Jewish Woman JEWISH WOMEN INTERNATIONAL

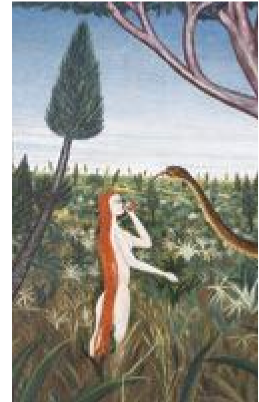
Successful Women

WINTER ISSUE 2009

Overcoming Shame

From the time of Adam and Eve, shame has been part of the human condition. How we respond to the discomfort it stirs in our hearts is what counts.

By Rahel Musleah



Victor Jose

Marisa Greenberg (not her real name) did not attend her last high school reunion. Though she is an accomplished editor and mother of three, she felt ashamed of her weight and the “unstylish” way she dresses. “I didn’t feel good enough about myself,” she says. “I didn’t have the ability to step back and accept my flaws. I used my appearance as an excuse not to do things.”

Greenberg’s personal sense of embarrassment is a far cry from the communal reproach the Bernard Madoff scandal has evoked in the Jewish community, but it reflects the numerous ways shame filters our perceptions and interferes with our lives. Read about a criminal activity by someone with a Jewish name and almost immediately there’s the involuntary shudder and mental whisper: “Is he Jewish?” Yet feeling shame is not just relegated to reading sensational headlines. It plays a pervasive role in our day-to-day existence—from laughing too loud or driving an old car to feeling too smart or not smart enough. Its tragic dimensions can extend to situations with serious consequences such as covering up domestic violence or hiding mental illness.

The concepts of shame and guilt are not easy to define, even by mental health professionals. Psychiatrist Michelle Friedman, head of the department of pastoral counseling at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in Manhattan, distinguishes between shame and guilt. She points out that guilt is a private emotion, while shame relies on the group context that decides what a person “should be like.” Internal remorse—guilt—surfaces when an individual crosses boundaries set by family or society, and transmutes into feelings of shame when he or she experiences a “lowering of personal dignity in the eyes of the group and fears ridicule, contempt or expulsion,” she says.

According to Michael Stadter, a clinical psychologist in Bethesda, Md., who also serves on the faculty of the Washington School of Psychiatry and the International Psychotherapy Institute, a person who experiences guilt feels bad about an action or feeling; a person who experiences shame feels bad about who they are. Though confiding in a friend, partner, parent or therapist would help, the person who feels shame thinks of him- or herself as defective or repulsive and hides what has happened from others. Stadter identifies signs of shame: “It’s hard to think. It’s hard to act. You are flooded with the desire to get away. Your heart races. You blush and try not to make eye contact with others. Your basic ways of dealing with the world are disrupted and you feel like you are ‘falling apart.’” The episode can be so strong that the feeling of shame can become an integral part of one’s self-image.

Both Stadter and Friedman agree that though we tend to think of shame as a negative feeling—and it can be, when it causes inhibitions that are painful and limiting—it can also be a highly important emotion to cultivate for social good. All traditional cultures, not just Judaism, deploy shame and guilt to enforce standards and desirable behavior, Friedman adds. “Shame operates all the time because people want to be loved and accepted by their families and communities.”

Obviously, Bernard Madoff needed to cultivate more shame. And Marisa Greenberg learned to cultivate less of it. When an invitation arrived for her next reunion, she decided to attend. “I figure I’m not the only imperfect one around,” she says. It took years of therapy, she says, to feel compassion for herself and overcome the impact of a narcissistic mother who paid her little attention and a divorce that compounded her feelings of low self-esteem. Greenberg ultimately remarried.

Getting pregnant was about the most scandalous thing a girl of 17 could do in the conservative Jewish community of Capetown, South Africa, in 1960. When Lynette Langman told her parents she was seven months pregnant, they told her she would disgrace them and become the talk of the town. “My parents feared more how people would think about them than what they thought of me,” says Langman, now 66. Though the baby’s father, Max, was prepared to marry her, his wishes were overruled and Lynette was sent to a non-Jewish friend of her parents until the baby was born. Named David and later renamed Antony, the baby was put up for adoption immediately.

Eighteen months after the baby’s birth, Lynette and Max did marry, and subsequently had three more children. “Every birthday was hard and the birth of each child was a reminder,” says Langman. “But we had to get on with life.” On a Sunday night in 2001, having just adopted a baby himself and realizing the sacrifices a birth mother makes, Antony called in search of his own birth mother. *On the Other Side of Shame*, written by Langman’s cousin Joanne Jowell, tells of the joyful reunion and of the parallel journeys of mother and son that Langman wanted to be recorded for her grandchildren. Going public was not an easy decision. “I work in a synagogue and am well-known in our community,” says Langman, who had absorbed her parents’ sense of shame. “I believed everyone would still whisper about me and look down on me. It took courage to face that.”

Langman says after the book was published she learned many people have secrets. “The minute I opened the door, other people felt they could open the door. I’ve been humbled by the whole experience,” she says. “I realized I wasn’t the only Jewish girl with a secret.” Years after the fact, she concludes that “facing your fears is far better than burying them.”

Because shame breeds secrecy, says Stadter, it’s not clear if it develops differently by gender, but women show more obvious signs. “It’s not necessarily that men feel it less, but they may be better at hiding it or acting out aggressively.” Women are more likely to feel shame around issues of sexual promiscuity and physical appearance; men are likely shamed by situations in which they feel weak, unsuccessful or physically defective, says Stadter. Situations that cause shame can range from a publicly humiliating remark, like a parent berating a child, “Oh, you’re so stupid!” to crises like rape or abortion. And, if the abuser feels little or no shame, the victim will often compensate by feeling more.

Jowell, 34, says that even with the generational difference, she was surprised at the vehement reaction of Langman’s parents. “As Jews we toe the community line for better or worse. It’s wonderful to inculcate in children the sense of belonging to something universal and ancient that has laws and

values and standards, but I'm not in favor of `what will people say?' We might try to encourage a sense of responsibility for the community good instead."

Learning From the Madoff Scandal

By now, the images of a smug, silver-haired Bernard Madoff that have been burned into American Jewish consciousness have caused a stinging communal breast-beating. Despite the rational sentiment articulated by Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel—that the despicable acts of an individual Jew do not bring shame on the Jewish people as a whole, only on the perpetrator of the act—it's hard to let go of the collective shame and sense of responsibility. After all, don't Jews adhere to a higher standard? And won't Madoff's greed-par-excellence add fuel to smoldering embers of anti-Semitism in our society?

According to Rabbi Irwin Kula, co-president of CLAL, Madoff has become the ultimate scapegoat because he has done a wrong of unimaginable magnitude. But that spotlight deflects us from examining, wrestling with and trying to change our own lives. Blaming Madoff "externalizes the guilt we've repressed about the way we've lived our own lives for the past 25 years," he says. "It mitigates our anxiety and guilt that our materialism is completely out of control. It's our own fault that we are out of alignment with the values we speak about and hold dear, like tzedakah, like happiness outside of materialism."

Kula acknowledges that he himself has not lived aligned with his own values. "I lived way beyond my means. I've given my kids a sense of entitlement. I know better. I repressed and ignored all of that." Now, he says, he has made changes in his personal life and at CLAL. He has conversations with his children about the difference between want and need. He and co-president Rabbi Hirschfield have frozen their salaries and are rethinking everything from what the organization buys and how it makes its purchases to who they honor and where they choose to speak. Madoff, says Kula, "is a giant reified projection of who we are."

—Rahel Musleah

The biblical story of Adam and Eve is one of the most iconic representations of shame. After eating from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, the two discover their nakedness. In *Teaching Jewish Virtues (ARE Teaching Series)*, educator Susan Freeman says that it is fitting that Adam and Eve felt shame for disobeying God, but internalizing shame can be self-destructive. If shame leads to regret and repentance, it can be a positive force, but if it overwhelms us, we may become unable to make changes.

Jewish wisdom acknowledges that feelings of guilt and shame are normal, says Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. "In our daily prayer, we are invited to own the feeling of guilt. The assumption is that guilt is basic to being fully alive. It can be the smallest thing—from not acknowledging a secretary in your office to hurting someone deeply. We meditate on where we intentionally or unintentionally did something hurtful." Because guilt can be paralyzing, Kula says, Jewish prayer acknowledges God as merciful and abundantly forgiving. "We have access to forgiveness. We can own it, feel it and ameliorate our behavior," says Kula.

Both shame and guilt can be expiated on individual and communal levels. The prayer for announcing the new Jewish month asks in a public and collective manner that the month ahead be free from shame and reproach for all of us. According to Friedman, a traditional Jew, the prayer represents

an ideal. “We know there will be shame but we hope there will be none. We try to approach perfection, though we may not get there.”

Parents often use shame as a way to call attention to behavior they disapprove of. All her life, Rachel Shukert heard her mother say to her or to others, “Have you no shame?” so she decided on that title for her book of autobiographical sketches. “It’s very easy for a memoir to feel exploitative and self-indulgent,” says Shukert, 29. “Is it me who has no shame for telling all or you who has no shame for reading it?”

With brazen humor, Shukert describes her formative years growing up Jewish in Omaha, Neb., where she attended a Jewish elementary school and public high school. Experiencing shame was and is a “constant” in her life, says Shukert, now a Manhattan resident. “There’s something particular in Jewish culture that puts a lot of emphasis on achievement, being a good girl and doing the right thing all the time.”

Shukert often felt she could not live up to her parents’ expectations, which were even stronger in a place where there were few Jews. “I wasn’t a good student in high school. I was embarrassed with friends who were non-Jewish because my Jewish identity was always an issue. Though we weren’t that observant, my parents were strict. They didn’t allow me to go out on Friday nights, not solely for religious reasons. Partly, they didn’t want me to go out at all. Everything had to be explained to my friends. I wasn’t ashamed of my Jewishness, but at the age of 14 nobody wants to be different, especially in ways they don’t choose for themselves. My Jewishness defined me in a jarring way.”

Shukert escaped the fish bowl when she moved to Manhattan to attend New York University as a theater major. “I could suddenly be invisible. It was so exciting.” But, she says, friends from Omaha continue to single out her Jewish identity. After a recent post on Facebook in which she wrote, “Rachel Shukert wants to go swimming,” a high school friend wrote back, “Can Jewish people do that?”

Other “demons” haunted her. Her body provoked a sense of shame. She suffered from an eating disorder in acting school, where thinness brought positive attention. “Jewish girls are taught to be assertive but we are constantly getting messages that we are never deracinized enough, not pretty enough, not blond enough.” Though her book has received mostly positive reviews, she acknowledges: “Put your work out there and you’re setting yourself up for constant shaming.” Humor helps: “If you can laugh at yourself, no one can laugh at you. And as much as it protects you, it can also reveal bigger truths.” Perspective that comes with the wisdom of age also guides her now. “Life is not a sprint,” she says. “I focus on trying to affect the things I can change.”

If Shukert struggled with what it means to be a good Jewish daughter, Shira Dicker struggles with what it means to be a good Jewish parent. In an article in the *New York Jewish Week*, she wrote, “Now that the economy has crumbled and a critical mass of people are newly broke and worried, I am inspired to ‘out’ myself as a committed Jew who has spent the past quarter century broke and worried, forced into a state of financial struggle due to the high cost of being Jewish in a major metropolitan area.” She marveled at how others seemed to be providing for their kids—mainly by sending them to Jewish day schools and summer camps—and was “loathe to be dubbed a kvetch or a bad Jew. So I bit my tongue and signed checks.”

Dicker’s experience focuses on financial expectations in the observant community—yet the price of keeping up with the Joneses (or Cohens) is a burden for many, regardless of one’s social circle. There’s pressure to buy a

new car, renovate a kitchen, wear the trendiest clothes, even enroll kids in SAT classes so they can get into the best colleges. The culture of affluence that has grown wildly in the American Jewish community in the past three decades has caused “distinct shame associated with financial struggle,” says Dicker, “a belief that not having enough money indicated some kind of existential failure.”

The daughter of a Conservative rabbi, Dicker grew up in Queens, lived in Cambridge, Mass., and Westchester, N.Y., and moved to Manhattan for the subsidized housing her husband, Ari Goldman, receives as a faculty benefit from the Columbia School of Journalism. In Westchester, “we were known for driving clunkers. It wasn’t a social statement. That’s just what we could afford. ... Economic success became equivalent to personal worth. We asked ourselves what was the matter with us that we hadn’t figured out how to be wealthy. The small core of people who could afford all the expenditures became the pace setters, and everyone else said, ‘Aha, this is the bar we should aspire to.’”

Dicker says that she was not conscious of feeling shame then; she just felt confusion and frustration. Embracing day-school education as a good Jewish value, she sacrificed her freelance writing career and her dreams of graduate school. “It was almost blasphemous to consider public school. We would be shortchanging our children’s Jewish identity. I support a little bit of struggle, but for us it was ruinous.” Dicker’s oldest is 25 but her youngest still has four years of high school. Though she loves the school, she still says, “I feel indentured. I feel choked. It has created lots of instability in our family.” In response to her article, Dicker has heard from many people who are being abandoned, shunned and shamed because they cannot afford to keep their children in yeshiva any longer.

Part of the difficulty in overcoming shame, says Friedman, is recognizing it. Try to identify the feeling and the incident that touched it off, she suggests. Ask yourself if you really did something wrong and need to make amends, or if you feel bad because of past baggage for which you should not continue to accept responsibility. If you feel ambivalence over a situation like attending a class reunion, make a list of pluses and minuses and try to add to the plus side until the date of the event arrives—but don’t create unrealistic tasks, like losing 30 pounds in a month.

Stadter urges people who feel shame to find a safe person to confide in; a therapist or trusted friend, for instance, who will respond without judgment. Being less harsh with ourselves can encourage our own healing. “Shame is something almost all of us deal with,” he says. “But in the vast majority of cases there is good reason to hope shame can be diminished when instead of seeing a pair of shaming eyes in others and in ourselves, we see loving, accepting eyes.”

To free yourself of guilt and shame requires simple tools, says Kula: your calendar, checkbook, a partner who will help you keep your answers honest, and enough time to move through the process. Do a behavior inventory starting with yourself and moving outward to other close relationships. Go through your calendar and ask yourself, Did I exploit someone when I made that deal? Did I show genuine interest in that person I met? How much time did I spend at home and at work? What is the relationship between what I spend on entertainment and clothing and tzedakah? Your answers must align with your own values, Kula stresses. “The process is not about beating yourself up. It’s not fun, but it’s liberating. You’ll experience a lot less guilt and a lot less shame.”

---

*Rahel Musleah is an award-winning journalist, author and speaker. Visit her Web site, **www.rahelsjewishindia.com**.*

Subscribe to Jewish Woman magazine today!

For gift subscriptions, call 800-343-2823.

Jewish Women International 2006
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 720
Washington, DC 20036
Please contact Jewish Women International for information about reprint rights

Web development by **TMG**