always be concerned for their feelings no matter how wrong or misguided they may be.