

“For Shame!”

A Personal Kol Nidre Reflection

Rabbi Barry M. Lutz, R.J.E.

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A couple of weeks ago I was downtown on the campus of my alma mater the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. where I was meeting with about ten of my colleagues, all of whom have agreed to serve as mentor rabbis for rabbinic students in their 2nd or 3rd year of seminary. We were there to discuss the year and to meet the students we would be mentoring.

After informal greetings over bagels and coffee Ruth, our leader, called us to order and as way of reacquainting, asked that we go around the room and share something both personal and professional that has been going on in our lives as we prepare to start a new year. One colleague talked about dropping his child off for the first day of school. Another talked about having moved back “home” to Los Angeles after serving as a rabbi in the Boston area for many years. One talked about tending to his partner after a bad car accident. Another about a transition in his role in his community. There were a few who talked about what they were doing in retirement: writing a book getting more actively involved in justice work. And then they came to me.

I sighed, looked at them all and said ... “Nothing really.”

They all laughed – because they all know what I have been through this past year. Many of them have been sources of support and counsel. So, I recounted (again) my journey ending with a description of this moment. They offered their blessings and best wishes for this new journey.

As I completed my turn I became very aware that my pulse had quickened I was breathing hard, and my face had reddened. I was feeling embarrassed. Bringing up all that had happened, even in front of my most supportive and compassionate colleagues, still brought to the surface a good bit of shame.

Shame and I have become well acquainted over this past year. we have faced each other in therapeutic settings, collegial settings, in conversations with family and friends, and mostly as I have sat quietly in my home office reflecting on the events that have led to this incredible and miraculous and blessed moment.

Who among us has not felt shame at some time?

My guess is that just talking about it has brought up the feeling for some. It is powerful, isn't it? It is one of the most basic of human emotions, deeply rooted in the limbic system of our brains where emotions and memory come together. Mental health researchers and clinicians have poured countless hours into trying to better understand the effects of shame and it how it might be moderated. Because shame is one cause of PTSD and a great deal of self-destructive behavior.

You see, once experienced, shame, stays in our body, we can never completely get rid of it. So that when a new embarrassing event gets processed in our limbic brain it can connect to and retrigger old shame filled memories. Causing us to re-experience the trauma of an older, sometimes even forgotten, experience.

If you do an Amazon book search on the word “shame,” you’ll get a list of over 6,000 titles! And it is not simply the concern of so many contemporary works on mental health. Shame and its effects was a topic of great concern to our sages.

Let me ask ... Who here has ever murdered someone? (Well, I’m glad to see that no one here has done that.)

So, then, let me ask you this: who among us hasn’t consciously or unconsciously shamed someone?

The rabbis of the Talmud took note of what happens to the blood in your face when you have been shamed and saw in that physical response the equivalent of shedding blood. (Bava Metzia, 58b) Our sages would have scoffed at the idea that “words can never hurt me.” Instead, they compared the emotional wound of shame to causing physical injury requiring not only penance but also monetary retribution. All of which is due not only to the person shamed, but to God as well. When I humiliate you, I shame God by desecrating the image of God that resides in you. Therefore, one who humiliates another, the rabbis decreed, forfeits their place in the world to come. Luckily, as we have all likely this once or twice, Maimonides would later add that this was in regard to one who routinely engages in acts of humiliation.

All of this may seem just a bit over the top, but I hope you can see in this brief summation just how very seriously the rabbis took guarding the dignity of every human being. In fact, I would argue that a large focus of all of Jewish tradition is to protect human dignity.

The bible is filled such narratives. For instance, the traditional haftarah read on Rosh Hashanah tells the story of חנה/Hannah. Because she was childless she was publicly and mercilessly mocked by פנינה/Peninah who claimed that God had closed her womb. Hannah we are told, would wail and refuse to eat. And to add insult to injury, the community’s clergy, misunderstanding Hannah’s response accused her of public drunkenness!

When we embarrass or humiliate someone we can’t know the far-reaching impacts. What happened to me and the way it happened to me, didn’t just happen to me. It happened to Debbie and my children, my larger family and friends, and my community. Its impact was felt in ways and in far flung places I could never have imagined.

The repercussions of humiliation I have experienced and perhaps you as well, are taught in the classic tale of the man who goes to his rabbi seeking retribution for the shame he had caused. His rabbi instructs him to tear open a feather pillow, cast its feathers to the wind and then go and collect them. Then, he is told, he will be forgiven. The man protests that the feathers

floating in all directions, are impossible to retrieve. Exactly, say his rabbi. The damage done to a name, a reputation, a most significantly, a soul can never be fully repaired.

Did you know that the Temple in Jerusalem and our two-thousand-year exile was due to a personal affront? The Talmud tells the story of a Jerusalemite who had a friend named Kamtza. It so happened he also had a bitter enemy named Bar Kamtza. This man was having a party and sent an invitation to his friend Kamtza. Well, you know what happened. The mail service delivered to the wrong address. When the man saw his enemy Bar Kamtza enjoying his appetizers, he was aghast. He immediately asked Bar Kamtza to leave. Not wanting to be humiliated, Bar Kamtza begged to stay. "I'll even pay for what I eat and drink," he said. "No." the man said. "You must leave immediately." Bar Kamtza begged the man. "Please, don't embarrass me in front of all these people. Let me stay and I will pay for the entire party." But the man was insistent. Humiliated and more than a little angry both at the man and at the many rabbis who were present and refused to intervene, Bar Kamtza went to the Roman Emperor and accused the Jews of plotting a rebellion against the Roman occupiers. The Temple was destroyed, and we were banished from our homeland. All because of a public humiliation.

There is, by the way, an important distinction between good ol' Jewish guilt and shame. There is a world of difference. Guilt's focus is "inappropriate" behavior, while shame is about being a "bad" person. When I feel guilty I say, "Wow, I messed that up. I'll do better next time." When I am humiliated I think, "Wow, I messed that up, I'm such a terrible person." Guilt is easily repaired: I'll just change my behavior. But, what am I to do when I feel that it is not my actions, but my essential BEING that is the problem? What have you wanted to do?

I tell you what I wanted to do. I wanted to hide. I didn't want to leave my house. I was overwhelmed with embarrassment and shame. I was afraid of running into anyone who knew what had happened. It was humiliating to say I had been fired banished from my community, not just the one I worked for, but the one I lived in. I now understand very personally the meaning of excommunication.

Who wants to reveal those parts of themselves of which they are ashamed? Unfortunately, trying to hide them away only makes the shame and pain worse. Which can lead to a downward cycle of self-destructive behaviors such as addiction and even suicide. How many times have we been surprised to discover a good friend's addiction or worse, shocked by someone who has committed suicide because there were no outward signs?

We hide our shame.

Given the great potential for damage, Jewish literature is, not surprisingly, replete with lessons on how to avoid causing shame. When Joseph realizes that the brothers who had sold him into slavery don't recognize him, he has his opportunity to get even by publicly humiliating them. We would well understand if he had. What he did instead is almost beyond belief: He orders

everyone else to leave the room so that his brothers should not be publicly humiliated. Remarkable.

In contrast to the tale of Bar Kamtza, the Talmud relates that Yehudah HaNasi, one of our greatest rabbis, was teaching a class when he was offended by the strong smell of garlic. He asked whoever had eaten the garlic to leave the class. In order that the offending student not be embarrassed the entire class rose and left the room.

This notion of all participating in order that those who are responsible not be publicly shamed is also a central component of our liturgy this day: - על חטא שחטאנו "For the sins WE have sinned." As I read, I find myself saying, "Yeah, I did that one."

"Nope, didn't do that one."

Yet, I confess to them all. Why? As a way of providing 'cover'. Like the rabbi's students, when everyone else is also confessing I can publicly acknowledge what I've done without the humiliation of raised eyebrows and scornful looks. "Oh really? That was you!?"

So, what is an antidote for shame? Forgiveness, for one, is so important in moderating shame. Yes, it is hard to ask for forgiveness isn't it? And it's hard to give it as well. Because both touch on our sense of shame. We don't want to reveal that we are a bad person. And, we don't want to let someone off the hook who has been bad to us. Yet, when I ask forgiveness, acknowledging that which I have done, I moderate both their shame and mine. When I forgive someone else and *when I forgive myself* I give myself permission to let go, I loosen the shackles of shame that bind me to the past and can turn and face the future.

That is the process of *t'shuvah* – self-regulating my shame through forgiveness so I can move forward. That is why I am instructed that I must first ask forgiveness of those I have wronged before asking God. *It is simply not possible to stand fully before God, in whatever way you understand that, if you still harbor within shame for something you did to someone else or to yourself.*

The flip side of letting go is re-connection. *Mitzvot*. *Mitzvot* are also an antidote against shame. My supportive, compassionate, and loving act says to another, "I see your Godly image and I care about you." My actions reveal to me that *I can be a source of tikkun*, repair for positive change. I inoculate myself against shame through *Mitzvot*, actions that prove that "I am good enough."

The Talmud records a story about Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta who was a friend of the great Rabbi Judah HaNasi. As Rabbi Shimon was taking leave of the Rabbi he asked for a blessing. Rabbi Judah offered Rabbi Shimon this blessing, "May it be God's will that you should not shame others and that you should not feel ashamed." (Moed Katan 9b) This blessing, by the greatest Rabbi of his time, reflects the great concern the rabbis had for maintaining the dignity of another as well as their own.

And so, on this awesome and powerful day as we join together at the start of a new journey this is the blessing I offer to each of us: יהא רעוא דלא תבייש ולא תתבייש אתא (*y'hey ra'vah d'lah t'vayesh v'lah titbayesh ata.*) "May it be God's will that we should not shame others and that we should never feel ashamed."