

MALBIN PNEI CHAVERO

Background

We know that there are various levels of sins in the Torah. While all transgressions are quite serious, there is an order to significance: some carry lashes as their punishment, some premature death, and in the highest category are those that carry the death penalty. In this category are those acts that the Torah views as so wicked that for transgressing them, one has lost his lease on life.

Questions

We are well aware that living with a married woman is considered a grave sin. And violating it certainly carries the death penalty. However, embarrassing one's friend doesn't seem to fit into this category. While being sensitive to another's pain of embarrassment certainly is a fine trait, it doesn't seem to rate as severe a sin as actually living with a married woman. But even further, the Gemara is telling us that this is one of the most severe sins that a human can engage in.

Why does the Torah exact such strict punishments for embarrassing a fellow man? And why does the Torah consider it such a grave crime?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נח/ב

כל היורדין לגיהנם עולים חוץ משלשה שיורדין ואין עולין ואלו הן הבא על אשת איש והמלבין פני חברו ברבים והמכנה שם רע לחבירו מכנה היינו מלבין אף על גב דדש ביה בשמיה

All who go down to Gehennom come up, except for three who go down and don't come up:

1. One who lives with a married woman
2. One who "whitens his friend's face" (thoroughly embarrasses his friend in public), and
3. One who calls his friend by a derogatory nickname.

Isn't calling someone by a nickname in the category of embarrassment, even if he is accustomed to being called by that name and no longer feels the embarrassment?

תלמוד בבלי מסכת בבא מציעא דף נט/א

נוח לו לאדם שיבא על ספק אשת איש ואל ילבין פני חברו ברבים

It is better for a man to live with a woman when there is a question of whether she is married or not rather than whiten his friend's face.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוטה דף י/ב

אמר רבי יוחנן משום ר' שמעון בן יוחי נוח לו לאדם שיפיל עצמו לתוך כבשן האש ואל ילבין פני חברו ברבים

Rebbe Yochanan said in the name of Rebbe Shimon Bar Yochai, "It is better for a man to throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than embarrass his friend in public."