

## Shame Then and Now

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Based on a verse in this week's Torah portion, the Talmud declares that there are three attributes by which the Jewish people are distinguished: "They are merciful, they have a sense of shame, and they bestow kindness." (*Yerushalmi Kiddushin 1:1*) Merciful and kind—these are attributes we are proud to claim, but what about having a sense of shame? Is this just an early reference to the Jewish guilt about which we joke so often?

Most of us probably remember being shamed at some point in childhood, perhaps by a teacher who sent us to sit in the corner or by a classmate who teased us about some aspect of our body or the clothes we were wearing. Perhaps our parents even used shame as a form of discipline.

I remember when a teacher found me reading a novel under my desk and embarrassed me in front of the class. Of course, that incident wasn't half as

bad as the time my teacher read the scores on our spelling tests aloud. I don't need to say that spelling was not my favorite subject.

Whatever our own experience, most likely we remember being shamed as feeling very unpleasant, even painful. The rabbis of the Talmud, perhaps having had their own experiences with shame, conclude that "a person would rather experience physical pain than shame" (*Sotah* 8b).

Shame is defined as "a painful feeling of distress or humiliation caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior." Shame can manifest itself physically as we blush, sweat, stammer, or feel queasy.

Evolutionarily, shame is believed to have fulfilled two functions. First, if we feel bad about our social or personal mistakes, then we are less likely to repeat them. And secondly, the manifestations of our shame or embarrassment, the blushing or downward glances, make us more likable at a time when others might judge us harshly. In some ways, our behavior when we are shamed can be compared to when a dog rolls over and exposes its belly. This is the kind of thing that social psychologists love to test, and they have done so in some really clever ways.

Lack of shame might be a symptom of being a psychopath, and it might lead to immoral, even criminal behavior. On killing his brother, Cain initially feels no shame, nor do Joseph's brothers feel shame when they sell him into slavery. But once what they have done sinks in, both Cain and Joseph's brothers realize the wrongness of their actions, and they do feel ashamed. Cain says, "My sin is too much for me to bear," and Joseph's brothers show shame in their interactions with Joseph when they believe him to be an Egyptian officer. Shame is part of their learning experience. But too much shame is no good.

Shame often moves from a judgment about a behavior to a judgment about ourselves. Shame can make us feel that we are not good enough, that we are wrong in our own essence, defective, permanently inadequate. This reaction can be in response to an innocent mistake, because we have failed to live up to someone else's dreams—often those of a parent or someone else who is very important to us, or because of our own unreasonable expectations. Perhaps we are dissatisfied with any personal imperfection.

When shame becomes a constant feeling, we may try to escape it through alcohol or drugs, or we may try to compensate for it by seeking others' approval or by buying things that will help our self-esteem.

Shame remains an issue today with public shaming on the internet—which is shaming on steroids. The speed at which information travels on the internet, the opportunity for anonymity, plus the permanence of things posted online have combined to make this kind of public shaming a painful problem.

On the other hand, shaming has been an effective strategy to move large corporations to more responsible behaviors. An article about corporate social responsibility cites the power of public shame to change the behavior of many well-known companies. After having been shamed in public, for example, Nike now monitors the working conditions in its suppliers' factories, and Ikea prohibits the employment of children by its rug suppliers. Likewise, Starbucks now sells Fair Trade Coffee, and Home Depot no longer sells products harvested from old growth or endangered forests. British Petroleum has reduced its greenhouse gas emissions, while even Shell has adopted policies to address environmental abuses.

When an individual, a company, or even a country has a conscience, then shaming can be an effective strategy as in Gandhi's protests against the British. Gandhi actually wrote to Martin Buber to encourage the Jews of Germany to engage in nonviolent resistance similar to his efforts in India. Buber wrote back explaining that nonviolence works only when your opponent respects certain values:

It does not seem to me convincing when you base your advice to us to observe satyagraha in Germany on these similarities of circumstance. . . An effective stand in the form of non-violence may be taken against unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them to their senses; but a diabolic universal steamroller cannot thus be withstood.

(<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/letter-from-martin-buber-to-gandhi>)

Being known for acting with mercy and bestowing kindness are definitely badges we wear with pride. But perhaps being able to experience shame is also a credit to our communal character.