On Shame

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

We Jews are considered expert at experiencing guilt and shame – or at least that's what the stereotype would have you believe. Maybe it's because Adam had to start wearing fig leaves after he ate that fateful apple. Or the speed at which angels of death would take you out if you transgressed. Or the success of *Portnoy's Complaint* in cementing the (dubious) notion that all Jewish teenagers are riddled with remorse, thanks largely to hypercritical mothers. Or all those Woody Allen movies portraying characters who were incapacitated by anxiety and guilt over the smallest of perceived lapses. Or almost the entirety of Yom Kippur.

My Catholic friends scoff at the notion that Jews have the guilt market cornered. They point out, correctly, that while we are presented with a compendium of mitzvot (good deeds) we should pursue, they grow up learning long lists of sins, both mortal and venial. Over the centuries, their priests have riffed off the Ten Commandments to specify the many ways you can sin in daily life. Just the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery" has been expanded to include prohibitions against divorce, fornication, pornography, prostitution, rape, homosexuality, and masturbation. Also, don't forget that they are into the idea of original sin, while we're more into being pure and of free will at birth.

Most consider guilt and shame as unhealthy emotions that restrain a person's opportunity to be happy and productive. Of course, at a certain level those emotions can certainly be problematic and even lethal. Feeling overwhelmingly guilty all the time limits your options for managing your life successfully.

Maybe that's why our culture nowadays makes such an issue of shaming others. You hear about body shaming, slut shaming, age shaming, identity shaming, victim shaming, addiction shaming, and more. Putting someone down for being who they are is rightfully considered cruel and destructive.

But I've been thinking that, in many circumstances, shame as a concept is unfairly maligned. My contention is that some of us should feel ***far more*** shame when we do or say things that are legitimately appalling.

Intentionally lying to prove your point is shameful. Blatant hypocrisy is shameful. Blithely disregarding reality and history because it doesn't fit your world view is shameful.

Criticizing someone for no reason other than to make yourself feel superior is shameful. Going behind someone's back to cause harm is shameful. Cheating in any form is shameful. Withholding what is rightfully another's is shameful. Taking all the credit undeservedly is shameful. And willfully hiding exculpatory evidence is especially shameful.

Do you know what you call someone who is truly shameless? Who experiences little if any guilt or anxiety?

A psychopath.

They don't experience the uncomfortable emotions that can keep the rest of us from doing wrong. Guilt and shame can put the brakes on our behavior when we might otherwise see benefit to crossing lines. We'd like to engage in questionable conduct but fear that we will feel poorly about ourselves (and suffer other consequences) if we're not careful.

I bet if you look at many of the world's problems, you can trace them to people who should have felt ashamed of themselves but ignored the guardrails shame imposes. They pursue power over service, dishonesty over integrity, impunity over accountability, hostility over kindness, and divisiveness over inclusion – and all without any concern for the impact on others. They literally feel no shame (and act accordingly).

I have often heard parents see as their goal the elimination of stress, anxiety, and guilt from their children's experience. They somehow feel that those negative emotions inevitably cause poor self-esteem and should be avoided.

I cringe when I hear mothers and fathers voice that position because, in my view, children should learn how to cope with uncomfortable feelings. If a youngster does something wrong, they should understand the consequences of their actions and feel at least a little bad for having misbehaved. No, they shouldn't be tied to a stake or belittled or made to feel they have forever caused disappointment and shame. But they should understand that to err is indeed human, and feeling bad about committing some of those errors can be instructive. It's generally good policy to fess up, apologize, and move on.

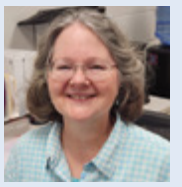
Children of all ages need to accept that it's okay to experience remorse when they've transgressed. No one's life has been irrevocably diminished just because they felt a bit guilty about having screwed up.

To the contrary, a measure of guilt and shame can guide us all along a more righteous path.

» BOOK REVIEW

The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum by Margalit Fox

Reviewed by Kay Davidson



***The Talented Mrs. Mandelbaum* by Margalit Fox is a cross between a biographical novella and a history lesson. It's a well-researched biography of a self-made entrepreneur in New York City during the Gilded Age, a period of rapid industrialization, wealth accumulation and extravagance that lasted from the 1870s to the 1890s. On her immigration to the U.S. in 1850, Mrs. Mandelbaum worked as a peddler on the Lower East Side. By the end of her professional career, she had accumulated multi-national real estate holdings, warehouses full of luxury goods, jewelry and precious stones worth upwards of $2.4 million in today's currency. The caveat is that it was all stolen.**

"Ma" Mandelbaum was a professional fence and ringleader of the best burglars and bank robbers for hire on the East Coast. Fox does a good job exploring how a Jewish wife and mother went from peddling to fencing to blackmail to smuggling. She explains the culture, economics and politics surrounding Ma Mandelbaum succinctly and clearly. As an amateur historian, I loved this aspect of the book. Fox makes Mandelbaum's choices seem logical and cohesive, even shrewd, considering the lack of opportunities for escape from poverty as a female Jewish immigrant. However, the pages are dense with footnotes that interrupt the flow of the story and make it hard to remember the nefarious characters who formed Mandelbaum's inner circle. Fox ends her chapters with a little "teaser" like you get in a murder mystery, but she fails to deliver. The historical research buries the reader in an avalanche of facts.

Despite the increasing scale of Ma's criminal endeavors, I wanted to respect her as a survivor, someone who did what she had to in order to survive. Ma herself made that hard for me. When she fled the country to escape prosecution, she left with a vast fortune that would have set her up for life. Once there, she employed the same tactics that she had used in New York. This time, she wasn't breaking the law to survive but to enrich herself. It was a decision I found hard to reconcile with her Jewish heritage—with any moral values that I share, except for the predominant "family first" ethos.

This book broadened my understanding of the economics, politics, and culture of New York, enough that it seemed like a treatise on the era, in which the multi-faceted Mrs. Mandelbaum does shine like the diamonds she so adroitly collected.

Kay Davidson is a published columnist and former business owner, now serving the Jewish community in Central New York.