

Shame

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

When I do or say something I regret, I feel shame. I am aware that I have let myself down and that I should have done better. Shame, regret are good emotions. So long as they encourage one to do better. Not if they lead to one becoming depressed. Shame is a condition of a healthy relationship with other people and with God. The response to wrong actions or wrong speech, according to our tradition, is to identify the mistake. To own it through confessing it to God (not to other people unless they are the ones you have wronged). And then one determines and tries not to repeat it.

I am concerned that even in our most orthodox of communities, too few people exhibit a sense of shame.

It is never pleasant writing about the moral failures of the Orthodox world because there is so much that is good and wonderful in it. But there is sadly another side. We are exhorted not to speak ill of people. There are laws against gossip and maligning. We must not rake up a person's past or remind him of his failures. But that never stopped the prophets from speaking out against our moral failures.

There have been and are too many cases of Orthodox or Haredi Jews in Israel, the USA, Europe and elsewhere, convicted of financial, sexual or political crimes. In breach of civil and religious laws and morality. And yet too rarely have I seen any outward show of shame. It is no comfort to me that this is also the case in every single other religious, social or national group around the world. If something is wrong, and our religion says it is wrong. It is wrong! Full stop.

If the prosecuting agencies are secular or non-Jewish, they will be accused of bias, of anti-Semitism and of double standards. And sometimes that may be the case. But not always. And if the felons or the organizations they are involved with, have done good things, charitable, educational or financial, they often will be excused. As if that in some way that white washes their actions.

There may well be a lot wrong with Judicial Systems. The USA seems intent on locking up anyone it can lay its hands on for ridiculously long terms. If you are from a minority, whether black, Latino or indeed Jewish, the longer

the better. The animus that many judges in the USA exhibit, is beyond immoral. I was glad to see a bill reducing these excesses, pass the Senate this week.

That is why I am usually happy when anyone is released from prison. Prison is an archaic, cruel, pointless punishment that affects the perpetrator and their families. It is expensive. It achieves little good. It breeds more criminals. Most prisoners offend again. I can only see one benefit. Where a felon is a serious and present danger to society, I am all in favor of sending him or her to the salt mines in a ball and chain. But to some people prison is almost a badge of honor.

When convicted felons are turned into heroes or paraded as victims, I feel very uncomfortable. There is a long and dishonorable tradition of Haredi law breakers who claim they were unfairly victimized even though they knew full well they were breaking the law. They often salvage enough of their ill-gotten gains to hand out largesse on their release and are treated as they are the victims. This is hardly a *Kiddush HaShem* (*giving Judaism a good name*). It reflects very badly on our religious values. It is not the sort of behavior we should be proud of.

This is indicative of a much larger problem. There is a culture in certain Haredi circles of a blatant disdain for the law. And if it starts with disrespect, even disdain for non-Jewish law it often ends up by taking advantage of other Jews. In Israel recently a convicted sex felon was welcomed into the home of arguably the most revered Haredi rabbinic figure. And another Rabbi convicted of sexual abuse was treated to VIP status at a well-known site of pilgrimage. As if this is a perfectly normal way of behaving. Too many well-known, public figures and even rabbis, serve jail time for offences. I don't need to mention names. Then they emerge as if they have done nothing wrong and continue their questionable ways.

This issue has been taken up by the admirable and gutsy Rabbi Natan Slifkin on his blog at www.rationalistjudaism.com. At the root of the problem is a lack of a sense of shame, *bushah*, in Hebrew. Maimonides, in his "Book on Repentance," describes the demeanor of a someone who repents. He should "be modest and of humble spirit...admitting his errors." A while back I read a great blog on "shame" by Jeremy Brown. He is a *Talmid Haham* and a Medical Doctor and another person I admire (and, I am proud to say, was once a pupil of mine). I recommend his web site too, which is more specialized, at <https://www.jeremybrownmd.com/talmudology/> and his new book "Influenza: The Hundred Year Hunt to cure the deadliest Disease in History" is being published at the end of January.

In the blog I am referring to, he quotes the Talmud in Nedarim 20a on the line in the Torah (Exodus 20:17) "The awe of (God) should be upon your faces." This refers to shame which shows on our faces. And it means that shame leads to a fear of sin. From this the rabbis learnt that it is a good thing to be embarrassed. Some say a person who is easily embarrassed will not so easily sin. And furthermore, where a person is not embarrassed, this is a sign that his ancestors did not stand at Mount Sinai."

Being a medical man, he goes into the physical indications of shame, blood rushing to one's face or rushing out, turning red, or white. Note how the Hebrew conflates embarrassment with shame. A good measure of the blog is about blushing! The Hebrew term, *Boshet Panim*, literally translates as shamefaced. And one must avoid making a person feel shame at almost any cost. As indeed one has to avoid *Lashon Hara*, gossip. But where a person shows no contrition, no shame or embarrassment, it needs to be addressed for the sake of the moral health of the community.

The Midrash Tanhuma calls the opposite of *Boshet Panim*, *Azut Panim*, arrogance. The Mishna in Sotah says that chutzpa and an absence of shame is what brings the world to its knees and only Divine Intervention in the form of Elijah can redeem it. Perhaps that is why some people campaign so hard for the Messiah to come now.

One of the few characteristics of an English culture that I used to admire is that it emphasized modesty, restraint, humility and keeping a low profile. This is now sadly out of fashion. Arrogance and braggadocio have won out. It is true there was and is a lot of hypocrisy in English culture too. Politeness often disguised venality.

But modesty is such an important quality in our religious culture. It was a quality the Bible attributed to Moses. The alternatives, arrogance, rudeness, abrasiveness, chutzpa, are often touted as more honest in many modern cultures. It pretends to be authentic, not fake. But there is a balance. Brusqueness, arrogance, not caring, being tough, are often considered signs of confidence and strength. Whereas I consider them indicative of weakness. They are certainly not morally preferable. Chutzpa is never something to be proud of.

The Mishna says, "a name made great is a name brought down." The higher you rise, the more public you are, the further you have to fall. We should not brag about our mistakes and misdeeds or minimize or excuse them. Certainly not make publicity or money out of them or hold them up as heroes. But rather, as the Prophet Micah says, "To act justly and walk humbly with your

God”.