Shame/Embarrassment/Modesty in Parashat Beraishit

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A concise weekly Dvar Tora on the Web

One of the things that I try to do each Erev Shabbat is to view the “Parasha BeRega” video that appears on the Yediot Acharonot website. The actor Ze’ev Manki gives a Dvar Tora in a very short amount of time. I find the Divrei Tora clever, insightful and original and they seem to never fail to provide food for thought.

An example of such a Dvar Tora

The “Parasha BeRega” for last year’s Shabbat Beraishit focused upon one aspect of Adam and Chava’s sin in Gan Eden. Manki notes that the eyes of Adam and Chava are “opened” only after each had eaten from the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Prior to their eating from the forbidden fruit, the Tora states:

Beraishit 2:25
And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

We later read:

Ibid. 3:6-7
And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat; and she gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.
And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together, and made themselves girdles.

Manki notes that the order of the verses implies that only after both Adam and Chava had eaten and their eyes were “open” did they first “know” that they were naked, leading to their experiencing shame and embarrassment, feelings that in turn drove them to attempt to cover up their nakedness. If there was in fact a direct, objective relationship between eating the fruit and feeling embarrassed about one’s nakedness, then why didn’t Chava immediately experience this emotion, even before she shared the

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1 I have tried to determine who writes these Divrei Tora—is Manki just an actor following a script, or perhaps he himself is the researcher—but I have not been successful in researching an answer to this question.
2 The presentation that I am referencing this Shabbat morning lasted 3 minutes and 12 seconds, but they are usually shorter than that.
3 One can find the Dvar Tora for Beraishit by going to “Ynet”, opening the Hebrew website for Yediot Achronot, pressing the button marked “Yahadut” and watching and listening.
fruit with her spouse? Since the Tora appears careful to state that only after each of them had tasted the fruit, did they begin to look upon one another in a lascivious manner, Manki says,

As long as Adam hadn’t eaten, there was no problem.

It was only after the second person ate, both of them knew that they were naked.

According to a close reading of the Garden of Eden story, a sense of embarrassment is precipitated when a person begins to wonder:

How do I appear in the eyes of another that sees my shame?

Adam and Chava looking at one another is another example of the dimensions of communication between two essentially different entities

In "Confrontation", (Tradition, Spring-Summer 1964, pp. 14-5) R. J.B. Soloveitchik writes how difficult it is for one person to truly understand the intentions of another when attempts are made to communicate via speech. Paradoxically, one can simultaneously experience community and loneliness...

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4 One could ignore the implications of the precise order of the verses and say that only after it is recorded that both of them ate, is there noted the feelings that were engendered. Consequently, perhaps Chava did already feel shame prior to giving the fruit to Adam, with the text not intending to be so precise about the specific sequence of events.

5 “…The word is a paradoxical instrument of communication and contains an inner contradiction. On the one hand, the word is the medium of expressing agreement and concurrence, of reaching mutual understanding, organizing cooperative effort, and uniting action. On the other hand, the word is also the means of manifesting distinctness, emphasizing incongruity, and underlining separateness. The word brings out not only what is common in two existences but the singularity and uniqueness of each existence as well. It emphasizes not only common problems, aspirations and concerns, but also uniquely individual questions, cares and anxieties which assail each person. Our sages, in explaining the graphic difference between the open and closed Mem, spoke of Ma’amar Satum and Ma’amar Patuach - the enigmatic and the clear or distinct phrase. They felt that the word at times enlightens at times, confounds; at times, elucidates, and at other times emphasizes the unintelligible and unknowable.

“When Adam addressed himself to Eve, employing the word as the means of communication, he certainly told her not only what united them but also what separated them. Eve was both enlightened and perplexed, assured and troubled by his word. For, in all personal unions such as marriage, friendship, or comradeship, however strong the bonds uniting two individuals, the modi existentiae remain totally unique and hence, incongruous, at both levels, the ontological and the experiential. The hope of finding a personal existential equation of two human beings is rooted in the dangerous and false notion that human existences are abstract magnitudes subject to the simple mathematical processes. This error lies at the root of the philosophies of the corporate state and of mechanistic behaviorism. In fact, the closer two individuals get to know each other, the more aware they become of the metaphysical distance separating them. Each one exists in a singular manner, completely absorbed in his individual awareness which is egocentric and exclusive. The sun of existence rises with the birth of one's self-awareness and sets with its termination. It is beyond the experiential power of an individual to visualize an existence preceding or following his…”

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as a result. It seems to me even more mysterious when we wonder how others perceive us and what they see, particularly of a negative nature, when they look upon us.

**Contemplating the implications of embarrassment and modesty**

Parasha BeRega’s interpretation of this detail of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is borne out by contemporary understandings of embarrassment and modesty, arising not so much from a sudden sea change in personal awareness of the “other” as was the case in the Garden of Eden, but rather when something is done in a social context that will humiliate another individual:

**Embarrassment** is an emotional state of intense discomfort with oneself, experienced upon having a socially unacceptable act or condition witnessed by or revealed to others. Usually some amount of loss of honor or dignity is involved, but how much and the type depends on the embarrassing situation...

In many cultures, being seen nude or inappropriately dressed is a particularly stressful form of embarrassment...


**Modesty:**

...Standards of modesty discourage or forbid exposure of parts of the body, varying between societies, which may include areas of skin, the hair, undergarments, and especially intimate parts. The standards may also require obscuring the shape of the body or parts of it by wearing non-form-fitting clothing...


**Talmudic parameters for compensating the victim of an action resulting in his embarrassment**

In the Talmud, Bava Kamma 83b, 86a-b, the Rabbis explore parameters of Boshet in terms of collectible damages that one individual perpetrates upon another. One of the five payments that are generated by personal injury is compensation for the humiliation—Boshet—that the permanent injury causes the victim going forward—living as an amputee or having a visible scar will cause psychic discomfort and a desire to avoid public occasions and interactions. However, the Talmud also notes that Boshet can be isolated from the other payments if no bodily injury occurs, but nevertheless it can be proven that there was intention to humiliate. Variables that are discussed are: a) how the computation of payment will be a function of the social status of the embarrasser and the embarrassee; b) does a non-Jewish slave experience Boshet—essentially a question of the extent to which lowly social status

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6 Examples of fines levied in response to people deliberately embarrassing others are:

Bava Kamma 90a

If a man boxes another man’s ear, he has to pay him a Sela. R. Yehuda in the name of R. Yose HaGalili says that he has to pay him a Maneh. If he hit him in the face, he has to pay 200 Zuz. If he did it with the back of his hand, he has to pay him 400 Zuz. If he pulled his ear, plucked his hair, spat so that the spittle reached him, removed his garment from upon him, uncovered the head of a (married) woman in the market place, he must pay 400 Zuz.

7 The other four financial assessments that are made are: 1) “Nezek”—depreciation of lifetime earning power; 2) “Ripui”—medical expenses; 3) “Shevet”—a minimum wage until the victim can return to some form of employment; and 4) “Tza’ar”—an evaluation of the pain experienced by the plaintiff.
can deprive a person of an expectation of dignified treatment; c) does a Shoteh (someone who is intellectually challenged) experience Boshet—to what extent must there be emotional and cognitive understanding of what was perpetrated; d) does a person who is already going around in public in a state of undress experience Boshet—i.e., if an individual has consciously chosen to humiliate himself, can others assume that he is beyond embarrassment and proceed to add to his humiliation; e) if the victim of Boshet was asleep at the time, and upon waking up the cause of the Boshet is no longer extent, does he have a basis for claiming damages (the case is further exacerbated when the question is posed what would happen in the case that this person dies in his sleep and therefore never wakes up to find out what had been done to him) — must a person be sensate at the time that he is humiliated; and f) even if Boshet does not apply to the victim, i.e., he is not sensitive to having been embarrassed, can it apply to the members of the victim’s family; etc.

**As aspect of Boshet raised specifically by the Garden of Eden story**

An additional interesting question that the incident in Gan Eden raises is whether the experience of Boshet is a learned response, or innate within the human species. In other words, someone brought up like the mythological Romulous and Remus, would he be bothered by not having any clothes as long as he was not socialized into human society? Does the act of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil represent a change in the nature of man, or the fact that man’s values and sensibilities are affected by his environment?

On the one hand, there are Rabbinical statements that appear to suggest that it is imprinted on our DNA:

**Beitza 32b**

R. Nathan b. Abba further said in the name of Rav: The rich men of Babylon will go down to Gehenna; for once Shabthai b. Marinus came to Babylon and entreated them to provide him with facilities for trading and they refused this to him; neither did they give him any food. He said: These are the descendants of the ‘mixed multitude’, for it is written, (Devarim 13:18) “And [He will] Show thee Mercy and have Compassion upon thee”, [teaching that] whoever is merciful to his fellow-men is certainly of the children.

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8 **Romulus** and **Remus** are the twin brothers and central characters of Rome’s foundation myth. Their mother was Rhea Silvia, daughter to Numitor, king of Alba Longa. Before their conception, Numitor’s brother Amulius had seized power, killed Numitor’s male heirs and forced Rhea Silvia to become a Vestal Virgin, sworn to chastity. Rhea Silvia conceived the twins by the god Mars, or by the demi-god Hercules; once the twins were born, Amulius had them abandoned to die in the river Tiber. They were saved by a series of miraculous interventions: the river carried them to safety, a she-wolf found and suckled them, and a woodpecker fed them. A shepherd and his wife found and fostered them to manhood, as simple shepherds... [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romulus_and_Remus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romulus_and_Remus)

9 This is a reference to the non-Jewish individuals who attached themselves to the Jews at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, as in BaMidbar 11:4: And the **mixed multitude** that was among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept on their part, and said: “Would that we were given flesh to eat!”

 RaShI d.h. VeHaAsafsuf

This is the mixed multitude that joined them when they left Egypt.

10 The term “MiZaro” (from the seed of) is in contrast to the statement in Avot 5:19: meshu Meshu Meshu.
of our father Abraham, and whosoever is not merciful to his fellow-men is certainly not of the children of our father Abraham.\textsuperscript{11}

RaMBaM in Mishneh Tora also seems to make such a claim in a number of instances,\textsuperscript{12} e.g.,

Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 10:2

...Whomever is cruel and does not have compassion, one should suspect his lineage, because cruelty is found only among pagans, as it is said, (Yirmiyahu 50:42) “They are cruel and they do not have compassion”...

Yet, one of the passages in the Talmud that has occupied my thoughts a great deal ever since I first came across it many years ago, appears in Yevamot 78b-79a,\textsuperscript{13} and offers an opposite approach, at

Whomever possesses these three attributes is of the students of our Father, Avraham...a generous eye, a humble spirit and a lowly soul is of the students of our Father Avraham...

\textsuperscript{11} The translation of this proof text is curious. It would appear that all that it connotes is that God will Be Merciful to the Jewish people. However, when the text is engaged in the original Hebrew,

lit. “And He will \textit{Give you Mercy} and will Be Merciful to you and Multiply you as He Swore to your fathers”, the strict implication of the usage of this verb is that these are qualities that God will Make inherent within you and your descendants.

\textsuperscript{12} See also Mishneh Tora, Hilchot Chovel U’Mazik 5:10

And it is prohibited for one who was injured to be cruel and not to forgive. This is not the way of the children of Israel, but rather once the perpetrator asks and begs one time and then a second, and it is clear that he has repented from his sin and he regrets his evil deed, one should forgive him, and the quicker that one forgives, the better it is, and the sages will be pleased with him.

Hilchot Isurei Bi’ah 19:17

All families have the status of being worthy and it is permitted to marry into them LeChatchila (a priory). Nevertheless, if one sees two families that are continually feuding with one another, or you see a single family that is constantly contentious with everyone and exceedingly aggressive, you should be suspicious of them and distance yourself from them because these are signs of disqualification. The same is true for someone who is always saying about others that they are disqualified (not “Kosher”)...Similarly anyone who is very forward or cruel and hates people and does not treat them kindly, one must be exceedingly suspicious that he may be a Givoni (see the next Talmudic passage from Yevamot cited in fn. 12) because the inherent signs of the holy nation of Israel is that they are modest, compassionate and engage in acts of kindness, and concerning the Givonim, it is said (in the Talmud) that they are unworthy of joining the Jewish people because they were aggressive, they did not forgive or have compassion for the members of Shaul’s family and did not extend to the Jewish people kindness to forgive the members of the royal family even though they were the recipients of kindness and were allowed to live (this is a reference to Yehoshua 9).

\textsuperscript{13} Yevamot 78b-79a

R. Chana b. Adda stated: David issued the decree of prohibition against the Netinim, for it is said, “And the king called the Givonim, and said unto them -now the Givonim were not of the children of Israel etc.” Why did he issue the decree against them? — Because it is written. “And there was a famine in the days of David three years. year after year. In the first year he said to them, ‘It is possible that there are idolaters among you, for it is written, ‘And serve other gods, and worship them ... and He will Shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain etc.’ They instituted enquiries but could not discover any idolaters. In the second year he said to them, ‘There may be transgressors among you, for it is written,’ Therefore the showers have been withheld and there hath been no
latter rain; yet thou hadst a harlot's forehead. 'Enquiries were made but none was found. In the third year he said to them, 'There might be among you men who announce specified sums for charity in public but do not give them, as it is written, 'As vapors and wind without rain, so is he that boasteth himself of a false gift'. Enquiries were made and none was found. 'The matter', he concluded, 'depends entirely upon me; 'Immediately, he sought the face of the Lord.' What does this mean? — R. Eleazar explained: He enquired of the Urim and Tummim. How is this inferred? R. Eleazar replied: It is arrived at by an analogy between two occurrences of the expression of 'Countenance of'; for here it is written, 'And David sought the Countenance of the Lord, and elsewhere it is written, 'Who shall enquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Countenance of the Lord.' And the Lord said: 'It is for Saul and his bloody house, because he put to death the Givonim'. 'For Saul', because he was not mourned for in a proper manner; 'and his bloody house, because he put to death the Givonim'. Where, however, do we find that Saul 'put to death the Givonim'? The truth is that, as he killed the inhabitants of Nov, the city of the priests who were supplying them with water and food, Scripture regards it as if he himself had killed them. Justice is demanded for Saul because he was not properly mourned for, and justice is demanded because he put to death the Givonim? — Yes; for R. Lakish stated: What is meant by the Scriptural text, 'Seek ye the Lord, all ye humble of the earth, that have executed His Ordinance'? Where there is His Ordinance, there are also his executions. David said: As to Saul, there have already elapsed the twelve months of the [first] year and it would be unusual to arrange for his mourning now. As to the Nethinim, however, let them be summoned and we shall pacify them. Immediately the king called the Givonim, and said unto them: 'What shall I do for you? and wherewith should I make atonement, that ye may bless the inheritance of the Lord'? And the Givonim said to him: 'It is no matter of silver or gold between us and Saul, or his house, neither is it for us [to put] any man etc. ... Let seven men of his sons be delivered unto us and we will hang them up unto the Lord etc.' He tried to pacify them but they would not be pacified. Thereupon he said to them: This nation is distinguished by three characteristics: They are merciful, bashful and benevolent. 'Merciful', for it is written, 'And Show thee Mercy, and have Compassion upon thee, and Multiply thee. 'Bashful', for it is written, 'That His Fear may be before you.' 'Benevolent', for it is written, 'That he may command his children and his household etc.' Only he who cultivates these three characteristics is fit to join this nation. But the king took the two sons of Rizpah the daughter of Aiah, whom she bore into Saul, Armoni and Mephibosheth; and the five sons of Michal the daughter of Saul, whom she bore to Adriel the son of Barzillai the Meholathite. Why just these? — R. Huna replied: They were made to pass before the Holy Ark. He whom the Ark retained [was condemned] to death and he whom the Ark did not retain was saved alive. R. Hana b. Kattina raised an objection: But the king spared Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan the son of Saul! — He did not allow him to pass. Was there favoritism then? — In fact he did let him pass and it retained him, but he invoked on his behalf Divine Mercy and it released him. But here, too, favoritism is involved! — The fact, however, is that he invoked divinemercy that the Ark should not retain him. But, surely, it is written, 'The fathers shall not be put to death for the children etc.' — R. Chiyya b. Abba replied in the name of R. Yochanan: It is better that a letter be rooted out of the Tora than that the Divine name shall be publicly profaned. 'And Rizpah the daughter of Aiah took sackcloth, and spread it for her upon the rock, and she suffered neither the birds of the air to rest on her by day, nor the beast of the field by night.' But, surely, it is written, 'His body shall not remain all night upon the tree!' — R. Yochanan replied in the name of R. Shimon b. Yehozadak: It is proper that a letter be rooted out of the Tora so that thereby the Heavenly Name shall be publicly hallowed. For passers-by were enquiring, 'What kind of men are these?' — 'These are royal princes' — 'And what have they done?' — 'They laid their hands upon unattached strangers' — Then they exclaimed: 'There is no nation in existence which one ought to join as much as this one. If [the punishment of] royal princes was so great, how much more that of common people; and if such [was the justice done for] unattached proselytes, how much more so for Israelites. A hundred and fifty thousand men immediately joined Israel; as it is said, 'And Solomon had threescore and ten thousand that bore burdens, and fourscore thou and that were hewers in the mountain.' Might not these have been Israelites? — This cannot be assumed, for it is written, 'But of the children of Israel did Solomon make no bondservants.' But that might have represented mere public service! — [The deduction] however, is made from the following: 'And Solomon numbered all the strangers that were in the Land of Israel, etc. And they were found a hundred and fifty thousand. And he set threescore and ten thousand of them to bear burdens, and fourscore thousand to be hewers in the mountains.'
least in light of the proof-texts for two out of the three elements of the Jewish personality that it cites. The Gemora states that the three essential characteristics of a member of the Jewish people are that the individuals be “merciful, bashful/possess a strong sense of shame and benevolent. Proof texts are brought to support the contention:

Yevamot 79a

This nation is distinguished by three characteristics: They are 1) merciful, 2) bashful and 3) benevolent. ‘Merciful’, for is is written, (Devarim 13:18) “And Give thee Mercy, and have Compassion upon thee, and Multiply thee”. ‘Bashful’, for it is written, (Shemot 20:17) “And Moshe said unto the people: ‘Fear not; for God is Come (on Sinai accompanied by terrifying fire, smoke, thunder, lightning, etc.) to prove you, and that His Fear may be before you, that ye sin not.” ‘Benevolent’, for it is written, (Beraishit 18:19) “That he (Avraham) may command his children and his household etc.”

With regard to characteristics 2) and 3), based upon the proof-texts that Yevamot 79a cites, they appear to be acquired traits:

2) The Sinai experience was such as to engender a fear of God which would impress upon the individual his limitations and cause for humility. MaHaRSA on Yevamot 79a states that the Tora is intended to weaken the strength of the individual, i.e., an outside force being brought to bear upon natural human tendencies, in order to rein in his less than optimal Middot. Ritual observance and holy study are then viewed as means by which an acquired characteristic can be developed by disciplining and sublimating tendencies that would lead to self-absorption and insensitivity to others.

3) Avraham had the qualities that he would attempt to impart to his family via long-term education and acculturation.

It is only in terms of being Rachmanim (compassionate) that it is suggested that this is something that God has Instilled in the people. Yet the Gemora is by implication—the Givonim don’t have these qualities and therefore are disqualified from becoming members of the Jewish people; but others might in fact possess the character traits that would allow them to be candidates for conversion—suggesting that Jews do not have a monopoly on these virtues. While some advance the ideas that people who present themselves for conversion are actually lost Jewish souls who therefore possess the “right stuff”,

See fn. 10.

If we define those who possess a considerable capacity for embarrassment and shame as individuals who are sensitive to outside evaluation by “others”, and who are kind and compassionate as those reaching out to others to try to treat them well and make a good impression upon them, it makes sense that a people whose destiny is to be an “Ohr LaGoyim” (light unto the nations), should be very concerned what the nations think of them.
it seems to me that an alternative interpretation that allows for all human beings potentially being kind and humble, with perhaps a few notable exceptions, e.g., the Givonim, the Amalekim, is possible.

A theological reason for constantly being in a state of Boshet

Finally, the Jewish theological assumption that God is always Present and Watching what one does, as in:

Tehillim 16:8
I have set the Lord always before me; surely He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

can be understood to further promote an ongoing sense of humility and Boshet—while I might think that no other human is seeing me (in an age of all sorts of cameras and other recording devices, there are less and less occasions when this is true), I must maintain a sense that I am always before God and therefore must be concerned lest He See my “Erva”.

Conclusion

While an overdeveloped sense of embarrassment can constitute a neurosis, and an aggressive attempt to inspire such feelings in others constitutes criminal behavior for which one must repent and even offer compensation, when the emotion is present in a “healthy” form, Boshet goes far to keep one on the straight and narrow as he tries to grow in holiness and spirituality. Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil could then be viewed as unleashing within human beings a type of feeling that contributes to their ability to emulate HaShem and engage in His Service.

16 I have never become comfortable with the stereotypes found in ChaZaL maintaining that all people belonging to a certain ethnic group or religion are a certain way without exception. There are certainly a variety of Jews, so why can’t there be a variety of others as well?