

Don't Mind Me, I'll Just Sit in the Dark

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Many years ago, I was lucky enough to observe a public master-class being taught by the renowned violinist Pinchas Zuckerman. A young man from Russia – he couldn't have been sixteen years old – played an arrangement of *Kol Nidrei* by Max Bruch. The student gave a marvelous performance, and both Zuckerman and the audience were quite taken with him. In a thick Israeli accent, Mr. Zuckerman told the student that he had played beautifully, but could he tell the class what he was thinking while he played. The student replied that he thought of the notes and the phrasing. Zuckerman agreed that the notes and the phrasing were very important, but could he tell the class what he was feeling when he played this music. The student hesitated before answering that the music was full of sadness.

Zuckerman nodded, as if to say, 'perhaps,' and then said: "Do you know what this music is? [Pause] It is Jewish! ... What do you think of when you think of 'Jewish'?" Oh this poor kid. He didn't know what to say. So he just shrugged at the master violinist, obviously taken aback. Zuckerman then turned to face the audience with a twinkle in his eye. "Eh? Do you know?" (Pause) "Then I will tell you ... It is guilt! There is nothing like Jewish guilt..." The laughter in the audience was quickly replaced with a collective sigh as Zuckerman whipped out his violin to play the opening bars of the chant. Every note was an anguished sob, and the guilt seemed to literally drip off the strings.

You've heard the old joke right? How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a light bulb? None! Don't mind me, I'll just sit in the dark.

We Jews don't have a monopoly on guilt, but it certainly has a hold on us. If Rosh HaShanah is about hearing the sound of the *shofar*, much of *Yom Kippur* is about hearing the nagging sound of our guilt. *Kol Nidre*, one of the most powerful and yet strangest prayers in our liturgy tugs at our heartstrings. With it we ask forgiveness not only for the vows we have broken, but for those that we haven't yet made but might break in the future! Forget about borrowing worry, tonight

we borrow guilt! Then there is the *viddui*, our communal confession of sins. If we recite this with intention, then we all take responsibility, we all feel the guilt. Sure, the chances that any one of us has done all or even most of these things is minute, but between us, we have probably covered the lot.

Yes, tonight is all about the guilt. And we are all of us guilty, in one way or another.

I really used to struggle with this. I mean, is this why we all come out tonight? So that we can suffer? Is this what makes Yom Kippur the highest of our High Holy Days? Are we really such gluttons for punishment?

Don't answer that.

When I was a rabbinical student, I spent a summer training as a hospital chaplain outside of New York City where I met a Jewish patient who desperately wanted to introduce me to his wife of more than fifty years, and it was especially important that I knew that she was a practicing Catholic. Somehow, her schedule and mine just never seemed to line up, until finally, after almost three weeks, he was being discharged. As I was helping them to their car he said, "I want you to know rabbi, that we gave our kids the best of both worlds: guilt and shame."

I did not understand what he was saying at the time, nor am I sure that he even did. But we both knew that our culture, Jewish culture, is guilt based. Anthropologists and Psychologists have been talking about and comparing what they call 'guilt cultures' and 'shame cultures' since the 1940s.¹ While there is debate over the nuances and culturally diverse variations on these themes, at their most basic level the difference between a shame culture and a guilt culture is instructive. In a shame based culture, when we are perceived as doing wrong, then we are seen as permanently damaged. This evokes Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, where young Hester Prynne was convicted of adultery. As a punishment, she was forced to sew a red letter 'A' to her clothing

¹ The first use of this comparative frame is credited to Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), which contrasted the cultures of Japan and the United States as shame and guilt based respectively.

so that she could be judged, despised and shunned by all. The purpose of the sentence was to make sure that there could be no recovery, no redemption for Hester: only a lifetime of shame.

A guilt based culture, on the other hand, locates the problem not with the person, but with the act. We feel guilty for what we have done, or we are found guilty for what we have done. However, at least in theory, we have the possibility of redemption. We can be rehabilitated, or pay our debt to society, or in the case of these High Holy Days, we can make *teshuvah*. If you want to see how a guilt-based culture operates and the good it can do, then look around.

Our Jewish guilt is part of our strength. It inspires and motivates us to learn, to change, to become better human beings; and every year we are given another chance and a little push.

I think that this is why we come tonight. Whether we are fully conscious of it, or intuitively in sync, we understand that today is about the possibilities for a better future, and for a better 'us.'

Traditionally, the focus of our *teshuvah* is on our relationships with each other and with God. While we might try during the year to ignore it, we break a little bit each time one of our relationships is damaged. We break a little bit whenever we hurt someone. We break a little bit whenever someone hurts us. We break a little bit when we give up what we know is right, out of fear or worry. We break a little bit when we do what we know is wrong out of greed or revenge. We break a little bit when we are injured, or lose a loved one. We break a little bit when we ignore the needs of another. We break a little bit when we exaggerate our own needs to take advantage of another. We break a little bit when we love so much that we can't seem to let go. We break a little bit when we withhold our love out of anger, or to be manipulative. We break a little bit when we isolate ourselves from each other. And we break a little bit when we isolate ourselves from God.

We are all broken, in more ways than we care to admit. If we lived in a shame culture, then we might have to carry that brokenness with us for the rest of our lives. Thankfully, instead of shame, we have some nice Jewish guilt. Each generation's gift to the next, woven into the values

of our tradition, so that today through the process of *teshuvah* we can make ourselves more whole again. *Teshuvah* can mean repentance, turning or return.

Maimonides famously taught that there are five sequential steps to *teshuvah*. First, we must recognize that we have erred and done something wrong. If we refuse to recognize that we have a problem, we will never be able to fix it. Second, we must feel remorse for our misdeeds. This is real Jewish guilt, the kind that can serve as our drive for personal betterment. Third, we must apologize to the person we have hurt, and try to make amends. Now, if we are able to fix up our relationship, have apologized and been forgiven, then we might think we are done, but we are not. Maimonides details two additional critical steps. Fourth, we must determine not to repeat the same mistake in the future. Then, finally, when the opportunity comes, and it surely will, we must choose a better way to avoid repeating that same mistake. Only when we have changed our behavior is our *teshuvah* complete, only then will we have turned from a path of brokenness to a path of healing.

I find this description of *teshuvah* to be compelling, and yet, as I thought about it this summer I began to wonder: if *teshuvah* is about repairing our relationships with each other, and we have effectively done that by making up, by apologizing to each other and forgiving each other, then why do we need two more steps?

The surface answer seems obvious – we have to change our behavior so that we do not damage our future relationships in the same ways that we have in the past. That's nice, and it's true, but it doesn't really answer the question. If the purpose of all of our Jewish guilt is ultimately about making *teshuvah*, and if *teshuvah* is about healing our relationships, then we shouldn't need the last two steps. Once we have truly made up, our relationship is healed – at least for now. We all know what a release we can feel after making up, and how much lighter we become. Isn't that enough?

Well, no, not really.

Let's review the last two steps: determining not to repeat the mistake again in the future, and then, not repeating the mistake in the future. What is broken that these two steps try to heal?

The answer, I think has to do with our very souls. My *yetzer*, my inclination is to hold myself to an unforgiving standard. I have been like this since I was a child. On the positive side, this has driven me to become a 'me' that in many ways I can be proud of. The negative side is this: I consistently hold myself to a double standard, with a brutally harsh frame for judging success or failure. I carry my own internal scarlet letters, create my own mental marks of shame. Nobody could be harder on me than I already am on myself.

That's my *yetzer*. That's what I need to work on this year. I know that I am not the only person here who struggles with this inclination. Yet, some of us have the opposite challenge. We are too easy on ourselves, we have almost no personal accountability and instead blame others for our troubles and theirs, even when we are to blame. Those of us who incline in this direction find ourselves repeating the same mistakes over and over, often not even realizing it, and don't understand why nothing ever seems to change.

My guess is that most of us fall somewhere in the middle, but we do lean in one direction or the other. We all need a little *mussar*, a little correction to bring us closer towards a healthy balance. The first three steps of *teshuvah* help us to repair our relationships with each other, the last two help us repair our relationships with ourselves, and by extension, with God. For those who need their feet held to the fire, completing the last two steps gets them through. At the end they have not only changed for the better, but have found new spiritual strength. For those who hold onto their guilt until it becomes shame, the last two steps give them permission to let it all go. At the end they have found spiritual healing, and their *teshuvah* has set them free.

So tonight, let's not laugh about our Jewish guilt, or denigrate it: let's embrace it. Tonight, let's determine to make real *teshuvah*, complete *teshuvah*, and this Yom Kippur may we all find the healing, the spiritual strength and the freedom that true *teshuvah* brings.