

Breslov Repair Kit – Shame

written by Chaya Rivka Zwolinski | September 23, 2011



Through new Torah insights, each person becomes filled with shame.

Through shame, a person merits repentance, since repentance, whereby we cease to sin any longer, primarily results from shame...

...when a person comes to the tzadik and hears Torah teachings from his mouth, and he thereby feels shame and begins to sense his own lowliness, this is a sign that he was in the presence of a true tzadik. But when a person comes to some famous [rabbi] and hears Torah teachings from his mouth and is then filled with pride and feelings of self importance... (The opposite conclusion may readily be deduced).

–Excerpted from the English translation of Kitzur Likutei Moharan, Volume II, Lesson 72, BRI publications.

If we apply the Western connotations of shame to the above Torah from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, we squirm. Today, our sensitive generation considers shame to be a counterfeit feeling, something with little or no value, even a neurosis which holds us back from being authentically “me”.

Perhaps society’s view of shame had to swing to this extreme in order for the old, toxic definition of shame—what can be called “shaming-shame”—to die the ignoble death it most likely deserves. Because the current cultural landscape ascribes virtually no redeeming value to shame, this has allowed us to throw out the black box of shaming-shame. Shaming-shame holds us down, drowning us in despair and directionless rage. This kind of shame has caused angst for many generations.

Over 70 years ago, a dear family friend, Hanoach, left the Torah path, a choice which he openly attributes to his father constantly shaming him about not performing mitzvahs with precision. Another friend who was constantly humiliated and shamed as a child has struggled with anorexia and its complications for nearly two decades. And today we’ve all heard of adults (or teenagers) who haven’t been able to develop the psycho-spiritual tools to process the humiliation, confusion, and pain of their childhoods.

But the pendulum appears to be swinging back. Parents and teachers are realizing that the past twenty years’ response to the shame-based pedagogy of previous generations entails a squishy, everybody’s-a-winner approach combined with endless praise that is unbalanced. There has to be discipline and fine-tuned criticism if we don’t want to create a generation of fragile beings that can’t handle disappointments or failures. A blend of compassion and constructive awareness of shame is where at least part of the truth lies.

The Hebrew word for shame is *busha* (note the resemblance to bashful, which is also one of *busha*’s definitions), which can

also be translated as embarrassed, shy, dishonored, lowly, or, as it moves closer to shaming-shame, disgraced. So what exactly is this *busha*? Is it a blend of shaming-shame and “progressive” shame? Is it possible that *busha* has real meaning for our generation or is this fantasy? What does the Rebbe mean when he says we should feel shame when we learn Torah from the mouth of the *tzadik*?

Rabbi Bunim of Pshischa taught that each person should have two pockets to help him remember his place in Creation. In one should be a slip of paper that says “I am only dust and ashes.” In the other should be a slip of paper upon which is written “The whole world was created for me.”

The meaning of the latter isn't what it appears to be—it isn't telling you you're the greatest thing since sushi—it's saying that because the world was created for you, you've got tremendous responsibilities to live up to. It's telling you: Be humble.

Anavah (humility) is the intellectual awareness of our true measure and the relationship between this assessment and our potential and responsibilities. It also means we're aware of the difference of magnitude between us...and Hashem's greatness.

Busha is in the other pocket. It's a necessary part of the twinned *kvitlach*. *Busha* is the feeling of lowliness and embarrassment that we feel when the intellectual assessment of our spiritual status makes its way into our emotions. If we're at a very lofty level of *busha*, we'll actually sustain a subliminal awareness of *busha* at all times. When the occasion arises where greater feelings of *busha* are warranted, we'll instantaneously feel it—with no transition time from thought to feeling. In fact, at this level, *busha*, a feeling, comes before we even register it in our thoughts.

Why is *busha* so desirable?

Though *busha* is a feeling, the Orchos Tzadikim says that

busha's source is the *seichel*, the intellect—only an intelligent, knowledgeable person is capable of *busha*. How do we know this? The Orchos Tzadikim explains that before Adam and Chava (Eve) ate from the tree of knowledge, they didn't know enough to feel ashamed of their lack of clothing. Only after they gained knowledge did they feel *busha*.

When we contemplate Hashem's greatness during *hisbodedus* (the Orchos Tzadikim uses the term for the type of meditation most closely associated with Breslov Chassidus), we develop progressively higher levels of *busha*. We'll become more aware of Hashem's constant presence, of the fact that He totally understands what's going on inside us, and that He knows us better than we know ourselves.

But *busha's* not only a sign of intelligence. Chazal say that Jews are by nature *rachmanim*, *baishanim*, b' *gomlei chassadim*, (merciful, bashful or easily shamed, and benevolent). The ability to feel shame is an essential ingredient of our Jewishness.

As we relate to Hashem (during *hisbodedus* and throughout our day) with recognition of both His greatness and our absolute dependence on Him, we engage in the act of comparing our self with His greatness. We deeply sense our lowliness, our absolute debt of gratitude to Hashem for giving us life and sustaining us. *Hisbodedus* also helps us develop an accurate assessment of our true self. We compare our present self with the potential self we yearn to be. In other words, we feel *busha* when we recognize our failures and transgressions and see how far we need to grow. This comparison leads to *teshuvah* (repentance). *Busha* cannot fully exist independently of these comparisons.

We also feel *busha* when we learn Torah from a *tzadik*. We sense his connection to Hashem, his greatness, and his own higher level of *anavah* and *busha*, and subconsciously or consciously, compare our self to him. (Though we're taught to not compare

ourselves with others on the one hand, on the other, when we do it in this context, we gain.) Also, merely being in the presence of the *tzadik* and his more comprehensive *busha*, has an impact on us.

Astonishingly, the Rebbe tells us that each of us has the potential to become a *tzadik*, if we would devote ourselves to the task as much as he did. He encourages us and motivates us by teaching us that real spiritual growth, even spiritual excellence, is possible, though challenging to say the least.

In sum, we gain *busha* by looking up and looking within.

Though *busha* requires us to have a realistic view of our own smallness, which, by necessity includes an awareness of our transgressions, it isn't spiritually defeating. On the contrary, authentic *busha* strengthens us because as we look inwards, our psycho-spiritual gaze is simultaneously trained upwards. We draw strength from above—our relationship with Hashem and the Torah teachings we hear from the *tzaddik* are toe holds.

However, if we hear and accept Torah from a false teacher, we end up looking downwards and outwards. We become blind to our own shortcomings and transgressions and are only able to see them as they are falsely reflected in others. In this case, what we are doing is projecting our unhealthy shame onto others because we aren't spiritually healthy enough to do the inner work that leads to healthy *busha*. Arrogance enables us to distance ourselves from "those people." We console ourselves with illusion. We might even ridicule or sneer at this person who's actually an illusory manifestation of inability to deal with our smallness in an enlightened manner. Of course, this kind of distorted view is only possible when we look away from Hashem and away from our inner self and learn from a false teacher.

Busha is one of the spiritual tools we should be aware of as

Rosh Hashana draws near. Are we looking upwards and inwards?

A caveat: Used judiciously, shame is a motivating force. But if we wallow in shame we sink into *atzvus* (depression) and *atzvus* is like a heavy, damp fog, obscuring our ability to see the truth and make spiritual progress.

Many thanks to M.C. whose feedback, discussion and excellent translation of the Orchos Tzadikim were essential.