

Shame

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The HBO series "Game of Thrones" is set somewhere in a mythical medieval past and is based on a series of fantasies by author George R. R. Martin. It is immensely popular because it is saturated with rivalry, incest, rape, murder, torture, sex, violence, dynastic power, religion, magic, and, of course, dragons. Not something a normal parent would want any of his children to see. The finale of this season introduced a novel idea: shame.

Cersei Lannister is arguably the most evil character in a cast of the most evil characters you have ever seen. She is the incestuous, wicked queen, the daughter of an evil father, who fights without any scruple to ensure that her children, conceived with her brother, keep control of the Iron Throne. There is no imaginable evil she has not perpetrated, no moral boundary she has not transgressed, and for awhile we thought her end had thankfully come when a new reformist religious movement threw her in jail for refusing to admit her guilt.

Ever scheming and devious, the only way she can escape is when she finally pulls the wool over the holy man's eyes and confesses a minor infraction while barefacedly continuing to deny the major. She is allowed to return to the sanctuary of her palace provided she accepts her penance, which is a long, nude walk of shame through the streets of the city accompanied by a nun-like figure who rings a bell and cries out "shame" every few yards.

Pelted with refuse, her feet bleeding, Cersei finally makes it through the derisive throngs to the palace, where she finds sanctuary. One almost begins to feel a measure of sympathy for her. But, safely in the arms of a new champion, she casts a malignant eye on the people who have abused her. The clear message is that revenge is going to be awesomely cruel and swift. Cersei has no shame. She is incapable of it. She might be embarrassed and humiliated, but there is not an iota of shame. But then, what is shame?

Now let's switch from the pagan to Torah. If you study the daily page of the Talmud (you can't really study a page of Talmud a day, but you can read it), you know that we have recently read in Masechet Nedarim about the idea of shame, or perhaps embarrassment, using the words "busha" or "boshet panim". Panim is the Biblical Hebrew word for face. But it is plural word—"faces"—as if to tell us that we all put on different faces in different situations.

The Talmud says, basing itself on a sentence in Exodus, "From here we learn that shame helps a person to be wary of sinning, which is why they (the rabbis) said that shame (busha) is a good quality in a person. Others say whosoever is embarrassed (mitbayesh) will not easily sin, and whoever does not get embarrassed (boshet panim) you can be certain his forefathers were not standing at Sinai" (Nedarim 20a).

Same words, but three different uses. Are these merely local usages, or do

they signify differences? In English, embarrassment might simply be a matter of conditioning. Blushing may just be a physical reaction, with no reference to morality at all. So "Have you no shame?" could as well be a moral judgment as it could simply be a matter of etiquette. There are expectations and expectations. I do not think the Talmud is concerned here with simply physical responses or matters of social expectations. They were not worried about turning up to the hunt in the wrong colored jacket, for example.

You might think that "boshet panim", shame or embarrassment of the face, could be a human response to others, like blushing, or because one is found out. Whereas simple "busha" is before God or one's conscience. Similarly, the English word "shame" might have two usages—before others, as opposed to before God. In which case Cersei had the first but not the second.

But the truth is that the Talmud makes no such distinction. The term "boshet panim" is used in these additional cases. Moses begs God not to destroy the Children of Israel but to keep him alive after the Golden Calf. He says, "Please do not shame me in the face of my forefathers." Jerusalem was destroyed because the people had no shame. An ignoramus has no shame when he has intercourse. All very different kinds of situations.

What I derive from this is that there are correct ways of behaving towards other people and incorrect ones. If one is sensitive, then one will regret one's insensitivity. If one is religious, one will regret behaving in an irreligious way. If one is moral, one will regret behaving in an immoral way. But if, like Cersei, one regrets nothing, then a walk of shame cannot succeed in bringing about change. It only deepens the ill will.

Shame indeed has two ingredients: shame for the act itself and shame for the response of others. The Talmud is telling us that we should have shame for betraying God and our values, first and foremost. Shame or embarrassment in the face of others may well be a necessary condition of socialization, but it is secondary.

There is one other example of this idea that one needs to have a sense shame to be fully part of the Jewish people. That is in Talmud Beitzah 32b, where it says that anyone who is not merciful towards humanity (please note, not only to fellow Jews) cannot possibly be a descendant of Avraham our father.

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These two are what we might call the spirit of Judaism rather than just the letter. Which is why if you only have time for one of the two sources for this homily, go study Torah first.