

On (Self-)Impeachment¹

Rabbi Rachel Miriam Safman
Congregation Beth El, New London, CT

It is unfortunate that the public debate that has taken Washington by storm in recent weeks has impugned the public's perception of a perfectly reputable character: the word "impeachment." We have all been taught in civics classes that impeachment is a political process intended to remove a high-ranked official from elected office – or at least raise this as a question.

But the term "impeachment" has a far more venerable and largely apolitical meaning that can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. The *OED* defines impeachment as: "The act of calling into question the integrity or validity of something," or alternatively, "subjecting an action to [inquiry and] reproach."

Defined in this way, impeachment is clearly the agenda of the day – of *this* day, Yom Kippur – as is has been since the dawn of the rabbinic era. For as long as our people's spiritual leaders have been addressing congregations from the *bimah* during this season of *teshuvah* ("return" or "repentance"), they have been calling upon them to engage in an act of self-impeachment, known in Hebrew as *cheshbon ha-nefesh* ("self-accounting" or "self-scrutiny").

All of us, if we examine our lives closely, will find that there is a lot to account for in the year gone by, both actions in which we take justifiable pride and, shall we say, "impeachable offenses." Neither set of behaviors cancels nor fully compensates for the other, but the two regarded in tandem provide a nuanced perspective on who we are at present and who we aspire to become.

There is a lovely teaching attributed to the early Chassidic master Simcha Bunim that instructs every individual to sew into their garments two pockets. In one, to be accessed in moments of self-doubt, he or she should place a scrap of paper saying, "For my sake the world was created." In the second pocket, to be taken out when the owner is feeling particularly self-assured, should be hidden a scrap of paper reading, "I am but dust and ashes."

None of us, of course, is, at our most essential core, "but dust and ashes." However, the mainstream society in which we reside sometimes tries to make us feel that way, especially when we transgress closely guarded social norms. This propensity stems from our culture's rootedness in a Puritanical worldview that, historically, employed shame as its central corrective mechanism.

¹ Sermon delivered on Kol Nidrei evening –5780 (2019)

In the colonial era, "shaming" was epitomized by the practice of imprisoning an offender in a pillory situated in the public square, where they would be seen and ridiculed by their friends and neighbors. In modern times, shaming has morphed into other forms of public humiliation: teenagers ganging up on one of their peers on social media, the posting of compromising photos on the internet, and the *ad hominem* attacks on public figures. Even the shunning of eccentrics who fail to conform to widely held standards of dress, behavior or taste is a form of shaming.

In response to our desire not to be shamed, we often go to great lengths to maintain a public appearance that accords with societal expectations. We curate versions of our lives on social media, producing Disney-like caricatures of our own and our family's lived experiences.

Whole industries have grown up to help public figures depict themselves, or the organizations they lead, in the most positive light possible. After all, the ultimate goal of a corporate or political "PR" campaign is to create good "optics" in order to convince people to endorse and/or associate with you.

If all this image-burnishing served the Pilgrim Fathers' goal of creating a God-fearing society characterized by moral excellence, then one could argue that both the effort – and its collateral damage – were justified. After all, public censure – or fear of public censure – *can* and often *does* encourage us to rise beyond our basest tendencies. But, as the columnist David Brooks has written, our contemporary "moral" standards are based "not on a continuum of right and wrong, [so much as] a continuum of inclusion and exclusion."

Furthermore, since under this system the real goal is avoiding public opprobrium based on what others see *of* or *in* us, there is a danger that our public presentation is *all* that we will seek to improve. After all, if painting over the rusty supports of the bridge wins you as many accolades as repairing its structural defects, why bother to rip out the girders? In fact, closing the bridge as part of a more major overhaul may expose you to heightened criticism for revealing a problem of which others were contentedly unaware.

In the same way, building the perfect Facebook profile, college application or curriculum vitae does nothing to address the fundamental shortcomings in our relationships with our loved ones, the fallacies underlying our business strategy, or our underdeveloped skill set for negotiating interpersonal conflict. On the contrary, it redirects resources from the critical efforts needed to redress these issues.

Furthermore, a system of social correctives based on shaming encourages a predatory "pack mentality." As we have seen in recent attacks on public figures – and sometimes private citizens – it can become seductively easy to join in heaping criticism on a person who has transgressed our current standards of taste or morality.

So, for example, while certainly do not condone the actions of the affluent parents who misrepresented their children's credentials to win them a place in a highly selective university, I

am not sure that their fraudulent conduct warrants multiple articles on the front page of *The New York Times*.

A shame-based system of correction encourages our most punitive and vindictive instincts, and this flies in the face of Judaism's passion for *rachamim* (mercy or compassion) as a temper to *din* (justice).

So we arrive at a Jewish alternative to shaming, an enforcement mechanism that should be familiar to many of you already: guilt – that is, the invocation of an internal voice of rebuke, or as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks described it, "a conversation with the better angels of our nature."

Ruth Benedict, the 1960s anthropologist who first invoked shame as a cultural paradigm for encouraging conformity to moral precepts, proposed guilt as an alternative path for achieving the same end. According to Benedict, while shame is dependent on exposing deviants to the sanctioning gaze of their fellows, guilt is based on refining each actor's own moral sense. It gives rise to a private discomfort as individuals realize the ways that they have fallen short of a commonly held ideal.

The advantages of a guilt-based cultural system over a shame-based system are manifold, and here I will speak as a cultural partisan.

- Guilt does not allow us to simply slip under the radar of public scrutiny or to "game the system." As we remind ourselves in the liturgy of this High Holiday season, *all* our actions are open to our own internal scrutiny, the *nistarot* ("hidden things") as well as those which are public knowledge.

- Guilt probes our motives – the intentions behind our actions – and not just their visible outcomes. Thus, an overtly meritorious act – like volunteering at an old-age home – done for ulterior motives (like getting credit towards graduation or being pictured in the local paper) will not garner undeserved acclamation, nor will a well-intentioned action gone astray carry the same sanctions.

- Guilt has a natural "half-life". It is delimited in scope when compared to the self-perpetuating trajectory of shame, particularly in the internet era. Tragic reports of adolescents taking their own lives after being hounded by peers over a perceived (or actual) act of indiscretion, or of politicians facing exaggerated recriminations for actions many decades in their past that don't conform to the shifting standards of our day, are examples of the ways in which a shaming culture oftentimes generates its own momentum in a way that a guilt culture seldom does.

But the most important attribute of a guilt-based corrective mechanism, and the reason that I believe Judaism puts so much stake in it, is that guilt functions in a way that is ultimately restorative. By casting the transgressor him- or herself also in the role of "judge, witness and jury," as we attest in tomorrow's *U'netaneh Tokef* prayer, we are acknowledging each

individual's redemptive qualities, their potential for self-correction and self-improvement – separating, as it were, the "sinner" from their "sins."

Indeed, we this assert repeatedly in the Yom Kippur liturgy, which quotes the prophet Ezekiel in saying: "God" – which we can also understand to be that internalized moral voice of Divinity within us – "does not desire the death of the sinner, but that they turn from their ways and live."

Would that America's punitive penal system embraced the goal of restorative justice with equal sincerity!

Now, I am not going to naively suggest that a guilt-based system of moral policing is without its flaws. Most prominent among them, perhaps, is the tendency of some individuals raised amidst a regime of guilt to internalize its message to an unhealthy degree. A guilt culture can encourage a tendency towards self-flagellation that is relentless rather than productive. Who, for example, hasn't known someone who every Pesach descends into neurosis as they strive for an impossibly complete purge of their *chametz*? And it is not just literal *chametz* (crumbs of leavened grain) that we can become obsessive about removing from our lives. There are those who, as a matter of temperament, are incline to cast about ceaselessly to uncover their own failings, only to come away feeling perpetually inadequate.

Regrettably, a caricature of this obsessive mindset – often mis-cast as Judaism's central purpose – has helped turn more than a few disaffected Jews away from their faith tradition and the institutions that embody it. To them I can only appeal by defining this pattern of thinking as a terrible corruption of our tradition's original intent. Again, I refer you to Simcha Bunim's advice that we must carry with us not only the reminder that we are perpetually in need of refinement, but also the affirmation that it was expressly for the realization of human potential that the world was brought into being.

Similarly, throughout the liturgy of our High Holiday season – the time of year in which we are asked to engage in the most aggressive self-critique – we consistently refer to the God who stands behind our moral system as both *Malkeinu*, a demanding sovereign, and *Avinu*, a compassionate and loving parent.

Finally, there is a danger that, I believe, is particularly treacherous for those of us who straddle the fence between the shame-based system of our larger society and the guilt-based culture of our faith tradition. That danger is that a guilt culture requires personal buy-in. It requires that we take the processes of *cheshbon ha-nefesh* and *teshuvah* seriously.

If we come to the process of *teshuvah* with the understanding that it is but the rote recitation of an antiquated liturgy, or if we see the charges enumerated in the *Vidui* and *Al Chet* confessions – even in their modernized forms – as expressing the unfortunate tendencies of others but not ourselves, then the process we will engage in over the next twenty-four hours will be a mere pantomime of true self-scrutiny. Better that we stay home and, in quiet, private reflection,

compose our own corrective statements with which to line our pockets or emblazon on our screen-savers.

These short-comings notwithstanding, I believe that in our "Jewish guilt" we have, as a culture, created a mechanism that can help guide each of us in a perpetual process of self-betterment, in a highly personal but communally supported effort to attain a fuller portion of our innate potential. Though we may never fully achieve the behavioral ideals to which we strive, our tradition applauds us for each and every small victory that we achieve in the effort. And in moments of lucid self-reflection, who among us would forego the opportunity to burnish, not just their public profile but the underlying person it represents?

What do you say? Is this not the perfect season for a probing (self-)impeachment?