



The Psychology of Shame

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On The Parsha

When Yosef sends his brothers back to Canaan to bring Yaakov to him, he tells the brothers, "Do not quarrel on the way." Rashi explains this in several ways including the following: "According to the simple meaning of the verse, we can say that since they were ashamed, he was concerned that they would perhaps quarrel on the way about his being sold, debating with one another, and saying, 'Because of you he was sold. You slandered him and caused us to hate him.'"

This commentary by Rashi shows a deep awareness of how integrity can be undermined. He suggests that feelings of shame can spark arguments, which then turn into accusations about who is most responsible for the wrongdoing. The brothers had all participated in selling Yosef, but not equally. Some proposed killing him. Some suggested that they throw him into the pit. Some advocated for his sale. Some stayed silent. Each brother knew exactly what he had done and what he had seen others do. Yosef was concerned that each brother may quarrel with the other and say that, "I just remained silent – your actions were much worse, you advised us to kill him," or another claiming, "Your actions are worse than mine, because you caused me to hate him."

People react this way because shame is very hard to handle. To cope, our minds try to find relief, often by shifting blame onto others. If I can convince myself that someone else is more to blame, my own guilt feels lighter, even though the actual facts haven't changed—it's just that comparing makes me feel less at fault.

Yosef issues this warning after revealing himself and after forgiving them. One might think forgiveness would eliminate any need for caution. If Yosef holds no resentment, why would the brothers quarrel?

The answer is that Yosef's forgiveness addresses only one dimension of the wrong. Each brother must still confront his own conscience and the shame and guilt associated with that confrontation may still cause them to quarrel. The brothers can no longer deny the sale was wrong; Yosef standing in front of them as the viceroy of Egypt proves they did the wrong thing by selling Yosef and deceiving their father about his whereabouts for twenty-two years. The only psychological escape left is to shrink one's own share of guilt and blame by magnifying the share of others.

Rashi articulates his interpretation with precision: "Because of you he was sold. You slandered him and caused us to hate him." The passage's structure is noteworthy—the speaker, one of the brothers, passively acknowledges involvement ("he was sold," implicating all brothers collectively), while attributing causation to another ("because of you"). He references a prior transgression—slander—and asserts that it led to collective animosity.

The brother effectively states: While he harbored hatred and participated in the sale, he attributes greater culpability to the other, reasoning that his actions were instigated by the other's slander. This shift repositions himself from an active participant to someone influenced or manipulated by his sibling's conduct.

Within this context, Rashi's analysis provides meaningful guidance. When an individual claims, "I only did X because you did Y," they shirk full responsibility and avoid candid self-reflection. True integrity requires acknowledging and owning one's actions without reference to the behavior of others. For individuals who embody integrity, questions such as "Was I as bad as him?" are immaterial; the pertinent inquiry remains, "What did I do, and was it justifiable?"

If, as described by Rashi, the brothers engaged in such disputes, their actions would amount to moral arbitrage—attempting to mitigate personal accountability by amplifying the faults of others. However, this strategy is ultimately futile; regardless of comparative blame, each individual's deeds remain unchanged. The spoken slander, harbored resentment, complicity in deception, and collective silence before their father—all represent shared responsibilities that are not lessened by highlighting another's greater fault.

Yosef recognized that authentic repentance necessitates individual self-examination. That is why he advised that each brother must refrain from “quarrel on the way” and not seek solace in comparative guilt or minimizing their actions by referencing another’s provocation. Every individual is called to undertake their unique process of moral reckoning.

A person of true integrity does not evaluate their behavior relative to others nor seek reassurance through others' shortcomings. Instead, they stand accountable before their own conscience, confronting their actions honestly without measuring their conduct against others.

Chizuk - Inspiration

Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv ZT”L (1910–2012) was one of

the most influential Halachic authorities of the twentieth century, serving for decades as the preeminent Posek in Jerusalem. His rulings on matters of Jewish law were sought by individuals and communities worldwide, and he was revered for his encyclopedic mastery of Talmud and Halacha as well as his legendary personal integrity.

In the 1980s, a wealthy businessman visited Rabbi Elyashiv seeking his Halachic opinion about a complex business dispute with another party. Before he began presenting his question, he discreetly placed a large envelope of cash on the table near the rabbi, intended as a donation that would, he hoped, create some goodwill and assist in receiving a favorable Halachic opinion.

Rabbi Elyashiv immediately understood the situation. Without raising his voice, Rabbi Elyashiv pushed the envelope back across the table and said, “If you leave this here, I am Halachically forbidden to hear your question.”

The man protested. “This is not a bribe, it is just a donation to Tzedakah!”

Rabbi Elyashiv replied calmly, “If I accept anything from you, even for charity, I cannot provide an opinion on your case. The Torah commands, ‘Lo sikach shochad,’ do not take a gift. A gift, even without conditions, affects judgment. If you want to donate, give it to any institution, but I cannot hear your question until it is entirely unconnected to me.”

The man picked up the envelope and put it away. Only then did Rabbi Elyashiv allow him to present his question.

It is important to note that this consultation was not a formal Din Torah, a binding arbitration between two disputing parties. The businessman came alone to ask a halachic question regarding his business dealings. Since the other party involved in the matter was not present and had not agreed to submit the dispute to Rabbi Elyashiv for adjudication, any opinion that he would issue would not be binding. The opposing party would have no Halachic obligation to follow Rabbi Elyashiv's opinion, as they had never accepted him as their arbiter. Nevertheless, Rabbi Elyashiv maintained the same exacting standards of impartiality that would apply in a formal court proceeding. Even when offering a non-binding Halachic opinion, he refused to allow any factor that might compromise the purity of his judgment.

“May I back out of a school carpool that I have already committed to?”

“Should I report a co-worker who is acting dishonestly?”

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