

G'mar Hatimah Tovah, may we all be signed and sealed for a happy and healthy new year. We all know that guilt is an essential element in Jewish life, right up there with Torah scrolls, mezuzot, Passover Seders, and the Sh'ma.

The various words for guilt appear hundreds of times in the Bible. Much of the Torah reads like one huge guilt trip. Jewish culture without guilt is like a silent orchestra - what would be the point? Guilt is the fuel that makes the Jewish world run. Now, of course, we're not the only people on Earth who make a claim to guilt.

The Catholics also talk about guilt a lot. But I read somewhere that Catholic guilt is different than Jewish guilt. They have to learn it in school, but we're born with it. It's in our DNA.

That's why some of my favorite Jewish jokes seem to be about Gentiles. Jerry Seinfeld says that this is the kind of secret joke that only Jews can understand. For instance, there's the joke about a Gentile adult son who calls his Gentile mom and says, "Hi, Mom, I'm sorry, but I have to cancel having dinner with you tonight." The Gentile's mom says, "Okay, no problem."

It turns out that we tend to confuse two very separate concepts, guilt and shame. It's easy to mix them up because any thesaurus will list them as synonyms of each other. But the reality is that guilt and shame are very different.

Understanding the distinction between guilt and shame will shed God's light on our personal lives even as it puts the world's problems into clear, sharp focus.

Now you might think that guilt is a bad thing, but my message to you is that guilt is not just a good thing but a wonderful, sublime gift from God. The ability to feel guilt is what makes one a good person. It simultaneously cleans us and humbles us. We should thank God for guilt. Without the ability to feel guilt, we are lost. An

easy way to remember it is that guilt is gelt, guilt is gold. Remove the capacity for guilt, and life comes crashing down.

Guilt is what tells us that we've done something wrong. In fact, one of the major connections we have with God is our conscience, the part of the human soul that says, "Hey, you messed up."

Shame is totally different. Shame is not a reaction to what you have done. Shame is feeling terrible about who you are. The word shame applies to things that we cannot change about ourselves. Therefore, shame is something we must try to expel from our lives. Shame isn't a message from God, shame is graffiti on your soul.

If you feel ashamed for being divorced, childless, mentally ill, physically ill, being a crime victim or many other examples, then stop!

Feeling ashamed of how you were born or the deck you were dealt in life is pointless. It won't help you. There is no amount of regret or pain in the world that will undo whatever it is you're feeling ashamed about.

Feeling pain over what you have done or what you have failed to do — that's guilt, and guilt is a Jewish feeling. Just look at the text of the Al Hayt confessional. Every single sin listed is an action, not a thought or a state of being, because we Jews believe that it is our sinful actions that require repentance.

Feeling pain over a nasty thought you had or how you were born or something that happened to you? That's shame, and that's not a Jewish feeling.

Guilt, unlike shame, can help us a lot. How does guilt help us? It's really simple, actually. Guilt is like your car's check engine light. Nobody likes to see that light,

but seeing it beats having your car breakdown on the turnpike. Guilt is what allows us to clean up the mess we've made to the best of our ability.

Just as a chicken develops inside an egg and then breaks out, guilt grows inside us until it hatches, and when the guilt hatches, we express it.

The good, healthful way to express our guilt when it hatches is through confession, known as hoda'ah in Hebrew. In Jewish law, confession is a necessary component of repentance. Let's say you stole a hundred dollars from someone. It is not enough to return the money in the mail. True confession requires that you accept the guilt and verbally admit to what you did.

By the way, it is not a coincidence that the word hoda'ah sounds like the word todah, which means "Thank you." They come from the same root, and that's appropriate. The best way to confess or acknowledge one's sins when they are brought to our attention is to say thank you. We should be grateful for the correction. As Proverbs say, "Reprove the wise man and he will love you."

The bad way to express our guilt is to double-down or insist that we are innocent when it is plainly obvious that we are not. The classic example of doubling down is Cain in the Torah. When God asked him where his brother Abel was, Cain said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

Another bad way to express our guilt is to be petty. Whenever you see petty behavior, you can be sure that someone is trying to stifle guilt rather than express it.

Confessions to those we have wronged must be specific and face-to-face or at the very least in writing. Only that kind of confession will allow us to move forward.

Now some people think that guilt is a reason to see a psychologist. And I suppose that if guilt is really out of control, therapy is called for. Too much of a good thing is not good. But usually, guilt is not a disease. It's simply a reminder that we need to repent.

It reminds me of the story about a man who goes into a bar, asks for a beer, and then promptly throws the beer in the bartender's face. The bartender gets angry and says, "Hey, what was that for?" The customer says, "I'm sorry, I have a problem, I'm going to start seeing a psychologist for it."

The bartender says, "Okay, fine, but no more beer for you until I get a note from your shrink saying that you're cured." Several months later, the man comes back and hands the bartender a note from the psychologist. The bartender reads it and says, "Okay, looks like you're cured" and pours him a beer.

The supposedly cured customer immediately splashes the beer in the bartender's face. The bartender is enraged and yells, "Hey, I thought you were cured!" The customer says, "I am cured. I still throw the beer on people, but I don't feel guilty about it anymore!"

So that's the first point, guilt is good because it can stimulate confession, and confession cleans the soul. Unlike shame, which causes us to wallow, guilt has the power to repair us.

Another great thing about guilt is that it can make us to feel humble by causing us to experience another person's spiritual pain. When we understand each other's pain, good things happen. We judge each other less and we love each other more.

How does guilt cause us to feel humble? Guilt reveals to us how we have hurt another person, and when it does that, we have no choice but to experience humility if only briefly.

I read a story about a Jewish medical student that really drove this point home for me. This true story appears in an article written by Rabbi Daniel Landes, the former director of the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem.

He tells the story of a friend he calls Yossi Felder, a pseudonym he made up to conceal the real person's name. Yossi was the essence of a Washington Heights Modern Orthodox Jew back in the sixties. He was brilliant, athletic, and got into one of the top medical school programs where he excelled.

Yossi greatly admired the medical program's dean, a man known only as "the Professor." The Professor took Yossi under his wing and guided him in the practical aspects of being a physician.

One day, the Professor took Yossi into a patient's room, gave him a stack of charts and X-rays and asked him to give a diagnosis. Yossi examined the films and documents and then confidently said in the presence of the patient, "This man doesn't have a chance. He has a metastatic tumor in the left anterior lobe."

The Professor yanked his star student into the hallway and said to him, "How dare you speak so harshly in front of a patient, in front of a fellow human being? You'll never be a good doctor with that attitude. In fact, consider yourself expelled. Get out!"

The Professor then said, "And don't think you can just transfer to another medical school. I have enough clout in the medical community that you'll never set foot inside a hospital unless you're a patient!"

Devastated, Yossi went home, told his roommates what happened to him in a broken voice, and then took to his bed for days. He was ruined. Everything he had worked so hard for was now destroyed. His life was a smouldering pile of ashes.

Rabbi Landes and his friends took care of Yossi and made sure that he ate and showered, but his mental condition got worse by the day. Eventually, he was practically catatonic with shame and feelings of failure. Indeed, he now resembled some of the advanced cancer patients he had been treating.

Finally, days after the incident, Yossi put on a suit and said he was going to the medical school to clean out his locker and apologize to the Professor on his last day. Yossi waited in the Professor's office for over an hour, and then he was finally invited to enter, at which time he issued a heartfelt apology.

The Professor said, "Yossi, I accept your apology, but I never intended to really expel you from the program. I want you to continue, you might just make a good doctor yet. But after I heard what you said in front of that patient, I knew that I had to teach you what it is like to live without hope."

The moral of the story is that the student's humble guilt caused him to feel the very hopelessness that he had carelessly cast upon his patient. Rabbi Landes writes that Yossi's experience with guilt and repentance turned him into a softer, kinder human being and a better doctor than he otherwise would have been.

My personal take on this story is that the only reason Yossi was able to survive his expulsion is that he was able to transform his shame into guilt. Guilt is feeling bad about what you've done to someone. Shame is feeling sorry for yourself. While he was in his bed like an angry baby, he was feeling shame. When he put on his suit and asked for the Professor's forgiveness, he was feeling guilt.

His guilt allowed him to feel the pain of another human being, and that is a rare opportunity. Guilt unlocks and opens a window to another person's soul. Shame is the opposite. Shame causes us to fold in on ourselves and stew in our own juices.

What shame really is is a negative form of narcissism. A narcissist is one who looks in the mirror and marvels at how great he is. A person beset with shame looks at the same reflection and feels disgusted. One who feels guilt has a future, perhaps a better one. A person trapped in shame has no past, present, or future, just more shame.

So that's the second point. Guilt not only allows us to repair our misdeeds, it also humbles us to the point that we can feel the pain of another person. That brings me to my third point, which is how the difference between guilt and shame can help us understand a lot of what's going on in the world today.

The world is a mess, that's for sure. But when you hold up the guilt vs. shame lens to the globe, a lot of things start to make more sense. In my opinion, the good guys in the world are typically the guilt cultures. The bad guys in the world are usually the shame cultures.

What is the difference between a guilt culture and a shame culture?

Anthropologist Ruth Benedict says that in a guilt culture, you know whether you are good or bad based on what your conscience tells you. In a shame culture, you know whether you are good or bad based on what society says about you.

Societies that value individualism, human rights, and the rule of law are guilt cultures, and America is a prime example of a guilt culture. We expect people to act in a conscientious, responsible manner. We expect people to feel guilty about wrongdoing whether they are caught or not.

As a result, we believe in that repentance means something. We believe that one's guilt is written in pencil, not carved in stone. We love a comeback story, and we believe in forgiveness.

Shame cultures are very different. In a shame culture, what matters most is not morality but honor. The important thing is not what you have done or not done, but the honor you have among your peers. If you have honor in these shame cultures, you can write your ticket. Your wrongdoing is only a problem if it causes embarrassment to your family or clan.

Likewise, if you lack honor in one of these shame societies, it doesn't matter how many good deeds you do, you're still treated like garbage. Your lack of honor could be the result of your grandfather's sin, but that doesn't matter. Shame is permanent, contagious, and it even survives death itself.

When you look at a list of the guilt cultures and a list of the shame cultures, one thing shines clearly. All the countries that are giving us problems are shame cultures. North Korea is definitely a shame culture. You can be sent to a labor camp just because your great-grandfather had questionable loyalty to Kim Il Sung.

So when we demand that the North Korean government follows the treaty they signed, they hear "Wa-wa-wa-wa." From their cultural standpoint, it would be shameful to cave to Western demands, and the threat of shame is of greater concern to them than some piece of paper signed by diplomats.

The same is true of Iran and the entire Muslim world. Why is the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma so difficult? The reason is that Israel is a guilt culture and the Arab world is a shame culture.

A lot of Palestinians speak Hebrew beautifully, better than I do, but they don't speak the same moral language. As long as honor is what motivates them and not guilt, there will be no solution.

China is another example of a shame culture. One of China's biggest industries is pumping out illegal copies of movies and bogus products of all sorts. Do they feel guilty about doing that? Of course not. The thought of guilt doesn't even enter the equation. In their world, you do what you have to do to preserve social order and family honor.

The universe of social media is a shame culture. Your status in that world is determined not by the quality of what you post but exclusively by what other people think of it. And if you anger the trolls, they can ruin your life with shame.

Although America itself is a guilt culture, Washington D.C. is a shame culture. What matters most in Washington's culture is not obeying the Constitution or doing the right thing but rather holding on to power and the honor that comes with it. The motto for too many politicians is "Get re-elected and don't get caught." A guilty conscience in that culture is a liability.

Yes, indeed, guilt is good. We need to embrace it not erase it. And just as guilt is a gift that God gave us Jews, guilt is also a gift that we Jews have given the world. Why do you think the world hates our little tribe so much? As the conscience of the human race, we have been calling on the world to repent for thousands of years, and doing so has not won us friends.

But I am proud that we have spread the message of guilt to the Western world. That one gift is more valuable than a hundred Nobel Prizes. And what I want you to understand is that although there are many Jewish jokes are about guilt, the issue of guilt is really no joke.