

Parshat Bereishit  
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Written by Fred Ehrman

## **The Birth and Death of Shame**

"They were both naked, man and his wife, and they were not ashamed." Genesis 2:25

### **The Birth of Shame**

"Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they realized that they were naked; and they sewed together a fig leaf and made for themselves coverings." Genesis 3:7

It was about a year ago that the revelations of the sexual improprieties of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein occurred. It released a torrent of similar accusations against well-known celebrities, politicians, business people, clergymen, judges, some occurring decades ago and others very recently. The #MeToo social media phenomenon came into existence. Hardly a day went by when there was not a new sensational revelation. Although sexual harassment has been around for a very long time, its reporting had been covered up, buried or kept inside the minds of the victims.

Our world today is so different from the time I was growing up in the 1950s. Even earlier, when the classic film *Gone with the Wind* came out in 1939, the censors were debating whether Rhett Butler should be allowed to say, "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." Television was closely monitored. You couldn't use the word "pregnant." In the show "Father Knows Best", Robert Young and Jane Wyatt playing Jim and Margaret Anderson were in a bedroom scene discussing their kids. They were in twin beds with pajamas buttoned up to their necks.

### **The Death of Shame**

Of course, in the intervening 60 years all has changed. Little is left to the imagination, not only on cable but also on network channels. PG-rated movies give little comfort to parents who prefer shielding their children from the verbal vulgarity and explicit activities that would have been unheard of in prior times. Newspapers, advertising, dress codes, all have changed almost to an extreme.

When Vice President Mike Pence said that he would not go to dinner alone with a woman who was not his wife, he was ridiculed. When a celebrity stated that wearing provocative clothing can lead to sexual objectification, she was pilloried.

Does that mean we should go back to the standards of the 1950s? No, but the pendulum has swung too far, and it needs to return to the middle.

However, now that the dam has burst, I am feeling more optimistic about the possible reversal of this downward spiral of social mores. More than 17 years ago, I was on a commission investigating the charges of sexual abuse by a leader of a prominent Jewish youth group. Those

stories, comparable to the Harvey Weinstein revelations, opened the floodgate of countless other incidents that had been bottled up. The 10 members of the commission sat through six months of interviews of over 100 individuals, hearing their tragic stories. Many had their lives ruined as teen-agers, with marital relationships never achieving a modicum of normality. I remember two such interviews that left me in tears. But we on the panel learned a lot. And steps were taken to begin to fix the problem in the Jewish community.

Does that mean that now, post-Weinstein, the problem will be fixed? Of course not. The Yetzer Hara, the evil inclination, is very potent and insidious, but self-preservation of one's name and position in life is a powerful ally of the Yetzer Hatov, man's good inclination. Well-known individuals were fired and some were convicted of felonies. But much remains to be done.

Single mother births, drug use and other social problems remain in unacceptable percentages. But once a bright light shines on an area that was steeped in darkness, positive changes are possible. Hollywood, Netflix, HBO and printed materials will always have the right to produce salacious and violent material. If the audience wants it and is willing to pay to view it, it will remain in the public domain. It is the role of the home primarily and our educational system secondarily to educate our children on the destructive effects of the exposure to the basest of human instincts. However, it starts with the parents. They themselves have to be the role models and decide that there cannot be a double standard for an adult and a child. Movie ratings have to be tightened up and network channels standards of years ago should be restored. The internet which gives us so many positives, has to be shown in the educational process that it can have major deleterious effects, pornography leading the way. Not an easy task.

In 1987, Gordon Gekko, the fictional protagonist of the movie, Wall Street, proclaimed that "greed is good." I don't know if he was right. But three decades later we may justifiably be correct in saying, "shame is good," if that shame will lead to improvements in the behavior in our interpersonal relationships. This is a high hill to climb. The drift away from religion is perceptible. Our mores as a nation had been based on the belief in the Creator and the Bible. America, as envisioned by the Founding Fathers and as discerned by de Tocqueville has been a glorious experiment. It has gone off the road in recent decades. Can it be righted again"?