



THE CRITIC

within us

Judging our shortcomings...and those of others

BY LEONARD CARR

“IF YOU ARE LABELLED AS AN ESSENTIALLY BAD PERSON, YOU ARE DENIED THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING SEEN TO HAVE GOODNESS INSIDE YOU.”



AS HUMAN BEINGS WE OFTEN MAKE THE MISTAKE of using faculties that Hashem gave us for self-perfection and growth to avoid facing ourselves by applying those qualities to others. A good example of this is the ability to judge between right and wrong. Judgment is based on comparison. In judgment you make a distinction between what you encounter compared to a principle or belief about how things should preferably or necessarily be. In order to be able to choose appropriate responses from their opposites, or to be able to help others, like one's children, make sound choices, you need to evaluate behaviour against the yardstick of some ideal. When you approach the situation objectively and adopt a compassionate position, no

lasting damage gets done. In order to take this constructive approach you need to focus purely on the person's error in judgment or incorrect choice and the problematic behaviour to which those choices gave rise. In taking corrective action in the most constructive way, all you need to do is to dispassionately state what the person did wrong and what the preferable behaviour would have been.

When, however, you make the issue into a personal or emotional one, you inevitably start attributing the person's choices to motives and intentions that stem from ascriptions that you make about their personal attributes, identity, or character. This approach inevitably leads to the other person feeling dimin-

ished and demeaned, less than fully human, defective and lacking – in a word: shamed. You can do this unintentionally just by saying things like “you always” or “that is so typical of you”. As soon as you suggest consistent and enduring patterns of behaviour you are implying that the person's choices reflect character and, therefore, a certain identity. Naming is framing and framing is shaming; it isolates one aspect of you or the other and charges that it is a defining feature of your own or the other person's identity.

An example would be calling someone “lazy” because he is not producing at the speed or in the time frame that you expect of him. People who were shamed in this way cannot relax, unwind, or pace

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themselves appropriately because they grew up with the message that worth is determined purely by output and production and, therefore, anything that does not produce an outcome is worthless or bad. Rest that offers respite and restores the body and spirit, playfulness that releases stress and facilitates intimacy gets reframed as being frivolous and futile.

Some people grow up with the messages that to express needs is to be demanding, and showing feelings is a sign of weakness. These people learn to protect themselves by becoming numb to their inner experience, and replacing it with a brittle contrivance of social and relational game playing. They live with the unrelenting pressure to keep up the act instead of finding strength in being who and what they are and in so doing discovering the strength in vulnerability. Shame can make it so overwhelmingly painful to face one's own shortcomings that people prefer to switch-off to their internal world or become totally blind to their own behaviour and its effects on others. They cannot own up to who they really are because it means admitting to being essentially defective and bad. Shame, therefore, is an impediment to personal growth as well as to forging healthy interpersonal affection bonds or working relationships.

When you judge someone you place him in a category that separates him from what is opposite to how you are defining him. Judgment and criticism, therefore, create separation. Judgment separates the judge from the subject of the judgment. It also precludes the person being judged from whatever category the pronouncement excludes them from. For example, if you are labelled as an essentially bad person, you are denied the possibility of being seen to have goodness inside you. Separation leads to fragmentation which, in turn, leads to conflict and competition, which are antithetical to shalom. Shame puts people in conflict with themselves: the observing self against the rejected parts that you believe are bad or deficient, the opposite of perfect and complete. This creates within you a fundamental sense of lacking, which is the opposite of wholeness or shleimut.

This leads to conflict with others because, as a way to manage the pain of shame, you blame, criticise, and demean others in order to equalise the relationship so that you can both be equally lacking. Alternatively you may envy them and resent them for having the qualities you are convinced you lack. Or you could compete, play one-upmanship games, claim the moral high ground and bear grudges for real or imagined slights, or engage in other tactics to place you in a superior position in relation to the other. This explains why the bullied sometimes turn into bullies.

Judgment, therefore, also implicitly implies a shunning and rejection. When it's aimed at behaviour it is merely a rejection of actions in defence of more appropriate or legitimate actions. When it's aimed at a person then it is a personal rejection. Shame is the implicit message that you are not enough and/or you are not good enough. The inference that you draw from it is that you are defective and, consequently, less human and not entitled to fully belong and enjoy the privileges of those who are good enough.

The predicament of the outsider, the other, is most painfully highlighted when people in such a vulnerable position are shamed and blamed for their circumstances. Many cultures punish the vulnerable like widows and orphans as if their predicament was the result of Divine punishment. This was a theme in Charles Dickens where orphans were exploited and abused in Victorian society. The message of exclusion can be transmitted indirectly through behaviour, as, for example, when your best friend gets married and does not invite you over, even to a birthday party with coupled friends, but on your own treats you as usual. It can be couched in concern as, "Why is such a nice girl like you still single" or "Your problem is that you are so eligible that you have too many choices" or "Could you

not have worked harder to save your marriage". It can be presented as spiritual guidance, "What is Hashem trying to tell you through your illness" or "What next step in life were you trying to avoid when you broke your ankle". Popular psychology and the new age movement have provided an entire lexicon of persecutory explanations masquerading as superficial quasi-mystical reasons to shame people for their predicament. These theories also can serve to legitimise interference and meddling by people who know enough of the language of psychology from books and weekend trainings to believe that they are legitimate psychotherapists.

The worst from of shaming is the victim blaming that is directed to people who have been trapped in abusive relationships. Questions like, "What unconscious need do you have to be abused". All of these messages imply personal failings or worse, unconscious fears and wishes to be in the compromised position.

Inherent in everything that you experience and witness in life is an invitation to learn more about yourself and to refine your own qualities of character. In so doing you move a step closer to achieving your own wholeness and perfection. By placing others in the category of the outsider, you implicitly isolate yourself, thereby losing the opportunity to deepen and broaden your own humanity. Learning to empathise and identify with the mistakes of others opens the door to mercy and compassion. When you are able to look at others as mirrors of your own strengths and shortcomings, recognising that what you envy in them you too could achieve, and similarly that you could fall into the same pitfalls and errors of judgment, then the people you encounter become partners in your growth rather than competitors or objects of your own self-aggrandisement. In elevating yourself through this process, you become a partner with Hashem in building the world. ■