

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Tzav

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Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the sin offering: The sin offering shall be slaughtered before the Lord in the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. It is a holy of holies.' (Leviticus 6:18)

The prohibition not to embarrass another person is hinted to in many places in the Torah. The Talmud cites in particular, the story of Yehudah (Judah) and Tamar (Genesis 38) which demonstrates the lengths one should go to in order to avoid embarrassing others (Bava Metsia, 58a-59b).

The Torah includes an important lesson in the verse cited above. The burnt offering was brought primarily as a voluntary offering or as part of a communal offering. A sin offering however, is brought uniquely as part of the atonement for errant behaviour.

The Talmud teaches us that G-d ruled that both offerings should be brought in the same place to avoid embarrassing the sinner (Sotah 32b). If a person's sin offering had to be brought in a special place, it would be obvious that that person had done something wrong. By having both offerings brought in the same place, no one would know if his offering was for a sin, or simply a burnt offering brought voluntarily.

Similarly, since we no longer have a temple, our prayers must replace the offerings. The Talmud explains that the reason we read the Amidah (standing prayer also known as the shemoneh esrei) silently, is so that those who wish to confess sinful behaviour before G-d can do so without embarrassing themselves.

Other examples include the Mishnah's exhortation not to gaze at another person during his moment of ruin (Ethics of our Fathers 4:23). For example, one should stop people from crowding round and staring at someone who is being attended to by the emergency services. Similarly, it is inappropriate to stare at someone who has made a mistake in public or who has become angry.

It is not only prohibited to embarrass others, but we must also go out of our way to avoid making a bad situation worse.

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