Beyond Shame and Silence

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Shana tova,

I'd like to speak about silence this morning. There's a silence that comes from being overwhelmed. And there's a silence that comes from terror. There's an even more insidious form of silence, and that arises as a response to shame.

Sarah Braun talked about shame just a few weeks ago, and she pointed out that shame affects not only the abuser but the abused.

Now there are a lot of different understandings of the word shame, but I find the most interesting to be that while guilt is the feeling that I have done something bad, shame is the sense that – deep down – I am bad; irredeemably corrupt. I say this kind of shame is insidious because it has two particularly nasty tricks up its sleeve. The first is that because it focuses on my essence, not my debt, shame is an all or nothing business. It doesn't matter how big the puttanesca sauce is on my white shirt, or how much mold has grown on the leftover cholent: if it's a little bad, it's *all* bad. I suspect that that's why so frequently in our liturgy we return to the phrase "V'lo neivosh" – that we never be ashamed.

The second is that even the possibility that I am all bad can be intolerable – it leads to not just distress, but terror, and that terror can be paralyzing. We frequently see the idea that shame, or the fear of shame can be a incentive to repent, or avoid sin altogether, but I think just as frequently that fear is itself a stumbling block. As a midrash in Pesikta Rabati put it, when God asked the wicked of the world why they did not come closer to God, each responded "I was so steeped in my wickedness that I was ashamed." I am so afraid of feeling worthless that I remain mute even when speaking up could be to my benefit.

This might help make sense of a silence that troubles me every year around this time. Last week we read the story of the Akeida, the binding of Isaac, and although the text attributes Abraham's unquestioning obedience to his absolute faith, that's never felt psychologically true to me. Maybe, just maybe, Abraham has never forgotten his sending Hagar and Ishmael out in the desert, perhaps to die. Does he think, "Who am I to stand before God and demand anything?" Even while looking down on his soon-to-be killed child, Abraham's shame keeps him silent.

In a very subtle way, here at the end of the Ten Days we are confronted with with a similar kind of silence. Today's Torah reading is a description of the Yom Kippur service. But how does it begin? "God spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron's two sons." The atonement ritual set in the context of a story that it assumes we know: Aaron's two sons, Nadav and Avihu, offer "strange fire" in the Sanctuary and are struck dead by God. And Aaron? "Vayidom Aharon" – Aaron was silent.

Really? Could he believe this death was just? Or did he remember a time when he, too, was involved in strange worship, a worship that led to the death of many more than two. Looking now, does he think, "I am the one who fashioned the Golden Calf. I can't even bear to think of that, and if I were to say anything now, surely God would throw that right in my face."

Could things have been different? If Abraham had said, "No, the God I worship cannot be served by killing children". If Aaron had let himself cry. "I don't care what they did – they did not deserve this!" if shame had not paralyzed them, would our story have been different? What kind of people might we be, if we were the heirs of those who said cried out, of those who said no.

We can't know. All our Torah tells us is about their silence.

That's not the only silence that echoes; there's our own, in the way in which we have chosen to respond – or not respond – to those texts. Oh, we might critique Abraham or Aaron, but we don't generally reject the story as a whole, or the God it presents.

At least with me, I think that's because of my admittedly weird relationship to Torah. Even though I may not "believe" it, or follow it, in any way as normally understood, I still feel that somehow I identify myself with it. It somehow stands for me, or maybe I stand for it. It's almost like the way we might be superfans of our schools, or our home team, and when someone says something bad about them we feel personally affronted. In some cases, we can end up outsourcing our entire sense of self-worth to this "other" – this person, or thing, or enterprise. "X has value, and because I am

connected to X, I have value, too!" I am a disciple of this teacher, I am partisan of this movement, I am a descendant of this tribe, I am a member of this nation."

We talk about the value of connecting to something greater than ourselves, but this isn't about being part of a team achievement in which I feel good about the difference I have helped make – it's a purely vicarious connection.

But this won't relive my fear, or free me from the all-or nothing reaction to flaws, just displace it as the insistence on perfection is projected onto the object of my…Affiliation? love? Trust? The dynamic of shame works, then, in a vicarious way – but it can be just as devastating, and just as much built around the same all-or-nothingness as personal shame.

We can see this at play in the almost comically fierce determination to erase any flaws from the presentation of American History. If I have based my sense of self-worth on my identity as an American, then any recognition of even the most obvious wrongs becomes the most devastating personal attack.

Or in the way we avoid facing the brutality of the Akeida, or the deaths Nadav and Avihu, and the silence of their fathers. Even though I may not believe the histories of the Torah, or its theology, or the value of the discipline it prescribes, it is still desperately important for me to believe that it is uniquely valuable; that it the most sophisticated, the most enlightened, the most moral, teaching in the world. And therefor to label those who deny its perfection as misguided at best or anti-Semites at worst.

After all, If I were to say, “I don’t want people to believe in a God who would reward a man for being willing to sacrifice his son. I reject a vision of piety that insists on silence in the face of dead children!” – if the torah is not just imperfect but deeply flawed, does it have any value at all? could I still have a relationship with it?

That’s really the question haunting so much of our lives: how do we live in relationship with the deeply flawed. Better: how do we live in relationship with the deep flaws, in ourselves and in others. We can’t give up on that, first because it’s only in encountering those flaws that we can repair them. And second, because there’s nothing else out there. Not ourselves, not our loved ones, not our heroes or sacred texts or people.

Is that a surprise? Is there anything so perfect that it could support the weight of that kind much trust? Maybe that’s the point of our prayer. We tend to understand “V’lo neivosh ki b’cha batachnu” as “Don’t let us down, because after all we root for You”, but I’d suggest that the real meaning is “We won’t come to shame, because we won’t look for perfection in anything other than You.”

Once we recognize that, once we free ourselves from the need to build ourselves up by outsourcing our egos to the inherently flawed, we take the first step away from shame.

And just can’t afford our shame – not if we want to get better, not if we want to have any kind of attachment to others. We have to move from the terror that we are bad, to the reality that we have done bad things. In other words, we have to move from shame to guilt. That’s

good news! Because from guilt we can move to teshuva, and from teshuva we can move to repair and forgiveness and more repair, and the joy that comes from working to make healing happen.

I can empathize with Abraham's shame, and with Aaron's shame – it's all too familiar. But I reject the idea that it is good or pious or desireable to remain silent in the presence of dead children. And I'd like to believe that at deep down, beyond the shame, so do Abraham and Aaron. That they would want to change, to be different. To do teshuva.

The Torah's presentation of the Yom Kippur ritual begins, "After the death of Aaron's two sons," as though to say that is in the past, but this is now. Even after Abrahm's silence when looking at his son on the altar, even after Aaron's silence in the presence of his dead children – especially after Aaron's silence in the presence of dead children – there is the possibility of atonement, of breaking free of that pattern, of becoming different. There is the possibility of living without shame, and without silence.