



## The Power of Shame • Parshat Shemini

After seven days of consecration in *Parshat Tzav*, *Parshat Shemini* opens with the eighth day, when the offering of sacrifices by Aaron will enable the Glory of God to appear. After an elongated anticipation, we would expect Aaron to be brimming with enthusiasm to fill his role as High Priest. Yet, the Sages, attuned to the subtleties of language and the complexities of the human condition, hypothesize hesitancy on Aaron's part.

Moses told Aaron "Come near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people" (Lev. 9:7). Commentaries note that the opening words "*kerav el ha-mizbeach*," "come near to the altar," are seemingly extraneous. The verse could have begun with "offer your sin offering" and Aaron would have deduced that he would have "to come near to the altar" to accomplish this directive. Reading into this clue, one midrash intuits Aaron's reluctance. Moses needed to empower Aaron, urging him to "Embolden yourself and come and do your priestly activities." What exactly is causing Aaron's reticence to approach the altar?

Rashi posits two related emotions generating the resistance: shame and fear. The failures and shortcomings of the Golden Calf were ever-present in Aaron's psyche. Aaron was so haunted by the incident, according to one midrash, that he mistook the altar for the silhouette of a calf. These self-conscious emotions prevented Aaron from resolutely and energetically executing the sacrificial service.

Moses, according to Rashi, persuaded Aaron by stating "Why are you ashamed? It was for this that you were chosen." One way to interpret Rashi is that, due to the potentially paralyzing effects of these negative sentiments, Moses adjured Aaron not to feel ashamed. Alternatively, instead of denigrating shame, many Hasidic commentaries interpret Rashi's comment as endorsing this challenging emotion. It is expressly because of Aaron's deep sense of humility and hesitancy that he was chosen for this task.

In contrast to the Israelites who happily celebrated after the sin of the Golden Calf, Aaron's shame about his participation in that offense, writes Rabbi Sholom Noach Berezovsky in his *Netivot Shalom*, embodied the proper emotional expression after iniquity. It is precisely this painful penitential process that made Aaron the perfect leader to offer the inaugural sin offering. Through the experience of his own sin and internal process of repair, Aaron was able to empathize with other sinners. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks constructs the implicit message of Moses to Aaron that only one who understands sin can pray for exoneration: "You know what sin is like. You know what it is to feel guilt. You more than anyone else understand the need for repentance and atonement. You have felt the cry of your soul to be cleansed, purified and wiped free of the stain of transgression" ("When Weakness Becomes Strength," *Covenant & Conversation*).

While also advancing the value of Aaron's shame, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter in his *Sefat Emet*

acknowledges the pitfalls of shame gone awry. The primary distinction between what Rabbi Alter deems adaptive shame and harmful shame is whether the emotion causes us to be derelict in our spiritual obligations. With Moses' support and encouragement to "come near," Aaron was able to move forward. If he would have resisted and avoided his responsibilities, the shame would have been unhealthy and unholy. Indeed, his transformative challenges actually enhanced his capacity to effect spiritual change.

Shame, in response to an honest accounting of shortcomings, has the potential to stimulate personal growth and foster wholeness. The primary technique and strategy to ensure that it does not lead to stagnation and paralysis is through *kerav*: approach, activation, and connection. When confronting our own failures, we would do well to take responsibility, seek forgiveness, and move forward toward further fulfilling our Divine mission.

*Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, the associate rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center, and the author of *Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha*.*

**Character Challenge:** Are there any stagnating negative emotions that are causing you to avoid important responsibilities and opportunities for growth? Try to "come near" by approaching, accomplishing, and making forward progress towards your goals and values.

**Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l:** "The distance between who we are and who we ought to be is, for most of us, vast. We fail. We fall. We give in to temptation. We drift into bad habits. We say or do things in anger we later deeply regret. We deeply disappoint those who had faith in us. We betray those who trusted us. We lose friends. Sometimes our deepest relationships can fall apart. We experience frustration, shame, humiliation, remorse. We let others down. We let ourselves down. These things are not rare. They happen to all of us, even the greatest. One of the most powerful features of biblical narrative is that its portraits are not idealised. Its heroes are human. They too have their moments of self-doubt. They too sin" (*Ceremony & Celebration*, p. 27).