

Dispelling the Dark Clouds of Shame

(Jonah 1:1-6; 4:1-11; Genesis 1:26-31)

His overwhelming sense was one of shame. “This is the one story I’ve never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife... For more than twenty years I’ve had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance I’m hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams,”<sup>21</sup> he wrote. For all the world, it looked like he was a hero, that he had served his country, his community, his people honorably. But he knew better.

Tim O' Brien's story, “On the Rainy River” describes a tableau of shame. It was during the Vietnam War. He got his draft notice just after finishing Macalester College in St. Paul. He drove north, where he remained for six days, half a mile from the border. He was in a rowboat, close enough to the Canadian shore that he could jump out and swim to it. But what kept him from jumping into the river were images of his parents calling to him from the far shore, his teachers and girlfriends and old buddies rooting him on ...a swirl

of faces along the bank yelling at him, “Traitor! Turncoat!”...a million ferocious citizens waving flags of all shapes and colors...whooping and chanting and urging me toward one shore or the other.” He returned to his native shore and he went to Vietnam. O’Brien writes, “I was a soldier...I survived, but it’s not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to war.” And twenty years later, his overwhelming sense was of shame.

*Baruch Chacham Harazim she ain daatam dome ze le ze v ain partzufam dome ze le ze v ha KBH yodeh ma be lev kulam* (Brachot 58a) “Blessed is the Wise One who discerns secrets, that though our knowledge differs one from the other and our appearance differs one from the other, the Holy One Blessed Be God knows what is in the heart of all.” This blessing is traditionally recited upon seeing a large group of people gathered together. We all have secrets, and the ancient rabbis found comfort in the reassurance that the Holy One sees each of us as unique, acknowledges those secrets, and still finds us worthy, even with all of our private agonies and doubts. It strikes me as powerful that this blessing is said not for individuals, but only when people are gathered as a community, strengthening one another in facing that which too often, we hide even from ourselves.

We have each entered this sanctuary with our stories, our struggles, our secrets. We know different things. We look different than one another, and for some of us, what we look like to ourselves, what we know about ourselves, is so vastly unlike what we think meets the eye of others. Yet we are fully seen by a loving, caring God. What dishonor disturbs our sleep? What are the swirl of faces yelling to us? What secrets have we brought with us here today? What can we barely acknowledge to ourselves, let alone to others? What are we ready to unburden to God?

Shame can cause irreparable damage. The hero knows others are mistaken; in truth, he is a coward. Shame leads us to feel that if only people knew our deep dark secrets, we would be utterly unlovable. And, by extension, since we know those secrets, we believe that we are utterly unlovable. Yet, how many of those secrets truly warrant the isolation and harsh punishment we impose upon ourselves? How much of what we experience as shameful would we readily forgive in the person walking beside us, in our best friend, in our children, in our partner?

For 37 years, I had been troubled by a secret. When I returned from Israel to attend rabbinic school in Los Angeles, a friend met me at the airport and drove me to my cousins' house in a well-traveled, small, red car. My relatives were at

work; my friend and I spent the day together, enjoying one another after a year apart. He left, and when my cousins came home, they and I noticed a big oil stain in their driveway. “Where did this come from?” they inquired. The neighbors told them that there had been a small red car in their driveway.

I didn’t say a word. I was too ashamed to own up to it being my friend’s car. I became more responsible than the leaky oil for that stain by being unable to admit how it appeared. My cousin is now in her 90s. From the time I moved from New York to California as a 19 year old, she has always been exceedingly loving and generous to me. Earlier this year, she was so effusive that I was able to celebrate with her the wedding of her granddaughter. But before I could fully rejoice, I had to unburden myself and ask for her forgiveness. She had moved out of that house 25 years ago. The car was long gone. Half of her family of four had died. But my shame at not having owned up to that stain had endured.

I know I’m not alone in being shamed by my younger self. In order to graduate from my experimental college, each student proposed an individual narrative and course plan that we negotiated with faculty and students. This summer, I’ve had the privilege of interviewing alumni, followed by the registrar providing their graduation contract to them for their current reflections.

Within five minutes of receiving his, one of my interviewees wrote to me,

“How much is it going to cost me to keep this quiet?”

In the calm of my office, I often listen to young people who cannot imagine that they will ever get out from under their shame—for having cheated in a relationship, for having failed a class, for having been suspended for plagiarism, for abusing alcohol or drugs, for being too cavalier about sex, for having caused an accident, for keeping—or for telling—their family’s secrets, for escaping from poverty. I know that their picture is incomplete and missing perspective. I know that they are not the only ones to have experienced this and that others have found their way through the darkness. I can see their struggle. I know that they are still worthy of love and esteem. But they can only see their shame.

And then there are those haunting helpless moments filled with tears, profound grief and agonizing questions when the dark emotions utterly eclipse the light. We have had to say a final goodbye to more than one student who could not see past their shame, could not imagine successes after their failures, could not accept that their mistakes revealed that they were only human. No doubt these same young people had reassured others of their worthiness and they had helped friends through the vicissitudes of life. If only they could have believed it themselves. If only we could be as forgiving of ourselves as we often are with others.

In her popular TED talk, shame researcher Brene Brown distinguishes between guilt and shame. Guilt is “I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Shame is “I’m sorry. I am a mistake.”<sup>ii</sup>

There are a lot of jokes about Jewish guilt and at least a few about Catholic guilt. But it turns out that guilt is a good thing—guilt can motivate change; it can help us to align our choices with our values. But shame paralyzes and isolates. The Jewish sources are so conscious of how corrosive is shame that they teach, “A person would rather experience physical pain than shame.” (Sotah 8B). They tell us that whoever shames another in public is like one who sheds blood... Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of R. Shimon ben Yochai, “It is better for a man to cast himself into a fiery furnace than to put his fellow to shame in public.” They recognized that shame leaves an indelible scar, one that diminishes the image of God.<sup>iii</sup>

When I was a pulpit rabbi, one sweet older congregant of mine was something of a recluse. Yet her home was scarcely a refuge—she was a hoarder. Eventually, her worried family insisted that she move to a nursing home. I tried to soothe her while men in Hazmat suits entered her home. It was stuffed from floor to ceiling with newspapers, food, clothing. There was no room for her, no room for living. Entering the space required significant precautions, because it was a breeding ground for illness and disease.

That apartment could be a metaphor for the fruits of shame—a stark image of how our negative self-judgments can take up all the real estate, driving out fresh air, suffocating under layers and layers of isolation, breeding dis-ease. Thoughtful religious practice helps us to, one by one, peel off all of those extra layers.

Our garments of shame may not be from “missing our moment” like Tim O’Brien or from an aberrant action that we wished we had handled differently. And, thank God, most of our garments of shame do not cinch us up irreversibly through death and despair. But they are corrosive nonetheless.

Ponderous dark clouds can overwhelm us with their presence and persistence. The rabbis of the Midrash vividly imagine that such clouds smother fresh air, nearly asphyxiating us—they describe how our secrets and our sins create a *megilah afah*, a flying scroll, a weave that grows thicker and broader and so ubiquitous that it becomes like an elephant’s skin in the sky—an elephant being the largest animal the rabbis knew—crowding out all the air, suffocating all hope.

But they also imagine an antidote. On Yom Kippur, on the Day of Atonement, on the holiest day of the year, the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. He prays on behalf of the people, opening up space for

breathing and dissolving the elephant skin, dissolving the dark clouds of shame.

While there is no longer a Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Jews still tell the story of that High Priest in Leviticus, and we still perform rituals of confession and release on Yom Kippur. Throughout a day of fasting and contemplating, praying and accounting, a litany of sins is repeated, with the tradition of gently striking our hearts to break up the layers encrusting our soul, to dispel the dark clouds of shame.

The litany is an alphabet of sins, A to Z, *aleph* to *tav*, to suggest how comprehensive our accounting of our behavior ought to be. Paradoxically, with each repetition of sins, with each knock on the heart, the burden grows lighter. A layer of clothing that hides our inner beauty drops from our body. The melody that punctuates the recitation is almost cheerful. The liturgy forms a spiritual practice of unburdening, of removing the accretions of shame.

In Genesis, we experience God, the artist, preparing for the creation of human beings. “Let us make Adam in our image, in our likeness.” We, each of us, are created in the Divine image. It is so easy to forget that in a world awash in advertising, when the next new product plays on our insecurities. We are created in God’s image. Why should we feel shame that this particular manifestation of God’s image—is too short or too tall or too large or too small



or too old, or too plain?

Can we stop suffocating ourselves with fears that we're not smart enough or powerful enough or talented enough or rich enough or good enough?

Can we silence the tape that asks scornfully, "How did YOU get to Stanford anyway?" Or "Why didn't you listen to your parents? Of course they were right and you were wrong." Or "What makes you think he/she would be interested in YOU?"

Can we put down the bludgeon that criticizes—for having made decisions without having all the information or for saying wrong thing or for not speaking up? Or for cheating on our taxes or for taking credit for someone else's contribution?

Can we cease and desist our harsh accusations for inadvertently sending a broadcast email saying what we really thought of our boss? For doing what we literally call "the walk of shame?" Or for recording someone else doing it?

For those of us in the academic business, can we halt the indictments for not knowing everything our colleagues know? Or for those of us who are clergy, for getting the ritual wrong? Can we move past not having owned up to something we did wrong or for being bystanders when we should have been

advocates? Can we ignore the pernicious message that we are imposters, just waiting to be unmasked?

*Naaseh Adam b'tzalmenu c'demutenu*

*Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness*

Take off an unnecessary layer.

*Vayivra elohem et haadam betzalmo, betzelem elohim bara oto, zacha u'nekeva bara otam.*

*And God created human beings in God's image, in the image of God God created them; male and female God created them*

Breathe in a long breath of fresh air.

*Vayivarech otam elohim...Vayar elohim...ki tov*

*And God blessed them..and God saw that God's creation was good.*

When we are gathered together in this sanctuary, with our different experiences, knowledge and appearances, can we imagine how God sees us—knowing our secrets and forgiving us nonetheless? Can we remember that the Holy, Eternal One has blessed us and called us good?

Whatever weighed us down as we entered this morning, we can cast off the

garments of shame; we can dispel the dark clouds of dishonor. We can return to our source, recover our pure soul. We can start fresh.

The bible reveals stories not only of the wise, like Solomon, but also of the imperfect, like us. Stories of those we may recognize, like Jonah. Jonah may be a prophet, but he is suffocating under the burden of isolation. He is so incapacitated by darkness that he goes down to sleep and asks the righteous sailors to cast him overboard. He may have been called, but he is nonetheless a reluctant soul who resents God's compassion. Yet, even a recalcitrant prophet whose absence of empathy God tries to rectify is not beyond the Divine reach. Even as God's compassion prevails in saving Nineveh from destruction, God shades and teaches and stands by Jonah, as God stands by each of us.

“Rabbi Yose said, “All my days I was troubled over the meaning of this verse “and you will grope at noonday as the blind man gropes in darkness.” ((Dt. 28:29) Now, I wondered, why would a blind man grope more in darkness than in daylight? [For the blind] aren't all times equally dark?

Then I witnessed the following incident: I was walking in night's darkness when I saw a blind person who was walking on the road and he had a torch in his hand. I said to him: “My son, why do you need this torch?” He answered me: “As long as a torch is in my hand, people see me and save me from

harming myself in ditches, thorns, and briars.” (Megillah 24b)<sup>iv</sup>

Should we find ourselves in a time when shame has blocked out the light and a torch may seem useless, let us light it anyway, to invite others to walk with us, to protect us from our own lost perspective, to help us to be seen, valued and to restored to our worth and dignity. And together, may we see each other and ourselves as the Holy One, Blessed be God sees us.

*Baruch Chacham Harazim she ain daatam dome ze le ze v ain partzufam dome ze le ze v ha KBH yodeh ma be lev kulam* (Brachot 58a) “Blessed is the Wise One who discerns secrets, that though our knowledge differs one from the other and our appearance differs one from the other, the Holy One Blessed Be God knows what is in the heart of all.”

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Tim O’Brien, “On the Rainy River” in *The Things They Carried*, p. 43-63.

<sup>ii</sup> Brene Brown,

[https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en)

<sup>iii</sup> Dov Peretz Elkin, <http://www.wisdomofjudaism.org/samplechapters2.html>

<sup>iv</sup> Leon Wurmser,

<http://wwwnew.towson.edu/innovation/osher/downloads/WURMSER%20V%20-fall%20-%20SHAME,%20HONOR%20JEWISH%20TRAD.pdf>