

Blasphemous Rumors*****

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You have probably heard by now about the troubling and, frankly, insidious social-media shaming campaign that came in reaction to a drag performance by a student at Great Neck North High School this week.

In case you're unfamiliar with this, North High School holds an annual Coffee House event, which the school district describes as "a voluntary, extracurricular social event formatted as an open mic night for high school students. The event provides a forum for students' individuality and expression."

At this year's Coffee House last week, a 16-year-old sophomore at the school chose to perform a dance while dressed in drag.

Someone in the room captured the dance on video and circulated it online. Not surprisingly, the video made its way into local WhatsApp chats and onto social media.

In short order, the video was picked up by a Twitter feed called "libsoftiktok"—which, it's worth noting, is run by a young Jewish woman named Chaya Raichik.

Raichik uses her Twitter feed to expose what she considers to be efforts by woke liberals to indoctrinate children about gender ideology; and, to her, what she saw on the video from North High School fit the bill.

So, apparently without doing any research to figure out what was going on, Raichik shared the video of this 16-year-old student with her 2,000,000-plus followers, accompanied by a blurb saying:

"Great Neck North High School in NY reportedly held a drag show last week with students in attendance. The drag queen performed a sexual dance and spread his legs for students."

Local agitators in Great Neck got in on the action, too, including a former school board candidate and even our U.S. congressman.

But Raichik's description of the event was factually incorrect: The school did *not* hold a "drag show"; it held a student talent show, at which one student—a minor, mind you—chose to perform in drag.

Her post seemed to conflate this boy's act in a student talent show with the phenomenon of schools hiring outside adults to perform acts like Drag Queen Storytime.

Had she attempted to verify what was going on before spreading the video online, she would have discovered that her assumption was wrong.

But it seems she didn't try—presumably because it didn't really matter. What mattered was that the video appeared to fit with the narrative she wanted to tell.

And, in our highly polarized and toxic culture today, that's enough.

So, we post first and ask questions later—if we ask them at all.

And, generally, we don't because, well, the people in the videos are not really *people* to us. They're just *objects*, bit players in the political or social drama that consumes us at the moment, tools to make our point.

And making our point is the most important thing, even if it comes at the cost of causing immense anguish to an innocent family and defaming a school and stirring it up in the community.

Public shaming and distortion of reality like this are revolting.

All the more so, to me, in this case, because the people behind it are Jewish—and so is their victim.

So, especially because they are, I think it's worth offering some thoughts on their behavior based in the Torah.

Our parashah describes a situation where this guy comes into the Israelite camp and gets into a fight with another guy.

The first guy's blood starts to boil; and, in his anger and frustration, he curses God—and he is quickly punished for the crime of blasphemy.

And then, at the conclusion of the story, the Torah repeats a law that it's stated before: "If someone kills another human being—(*nefesh adam*, literally: 'a person's soul')—the killer shall be put to death." (*Lev. 24:17*)

Rabbi Hezekiah b. Manoach, a 13th-century French commentator, says that the Torah restated this law here to teach that people who start fights in the community can end up causing tragic consequences that they never intended—including even inadvertently causing people to die.¹

It seems like an extreme thing to say, until we think about the countless heartbreaking stories of teens who have taken their own lives because they saw no other way to escape the abusive cyberbullying targeted at them.

But our sages also recognize that a person doesn't have to die physically in order for their soul to be killed.

You probably know that the rabbis say that public shaming is tantamount to murder² because it desecrates the human soul.

And the midrash tells a parable: Just as a person who desecrates a coin imprinted with the image of the king desecrates the king himself, a person who desecrates a human being, who is imprinted with the image of God, desecrates God himself.³

So, one who publicly shames another person not only harms the soul of the person they're shaming; they also desecrate God. Meaning: They are guilty of blasphemy.

What these people did to this innocent high school student is blasphemy.

It's against the Torah, and they should repent for it and make it right. Immediately.

Unfortunately, as of this afternoon, the video is still up on libsoftiktok, and hundreds of thousands of people continue to view, comment, retweet, and get an outrage high on a post that not only dehumanizes this child, but is also, in fact, a lie.

To borrow a phrase from rabbinic literature: "Due to our many sins, the plague continues to spread."

We feel this incident more personally than usual because it's here in our community, and some of us know the boy and his family.

We know they're suffering, and we're ashamed and outraged that some other local people we know are responsible for that.

But we also know that this is not new or uncommon; this kind of thing happens every single day in our country, countless times a day.

Every time we click on a video of someone doing something that seems outrageous, and laugh at it, and share the link, without stopping to consider that person's humanity, we not only fuel the velocity and virality of the Internet, we also contribute to the toxic oversimplification and distortion of human life by reducing people to bit actors in our political and social narratives.

So, before we do it again, we should think about Great Neck North High School.

We should remember that blasphemous rumors desecrate the human spirit. They can even kill.

We should consider the words North High School PTA president—and our TBE board member—Jordana Levine wrote to the school administrators earlier this week:

"A lot of ugliness [has] reared its head," she said. "I, for one, can't live in that space. I feel like I'm continually having physical reactions to the hateful rhetoric that repeatedly gets spewed no matter the hot topic of the day."

But Jordana encouraged them not to despair and offered a message of hope.

"I wanted to share," she said, "that through the vileness of some people, there were many who spoke out and stood up for this student and this family. Because even if people don't necessarily agree with what this child did, many could and did say that spreading this video and saying these hateful and shameful comments is wrong.

"I was proud of the regulars who speak out, and even more so [of] the ones that we typically see associated with the 'other' side speaking out and saying please stop, this is wrong.

"It's the little things that can center us and help us see the good even when we are in the thick of the moment struggling to see the light."

1 Chizkuni, Lev. 24:17

2 Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia 58b

3 Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 20:14

*****The title of this sermon is an homage to Depeche Mode's song "Blasphemous Rumours," a painful meditation on tragedy and the fragility of life that offers an additional perspective on the tragic events of the week in Great Neck and our neighboring communities. [The lyrics can be found in this video.](#)