

Dear Community,

A gym is an excellent place to study the human species. The grunts and gasps from the victims of the expensive hamster wheels we inflict on ourselves force introspection into the frailty of the human condition. Some time ago I was ambling along on a treadmill, tearfully praying for the clearly Jewish boxer to win his match on the TV (prerecorded, as it turned out). I promised myself that I would keep running and praying for him until he emerged victorious. Unfortunately, as it turned out, this was a twelve-round match (not counting the commercials breaking up the rerun), so by round five I would have been ok with a swift knock-out in either direction. As my prayers began to shift from the young boxer to my aching legs, a young Adonis boarded the treadmill next to me. This fine, strapping lad turned on his treadmill and was soon doing a fast run while casting pitying glances in my direction.

After our Jew won his match, I walked into the sauna to recover and observe the local UN meeting that could always be found there. After a couple of minutes of welcome steam, Adonis himself walked in and sat down next to me. He turned to me and commented in a heavy Yiddish accent, “My body is a temple, my *avoda zarah* (idol).” The diplomats solving the Russia-Ukraine crisis next to me looked up at that. The older one, a sweet Hasidic man named Berel, retorted “*Dat’s* an *avoda zora!*?” sending Adonis scurrying upstairs to lift a few more barbells. After I left the gym, I started thinking about how Judaism views adoration, or at least admiration, of the human form. In this week’s Torah portion, we are introduced to a fascinating commandment. The Torah writes that after the Jewish court administers the death penalty for idol worship and heresy (opinion of the Rabbanan), the court is instructed to hang the corpse on a post to communicate to the populace the severity of the prohibition that this fellow violated. However, the body must be taken down before nightfall, as it is considering a tremendous indignity to the body to be left overnight. With the practicalities of dealing with a death penalty, combined with a deliberate delay to minimize the time on display (Sanhedrin 46b), this meant that the corpse was hanging for no more than several minutes before being taken down. If the Torah wanted to impress upon the viewers the severity of the sin, why not leave it up for a while? Conversely, if we are so concerned about the dignity of the human being, why do it at all?

We all have an intuitive notion of human dignity. Seeing an unfortunate person living on a street, covered in refuse, evokes not only pity at the discomfort this person must be enduring but a deep shame on his or her behalf. What is this sense of honor we feel humans are entitled to? Where does this intuitive sense of respect come from?

The Talmud gives an illuminating analogy when discussing the topic of taking down the corpse before nightfall. “Imagine a pair of identical twins. One was elevated to the position of ruler and one joined a band of thieves. After a few years, the thief was caught and sentenced to hang. After hanging for some time, the king began to hear

people claim that it was the king hanging from the gallows. The king immediately had the body taken down.” We, humble creatures of flesh and blood, are the identical twins of G-d? We resemble G-d? Isn't this extreme anthropomorphizing of G-d the province of Greek and Norse mythology? Don't we believe that G-d has no form? Was my gym rat friend correct in his deification of his body?

The human form is not simply a material entity, similar to the physical form of an animal. Yes, our DNA may be 99% identical, but this does not make us a beast. Our sages tell us that the human characteristic of walking upright highlights our role in joining heaven and earth. We place our hands on our children when we bless them because blessing can flow through our fingers. We watch what we eat, understanding that what becomes part of our physical makeup, becomes part of our spiritual self as well. On Shabbos and Yom Tov, we eat, drink and enjoy the physical. Our bodies and minds convert the seemingly mundane dish to a spiritual delicacy. The spiritual and transformative power of a simple human being is far beyond what we could possibly grasp. The Talmud teaches us that the closest being to humans are not animals, but G-d.

Yes, this person who worshiped idols, rejecting G-d's (and by extension, his own) divinity, still needs to be displayed to highlight what he was rejecting. By choosing to serve other gods or simply to serve himself, he rejects the divinity of G-d and himself. For this his body is displayed, to teach others the lessons of divinity and sanctity that he failed to absorb. However, ultimately, even this sinner, this person who refused G-d in his life, is still human, still divine, and as such needs to be treated with dignity.

How much more so must we treat each other with tremendous dignity. When we are kind to others how often do we adopt a patronizing, condescending affect? Do we worry more about a victim's dignity or our image as the white knight? We expect the poor and the disadvantaged to be constantly thankful, appreciative of our meager gifts. Human dignity is not merely a sweet humanistic ideal. It is a distinct awareness of the greatness of G-d and of ourselves. It motivates us to treat each other with the respect that is due divinity, and obligates us to use this amazing power we have been gifted.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein