

“I Am Not a Mistake”  
Yom Kippur 5776  
Rabbi David E. Levy  
Westchester Reform Temple

David was restless. It was summer, and everyone was out of town. He couldn't sleep, so he got out of bed and wandered to the window. Down below, on the terrace, a beautiful woman was bathing on a hot summer night. In that moment, he wanted her, and being a man in power, that wasn't a problem: he had her and sent her on her way. A month later, he had a bigger problem than insomnia: this married woman was now pregnant with King David's child.

The union of David and Bat Sheva began in sin, but it was Bat Sheva's son, Solomon, who would become a wise King and David's successor. Yet their initial coupling had some serious repercussions. Shortly after their tryst, the prophet Nathan marched into David's palace, and in front of his family and everyone he knew, he spoke truth to power. Nathan shouts:

11 “Thus says Adonai, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household;...12 ‘Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun.’”<sup>1</sup>

Wow. Quite a tirade for David to endure. To his credit, David replied:

“I have sinned against Adonai.” And Nathan said to David, “Adonai also has taken away your sin; you shall not die.”<sup>2</sup>

No if’s ands or buts, David accepted that his actions, however vile, did not mean that he himself was vile. By acknowledging his mistake, David found a path to forgiveness. He was guilty, but I wonder: should he have felt ashamed?

There is a huge difference between being guilty and being ashamed. Brene Brown, a noted research scientist, clarifies the difference: Guilt: I’m sorry. I made a mistake. Shame: I’m sorry. I am a mistake.<sup>3</sup> Each of these emotions, Guilt and Shame have a place

---

<sup>1</sup> II Samuel 12:11-12

<sup>2</sup> II Samuel 12:13

<sup>3</sup>Brown, Brene. "Listening to Shame." *Ted*. N.p., Mar. 2012. Web. 03 Sept. 2015. <[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)>.

here on Yom Kippur. This day exists for introspection and honesty with ourselves and others.

Guilt helps us recognize the mistakes we've made and urges us to fix them. It's that gnawing energy that reminds us that we hurt someone, and that we need to do better. We feel guilty when we throw out the piles of donation solicitations that fill our mailbox daily. We feel guilty when we are too hard on our kids. We feel guilty when we hurt someone we love with a callous word. Guilt is our mechanism for addressing our shortcomings and motivating self improvement. Maimonides argued that guilt acts as an encouraging force pushing each of us toward mastering repentance, having the strength not to make the same mistake twice.<sup>4</sup>

Jonah Lehrer, as my mother in law would put it: knew from guilt. He confessed in 2013: "I am the author of a book on creativity that is best known because it contained several fabricated Bob Dylan

---

<sup>4</sup> MT Hilchot Teshuvah 2:1

quotes...I lied, repeatedly, to a journalist named Michael Moynihan to cover up the Dylan fabrications.”<sup>5</sup>

The author of a book on creativity fabricated Bob Dylan quotes. Clearly he was being a bit too creative. Lehrer was given a chance to offer a public apology at an event hosted by the Knight foundation, which focuses on journalistic excellence. His apology was offered with a 21st century twist: a live twitter feed scrolled on a screen next to him so that people could respond in real time.

The Knight foundation and Lehrer had no idea what they were getting into. Everyone was unprepared for the onslaught of vitriolic comments that were waiting to be posted. One of the first tweets was promising: “And that, people, is how you apologize.”<sup>6</sup> It went downhill from there. “Jonah Lehrer boring people into forgiving him for his plagiarism.”<sup>7</sup> “The only way @JonahLehrer can redeem himself

---

<sup>5</sup>Ronson, Jon. *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. London: Pan Macmillan, 2015. 42. Print.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 45

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 46.

from his failures is by doing completely different work. He is tainted as a writer forever.”<sup>8</sup>

Jonah’s story was chronicled in Jon Ronson’s new book “So you’ve been publicly shamed.” The book illustrates the preponderance of public shaming in American society, and our desire to see people in one of two categories: either redeemable or damned; either having made a mistake, or that they are a mistake. By continuing to try Jonah Lehrer in the court of public opinion, we suggest that he is not worthy of forgiveness, and that he is the mistake, not that he made a mistake.

The Talmud teaches: Anyone who shames another person in public is like a person who sheds blood...When people are publicly shamed, their faces first turn red then white.<sup>9</sup> When we choose to act maliciously, or even thoughtlessly around others, our words have consequences. Shaming can corrupt our sense of self worth.

---

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* 47

<sup>9</sup> *Baba Metzia 58b-59b*

When we feel shame; we conclude that something is wrong with our core: that we ourselves are the problem. Shame is that nagging self doubt that says that we are never good enough, we are flawed and we aren't worthy of being loved. We may feel it when not enough people are coming to our Bar Mitzvah. When we didn't get into the right college. When we don't think we make enough money to live in this town. When we don't like what we see in the mirror. The Talmud teaches: a person would rather endure physical pain, than shame<sup>10</sup>.

Social media and the internet feed our societies need to shame others. As Ronson notes: "These days, the hunt is on for people's shameful secrets. You can lead a good, ethical life, but some bad phraseology in a Tweet can overwhelm it all, become a clue to your secret inner evil."<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Sotah 8b

<sup>11</sup>Ronson, Jon. "When Online Shaming Spirals out of Control." *Ted*. Ted, 1 July 2015. Web. 03 Sept. 2015. <[http://www.ted.com/talks/jon\\_ronson\\_what\\_happens\\_when\\_online\\_shaming\\_spirals\\_out\\_of\\_control/transcript?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/jon_ronson_what_happens_when_online_shaming_spirals_out_of_control/transcript?language=en)>.

I want us to remember Tyler Clementi, a freshman at Rutgers University, whose death marked a moment when the internet was used to its cruelest effect. His roommate Dharun Ravi tweeted: “Roommate asked for the room till midnight. I went into [another] room and turned on my webcam. I saw him making out with a dude. Yay.”<sup>12</sup> A few days later, Tyler asked for the room again. Ravi tweeted his intention to share his webcam feed with the world exposing Tyler to the wilds of the internet. Mortified, Tyler posted these words on his Facebook wall 5 years ago today (9/22): “Jumping off the gw bridge sorry.”<sup>13</sup>

One Jewish mother heard about Tyler’s suicide, and was devastated. Her daughter later explained: “My mom was beside herself about what happened..., and...I realized she was reliving... a time when she sat by my bed every night, reliving a time when she made me shower with the bathroom door open, and reliving a time

---

<sup>12</sup>Parker, Ian. "The Story of a Suicide." The New Yorker, 6 Feb. 2012. Web. 03 Sept. 2015.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

when both of my parents feared that I would be humiliated to death, literally.”<sup>14</sup>

That daughter, Monica Lewinsky, was the center of her own maelstrom of shame 17 years ago when her affair with the President of the United States was exposed. She was 22 years old. This past March she went on the TED stage and said:

“Anyone who is suffering from shame and public humiliation needs to know one thing: You can survive it. I know it's hard. It may not be painless, quick or easy, but you can insist on a different ending to your story. Have compassion for yourself. We all deserve compassion, and to live both online and off in a more compassionate world.”<sup>15</sup>

She spoke of cyberbullying, and our society's impulse to instill shame in others. Which leads to the question: how do we combat shame?

---

<sup>14</sup>Lewinsky, Monica. "The Price of Shame." *TED*. N.p., Mar. 2015. Web. 03 Sept. 2015. <[http://www.ted.com/talks/monica\\_lewinsky\\_the\\_price\\_of\\_shame?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame?language=en)>.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

Brene Brown argues that “Shame cannot survive empathy.”<sup>16</sup>

When those shameful thoughts creep in, empathy and compassion are the tools that we need to combat them. Brown believes: “A social wound needs a social [prescription], and empathy is that [prescription]. Self-compassion is key because when we’re able to be gentle with ourselves in the midst of shame, we’re more likely to reach out, connect, and experience empathy.”<sup>17</sup>

We live in a world that constantly holds us up to incredibly high standards and then tells us over and over: we can’t meet them. That we can always make more time for our kids, and our job, and our spouse, and so many other things. That we need to be thinner. That we can always make a bigger difference in the environment. That we can always get a better grade. That we can become a better Jew.

I do not stand here pretending to live without shame. I struggle to be compassionate with myself. When I forget your name, even

---

<sup>16</sup>ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Brown, Brené. *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*. New York, NY: Gotham, 2012. 75. Print.

though you probably remember mine, my face reddens. When I walk by a person in need, hardening my heart against their plight, my face becomes beet red. When I fail the impossible standard of being a perfect father to Micah and Benji, my face turns from red to white. When we have the strength to find compassion, and accept our failings as a part of being human: we can deflate our shame. Imagine living without that millstone around our necks; how much easier it would be to enjoy our lives, unencumbered.

Judaism, as Rabbi Blake regularly reminds us, is dramatically countercultural, and offers countless examples where we are reminded to have self-compassion. Psalms begs: Enter not into Judgement with your servant for no person living is righteous before you.<sup>18</sup> The book of Ecclesiastes decrees: there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.<sup>19</sup> The words of Unataneh Tokef implore; It is not the death of sinners you seek, but that they

---

<sup>18</sup> Psalms 143:2

<sup>19</sup> Eccles. 7:20

should turn from their ways and live. You God have created us and know what we are we are but flesh and blood.<sup>20</sup> We can all make better choices. That's what guilt is for, to remind us to turn right instead of left next time, because we can control our guilt in a way that we cannot control shame. When shame enters our lives it's a reminder that we have to stop being so hard on ourselves and others.

There is a beautiful song by Rabbi Menachem Creditor: Olam Chesed Yibaneh.<sup>21</sup> We will build a world of compassion. A world where we look at others and don't immediately try to figure out how to tear them down. A world where we look in the mirror we don't immediately think of ways to tear ourselves apart. What kind of world might we live in if we built it on compassion and lovingkindness, Olam Chesed Yibaneh? A world in which we recognized the inherent goodness in each person, including ourselves and made space for them to make mistakes?

---

<sup>20</sup> Ezekiel 18:23 quoted in Unataneh Tokef

<sup>21</sup> Psalms 89:3

As Monica Lewinsky said: none of this is painless, quick or easy. We will all continue to struggle with guilt and shame, even as we try to eradicate it, because we live in an imperfect and fractured world that we are constantly striving to make whole. However, it is my prayer that we can each take a step today towards Olam Chesed Yibaneh, A healed world built on compassion by declaring aloud or deep in our hearts this truth: I am not a mistake. No one here, is a mistake. The words of the serenity prayer say it best:

O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed,

The courage to change what can be changed,

and the wisdom to know the one from the other<sup>22</sup>

May we all learn to love ourselves: flaws and all. May we develop the wisdom to know when we need to offer an hug, and a compassionate presence not only for others but also for ourselves.

---

<sup>22</sup>"Reinhold Niebuhr." *The Serenity Prayer*. BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2015. 3 September 2015.  
<http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/r/reinholdni100884.html>

serenity prayer say it best:

May we be unafraid, and unashamed and fully deserving of G-d's  
blessing.