Rabbi Lauren Tuchman Webinar Series
Week 1
When Our Basic Values Aren’t So Basic Anymore
Source 1: Talmud Bavli Brachot 19B

This piece is taken from a larger conversation about treatment of and dignity for deceased persons.

The Gemara cites an additional proof from a baraita: Come and hear: Great is human dignity, as it overrides a prohibition in the Torah.

The Gemara asks: Why? Let us also say here: “There is neither wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel against the Lord.” Rav bar Shaba interpreted this prohibition, which is overridden by human dignity, before Rav Kahana as referring to the prohibition of:
“According to the Torah taught to you and the ruling handed down to you, you shall do, you shall not deviate to the left or the right from that which they tell you” (Deuteronomy 17:11). The Yeshiva students laughed at him, as the prohibition of “you shall not deviate” is by Torah law, like all other Torah prohibitions. Why should human dignity override it any more than any other Torah prohibition?

Rav Kahana replied to them: A great man has spoken, do not laugh at him. The Sages based all rabbinic law on the prohibition of “you shall not deviate”; however, due to concern for human dignity, the Sages permitted suspension of rabbinic law in cases where the two collide. All rabbinic decrees are predicated on the mitzva in the Torah to heed the judges in each generation and to never stray from their words. Therefore, when the Sages suspend a decree in the interest of preserving human dignity, human dignity is overriding a Torah prohibition. In any case, it only overrides rabbinic decrees.
Source 2: Talmud Bavli Chagiga 5B

§ The Gemara relates: Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi and Rabbi Ḥiyya were walking along the road. When they arrived at a certain city, they said: Is there a Torah scholar here whom we can go and greet? The people of the city said: There is a Torah scholar here but he is blind. Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: You sit here; do not demean your dignified status as Nasi to visit someone beneath your stature. I will go and greet him.
Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi grabbed him and went with him anyway, and together they greeted the blind scholar. When they were leaving him, he said to them: You greeted one who is seen and does not see; may you be worthy to greet the One Who sees and is not seen. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi said to Rabbi Ḥiyya: Now, if I had listened to you and not gone to greet him, you would have prevented me from receiving this blessing.
Having discussed the importance of reviewing one’s Torah study, the Gemara relates that Rabbi Perida had a certain student whom he would have to teach four hundred times, and only then would he learn the material, as he was incapable of understanding it otherwise. One day they requested Rabbi Perida’s presence for a mitzva matter after the lesson. Rabbi Perida taught his student four hundred times as usual, but this time the student did not successfully learn the material.
Rabbi Perida said to him: What is different now that you are unable to grasp the lesson? He said to him: From the time that they said to the Master that there is a mitzva matter for which he is needed, my mind was distracted from the lesson and every moment I said: Now the Master will get up, now the Master will get up to go and perform the mitzva and he will not complete the lesson. Rabbi Perida said to him: Pay attention this time and I will teach you, and know that I will not leave until you have fully mastered the lesson. He taught him again an additional four hundred times.
Due to the merit of Rabbi Perida’s great devotion to his students, a Divine Voice emerged and said to him: Is it preferable to you that four hundred years be added to your life, or that you and the rest of your generation will merit the World-to-Come? He said: I prefer that I and my generation merit the World-to-Come. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the angels: Give him both; he shall live a very long life and he and the rest of his generation will merit the World-to-Come.