

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Vaera  
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When I was little, we had a dog, named Tucson. A wheaten terrier, for you dog people. We only had him until I was maybe 1 or 2. I don't remember him. One day, my mother came into the kitchen, and found a puddle of pee on the floor. She started castigating the dog, who ordinarily would look guilty, his tail between his legs. But this time he didn't look guilty. It turned out I was the culprit.

My mother's investigation relied on the power of shame, an emotion that even our canine best friends can feel.

I would not recommend telling a story like this about people other than yourself, because it could embarrass and ashame them, something we are all usually careful to avoid, whether or not we are conscious of the Talmudic dictum, "Whoever shames a neighbor in public, it is as if you shed their blood."

And we have all experienced shame in many different contexts. I won't ask you to recollect them, because reliving shameful episodes can be pretty unpleasant. It hurts. It hurts terribly.

Shame has incredible power, and it can be used for purposes holy, and unholy.

Shame serves as a curb to some of our baser impulses. The fear of getting caught is based, at least in part, on shame.

Shame has also been a force for social control. "What will the neighbors think?" is the operative phrase here. Sometimes, shame thankfully prevents terrible things from happening. But shame also can prevent victims from coming forward and speaking up in situations of abuse.

Shame used to be a powerful tool for familial stability. Getting divorced was shameful. Having a child out of wedlock was shameful.

Shame was used to maintain Jewish in-marriage. A child marrying a non-Jew or the wrong kind of person could incur shame, on the parents, and thus on the child.

Shame was the weapon, the bludgeon, used to enforce heteronormativity, the idea that all people are and should only be attracted to be people of the same sex.

And yet today, we are living in an era that has seen the decline and perhaps even the fall of shame. The shame of intermarriage in the non-Orthodox world is gone. The shame of being attracted to people of the same sex, or of having a fluid gender identity and acting thereon, is diminishing. And I might say to these, good riddance. The shame of being a victim of all kinds of abuse is lessening, I want to hope.

But the decline of shame in other contexts is troubling. The internet allows us to act out some of our basest desires anonymously, without fear of shame or consequence. And we see in public figures an increasing imperviousness and immunity to shame.

There have been several rabbis around the country who have in recent months been publicly accused of various sexual improprieties. They have freely admitted to the various behaviors and events in question, but have no shame about them. Needless to say, this is deeply distressing and frustrating to victims, communities, and conscientious leadership who

themselves would feel terrible shame at having done as these rabbis have done. How do you punish the perpetrator who feels no shame?

Speaking to this, an acquaintance, Yehuda Kurtzer, quotes Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld as saying, “that anger catalyzes action (think: righteous indignation), whereas shame invites self-distancing, hiding, and the attempt to avoid detection.” Kurtzer continues, “And herein lies the great paradox of shame: that those who are most needing of the radical, violent act of public shaming - remember how extreme our tradition is about embarrassing someone in public - those very individuals are least likely to be affected by it.” In these situations, others who ought to feel shame but may not are those who protect, defend and through silence condone those most deserving of shame.

There’s a profound meditation about shame to be found in this week’s parashah, which focuses on the first seven plagues. During the first two plagues, blood and frogs, Pharaoh’s magicians match the plagues plague for plague. When Aaron dips his staff into the water to turn it into blood, the magicians do the same. And when Pharaoh saw his magicians do this, his heart hardened, and he did not let the Israelites go.

Aaron brings frogs. And so do the magicians.

But when Aaron brings lice, the magicians cannot. They tell Pharaoh, this is the finger of God, but Pharaoh’s heart hardened again.

The magicians do not attempt the next two plagues, insects/wild beasts (we don’t really know what *dever* means), and pestilence. But then, for the sixth plague, boils, we are told, “The magicians could not stand before Moses.” Some say that the magicians simply were too pained by the boils to be able to stand. But others say they “could not stand before Moses” is because they were embarrassed and ashamed of their inability to save themselves. Thus, they didn’t come to Pharaoh’s palace or appear before Moses. Rather, they stayed home.

At a certain point, shame kicked in with the magicians—they realized, according to Ramban, one of the great medieval Spanish commentators on the Torah, that they were dealing with God. They were outclassed, outranked, by infinite orders of magnitude. They realized, fundamentally, that their cause was unjust, and they were ashamed and embarrassed at their ineptitude and their being on the wrong side of God.

But Pharaoh? Pharaoh is the one immune to shame. He’s still standing even at the end of the plagues. He never repents, never feels shame, even until his death. One midrash does suggest that he did do teshuvah upon drowning, and God fished him out of the Red Sea, and he became the king of Nineveh, where Jonah went to issue successfully God’s warning.

Obviously, we want to be people with no reason to feel shame. But inevitably, we will err and transgress and in those moments, we want to be people, like the magicians, who are susceptible to shame. When we become like Pharaoh of old, or like the unrepentant abusive religious leaders we sometimes encounter today, we lose our way.

In my trusty *Treasury of Jewish Quotations*, of nine relevant quotations about shame, how many view shame positively? Nine.

“Many precepts are fulfilled only out of shame.” (Bahya)

“The chief of all the ten virtues is a sense of shame.” (Ibn Gabirol)

“Where there’s no shame before people, there’s no fear of God.” (Yiddish proverb)

“If one is ashamed of a sin, all one’s sins are forgiven.” (Brachot 12b)

“Jerusalem was destroyed because its people had no shame.” (Shabbat 119b)

May we use the powerful tool of shame responsibly and carefully.

May we strive to live lives of purity, and goodness, and so as never to be deserving of shame. But when we fail, may our shame propel us to higher levels of goodness and understanding.