

THE SENSE OF SHAME

We moderns have, to a large extent, lost the ability to feel ashamed. Young people grow up with an attitude of sneering cynicism, and moral restraint is treated like an anachronism, an out-dated inhibition. Shame is unknown. Our theatres and our entertainment places glorify profanity and immorality. But we are not shocked, we no longer have shame. Television, radio, newspaper, and magazines often publish the kind of pornography that once would have occasioned wide embarrassment and a public outcry; but today we accept it as inevitable, and no one is ashamed. People come to weddings in the synagogue dressed immodestly; Jewish organizations openly and aggressively fla<sup>o</sup>ut the most sacred Jewish traditions; Jews, especially college professors, proudly proclaim their religious ignorance from the rooftops - and for all this, there is no shame.

And yet, Bushah or shame is an integral part of teshuvah, repentance of the genuine Jewish religious experience. Maimonides counts Bushah as one of the fundamental aspects of repentance, the dominant theme of this holiday. It is mentioned repeatedly in our Selichot prayers and on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. If, then, we are ever to change to the better, if Judaism is ever to advance and Torah ever to triumph, the first thing we must do is recapture the ability to blush, we must relearn the art of feeling ashamed.


What is shame? Our inquiry is not merely for a dictionary definition. The problem of what it really is has been discussed by some of the world's greatest literary figures, psychiatrists, and philosophers. Allow me to present to you the findings of one writer, who recently devoted a whole book to the subject (Helen Merrell Lynd, On Shame and the Search for Identity, 1958).

Shame is the feeling of a sudden loss of identity. Every man has a picture of himself as he likes to think of himself, and have others think of him. When he suddenly stands exposed as something less than that, something inferior, not

at all the kind of person he thought he was and others thought he was; when he is astonished at how he has fallen short of his own ideals; when his own image of himself is cruelly jolted and disarrayed, and another, unpleasant identity is revealed -- that is shame.

Shame is thus a reaction to the blow to our self-esteem, the discrepancy between our exalted view of ourselves and the sudden revelation of a lower, more vulnerable, and less worthy self. Shame is therefore relative to a person's standing in the eyes of others, and even more: in his own eyes. Mr. Average Citizen who cheats a little on his Income Tax is engaging in a mischievous national sport - there is no shame attached to it. But the elected official who won office on a platform of "honesty in government" and who is so apprehended - he is filled with shame. The college Sophomore who cannot solve a differential equation, may feel bad. The Math. Professor who suddenly forgot how to do it -- is ashamed.

If you have a high image of yourself, then you feel shame when you fail that image. If you have a low image of yourself, shame is improbable, for your self-identity has not been questioned.

The root of the sense of shame is as old as the human race itself. The first human couple experienced it. In the beginning Adam and Eve were naked, but ve'lo yitboshashu "they were not ashamed." Later, they sinned - and they futilely looked around for something to cover themselves with, for now they were ashamed. Ashamed indeed: they thought of themselves as worthy, Adam as the Yetzir Kapav of G-d, the creature of G-d's own hands; Eve as the em Kol chai, the mother of all life. They inhabited Paradise; they were the most perfect of G-d's creatures; they spoke with G-d. Suddenly, rudely, crudely, they were shocked by their own failure, by the inability to resist a miserable piece of fruit -- and so they were ashamed. 

 A new and cheaper self was exposed.

And how wonderful and invaluable, how civilizing, is this sense of shame. For when we experience it, we are shaken by our failure to live up to the ideal picture of ourselves, and so we are compelled to change our real self, just discovered, and transform it so that it will conform to the higher, more ideal image we entertained. This, indeed, is the essence of teshuvah, repentance. That is why Maimonides teaches that after the sense of Bushah or shame, comes repentance which attains its highest expression when a man <sup>is</sup> ~~must~~ be able to say: ani acher, v'eini oto ha-ish, "I am another, I am no longer the same man who committed those evil follies." I have transformed my identity, my very self, my whole character, so that now I really am the person I originally thought I was! No wonder the Sefer Hasidim taught that: ha-boshet ve'haemunah nitzmadut; ke'she-tistalek achat, tishtalek chavertah -- "shame and faith are intertwined; take away one, and the other disappears."

If, therefore, we moderns have largely lost the sense of Bushah, it is not because we have a high opinion of ourselves; quite the contrary, it is because we have too low an opinion of ourselves, because we have almost no self-esteem, no image of dignity to be jolted and hurt. Our sophisticated generation has been nurtured on Freud and weaned on Kinsey. We have been taught to expect the worst in ourselves. We have become conditioned to the beast in man, so much so that if we sometimes are confronted with a genuinely human act - we are surprised. Our problem is that we have so contemptible a view of our own inner value, our own moral worth and significance, that that which is mean and despicable seems to us to fit into the picture we have drawn of ourselves. And if there is no discrepancy, no exposure, no jolt - there can be no Bushah, and hence there can be no impetus to grow and improve and transform ourselves.

The Sages taught (Avot, Ch. V): az panim le'gehinnom, bosh panim le'gan eden -- The bold-faced man to Gehenn<sup>a</sup>, the shame-faced one to Paradise. What they intended was not a prediction of things to come, but a definition packed with a moral charge.

What is it that makes a man an az panim, bold and audacious? It is: his self-de<sup>e</sup>gradation, his conviction that he deserves an existence of gehinno<sup>m</sup>, that life is hellish and nothing, therefore, can be expected of life, of man, or of himself. His self-denigration makes him shameless.

What makes a man a bosh-panim, one who feels ashamed when it is right and proper and decent to experience shame? It is le'gan eden, when he values hi<sup>m</sup>self, when he cherishes his own soul, when he feels that gan eden -- morality, decency, <sup>NO</sup> ~~ability~~ - is what defines his identity and determines his goals and his aspirations.

What we need, therefore, is a greater image of our real selves, a clear definition of who we are, <sup>a</sup> nobler and more sublime self-identity. We must feel that our souls were <sup>N</sup> ~~hewn~~ from gan eden, that our destiny back<sup>o</sup>ns us thereto.

On Rosh Hashanah, it is this message which is taught to us by one of the three central sections of our service, and therefore one of the three central ideas of Shofar: the zikhronot, loosely translated as "remembrances." This means not that G-d has a good memory, but that He knows us and is concerned with us, and that we are worthy because G-d takes notice of us. Shofar is the call which reminds us of our real self, the one we have all but abandoned. Ki Ata zokher Kol ha-nishkachot, G-d remembers not only all those who are forgotten, but all those who choose to forget their selves, their souls, their divine image, their dignity and worthiness - G-d remembers you, He thinks each human being worthy of His notice and attention. For, ein shikchah lifnei kisei kevodekha "there is no 'forgetting' before Thy throne of glory." G-d brooks no shikchah, no worthlessness in His creatures. Every single human being, by virtue of being important enough to be judged by G-d on this yom ha-din before the divine Kisei ha-Kavod, throne of glory, has kavod, glory and dignity and value and worthiness, infinite pre<sup>C</sup>viousness.

Our Rabbis taught us that when people are bayshanim, shame-faced, capable of experiencing the sense of shame, then it is a sign that they are zera shel avraham

avinu, genuine Jews, the descendants of our father Abraham. For when we realize where we stem from, what lofty origins we possess, therefore what exalted potential stirs within our breast - that we are the zera shel Avraham avinu, the seed of Abraham - then we ~~sh~~ will have enough self-esteem to be ashamed of our failures, when they occur, and so try to live up to our noble origins and our lofty destiny.

The sounding of the Shofar and the theme of zikhronot answers for us the great and crucial question of our self-identity, the question: who are you? And the answer comes to us: you are the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, descendants of prophets and poets, visionaries and philosophers, builders of temples and martyrs for freedom, sages, and saints, singers and seers. Their blood courses in your veins. Their marrow lies in your bones. Their dreams inform your ambitions. Their ideals permeate your literature. Their spirit vitalizes your heritage. Their lives are enmeshed in your tradition. THEY ARE YOUR REAL SELF.

And how, therefore, can we react with anything but deep shame when we fail to act like Jews, when we fall so low that our daily lives are indistinguishable<sup>from</sup> that of a pagan: no blessing, no prayer, no kindness, no Torah?

We are, as the Arab prophet called us, "the people of the book." That is ~~our~~ real self. How, then, can we help but blush to think that we have all but abandoned "the book" - the holy Torah? That there are Jewish homes when years pass without a chumash being opened up? That the "people of the book" spend communal funds on every kind of activity, but least of all for Jewish education, for teaching The Book?

Who are we? We are the teachers of morality to the world. We are the people who were charged on Sinai with those blazing words that have seared into our conscience: kedoshim tihyu, "Ye shall be holy." How, then, can we help but squirm in shame when immodesty, unchastity, profanity, and vulgarity infest our social lives?

Who are we? We are a people who produced singers like King David, dreamers like Yehudah Halevi, saints like the Baal Shem Tov, a people distinguished by holy Tzaddikim, people whose souls were caught up in a burning passion for the living G-d and striving for Him in a swirling flame with all their might and heart and soul. How, then, can we brook coldness, remoteness, smug complacency in the very midst of a House of Prayer?

Who are we? We are the people who marched through the halls of history as the am ha-Shem, the people of G-d; through every climate, every epoch, through all circumstances and vicissitudes, we held our heads high, for we were the priest-people, the mamlekhet kohanim of the world. We always were the teachers of religion. Should we, then, not hang our heads in shame that we have become known in this country as the least religious, the least observant, the most secularized of all people in this country? - that the Protestants represent Protestantism, the Catholics represent Catholicism, and the Jews represent the G-dless? Elohai, boshti ve'nikhlamti as Ezra cried! O G-d, we are ashamed and disgraced! We who should be at the summit of religion and religious teaching and the advocacy of the word of G-d in society - behold how we are fallen! Shame!

Despite our failures and our frustrations, we are -- essentially -- a great people. It is a true image. Let us recall our historical zikhronot. Let this exalted image, in all its reverence and loftiness, be forever engraved in our innermost consciousness. Then we will know how to experience shame, Bushah, when we fail our own image. Then that shame will help us rise to our true gestalt, to our true stature.

Chadesh Yamenu Ka-Kedem. Let us "renew our days as of old." And, having learned our true, nobler, selves, having regained the lost capacity to feel ashamed, may G-d grant that we never have reason to feel ashamed.

May G-d bless each of us and all of us with a year - many years - of chayyim, she'ein ba-hem bushah u-khelimah, life in which, despite the high and noble and lofty image of dignity we have of ourselves, we will never have to experience the blush of shame.