



GEULAS YISRAEL

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Yitro: Boshet and Tzniut in Modern Israel

Despite modern commitments to equality and universalism, different nations continue to display distinct cultural and moral tendencies. Peoples are shaped over time by shared habits, values, and patterns of response that give each society its particular character.

The Gemara in Yevamot describes our people through three defining traits: compassion, the performance of kindness, and *bayshanut*—a capacity for embarrassment.

The first two traits are easy to admire. Compassion is a foundational virtue which opens our hearts to the condition of those around us and prevents emotional distance. It allows us to enter the suffering of another, to feel sympathy rather than observe pain from the safety of detachment.

But compassion alone is incomplete. Feeling for another does not yet repair what is broken. We must also be capable of helping, of acting, and of translating inner concern into concrete

assistance. For some, compassion remains an internal emotion, sincere but inert. Jewish character demands more. Rachmanut is meant to flow outward into *gemilut chasadim*, into an active desire to ease the burden of others and to stand beside them in moments of need.

Dovid HaMelech disqualified the Givonim from entering the Jewish people because these traits were absent. Their city had been struck during Shaul's campaign, and they sought redress. But instead of mercy or measured justice, they demanded that seven of Shaul's descendants be publicly executed as retribution. Detecting the absence of compassion and a glaring deficiency of *gemilut chasadim*, he ruled that they could not become part of the Jewish nation.

While the traits of compassion and *gemilut chasadim* are self-evident, the third trait is more confusing. We do not typically view the capacity for embarrassment, or *bayshanut*, as a healthy trait. In contemporary culture, shame is treated as corrosive, something to be shed in the pursuit of confidence and strong self-esteem.

Why would the ability to feel embarrassment be considered a virtue? Isn't shame precisely what we are taught to avoid as we try to build a healthy inner life and a stable sense of self?

BOSHET AT SINAI

Yet according to Chazal, shame is not a pathology but an essential component of healthy moral and religious identity. It was

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not incidental to the revelation at Sinai but one of its intended outcomes. Moshe tells us that Hashem will speak to us from within the cloud, “ובְּעַבְורְתָהּ יְרָאָתָּה עַל פְּנֵיכֶם לְבָלְתִּי תִּחְטָאָרָה”—so that fear of Him will be upon your faces, so that you will not sin.”

Chazal are struck by the unusual phrasing. Why should *yirat Shamayim* be described as resting “on your face”? The Gemara in Berachot explains that this refers to *boshet*. One who experiences embarrassment—who feels exposed before moral truth—is protected from sin. *Boshet* is not incidental; it is a safeguard.

The encounter at Sinai was meant to generate precisely this response. Standing directly before Hashem was not only meant to inspire awe or obedience, but to cultivate an inner sensitivity and a quiet discomfort at the thought of moral failure. The question, then, is not whether shame belongs in religious life, but how to define *boshet* in a way that is healthy rather than harmful. How to distinguish between an embarrassment that sharpens moral awareness and a shame that diminishes us from within?

STANDING BEFORE HASHEM

Boshet stems from the recognition that Hashem witnesses all our behavior. He is always present. We are held accountable not only for public actions but for choices made in private. This awareness creates an inner discomfort when we cross religious or moral red lines. We are “seen” even when we imagine ourselves hidden from public view.

On his deathbed, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai told his students that he wished the fear of Heaven would be as real to them as the fear they feel before other people. Ideally, *yirat Shamayim* should surpass fear of human judgment and social impression. But Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was realistic. He hoped, at the very least, that we would behave in private

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Social awareness and concern for reputation place guardrails around behavior we might otherwise rationalize. In private, we sometimes feel unencumbered, as though no one is watching—despite the fact that we are always visible to the Divine eye. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was urging his talmidim to internalize that Divine scrutiny, so that even unseen moments would be shaped by restraint and responsibility.

This is the definition of healthy *boshet*: a steady awareness of Hashem’s presence that places quiet limits on our behavior and protects us from sin.

TZNIUT

However, *boshet* rooted in the awareness of Hashem’s presence goes far beyond avoiding sin because someone is watching. It shapes our overall deportment, even when no mitzvah is being performed and no aveirah is being



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avoided. The question is not only what we do, but how we carry ourselves. Do we project our own personality outward, or do we feel humbled by the Divine presence and act with inwardness rather than self-projection?

That inwardness is what we call *tzniut*. *Tzniut* is not limited to women or to questions of dress. It applies equally to men and women and speaks to a broader trait: not drawing undue attention to yourself, not placing the self at the center. This posture flows directly from the recognition that Hashem is in the room. When He is present, there is little space for the projection of human talent or personality for its own sake.

When Moshe first encountered Hashem at the sneh, his instinctive response was to hide his face. He could not imagine asserting his own identity while standing before such an overwhelming Divine presence. Ideally, *tzniut* grows from that same sense of *boshet*—from the awareness that Hashem's presence fills the space. At Har Sinai, that presence was experienced with such intensity that *bayshanut* became embedded in our national consciousness.

This understanding of Hashem's presence as the foundation of *tzniut* also explains the rare exception—moments when restraint gives way to outward expression in the service of Heaven. When Dovid HaMelech danced with unrestrained energy as the Aron was returned from the Pelishtim to Yerushalayim,

his behavior seemed out of character with his usual quiet dignity. This behavior drew the sharp criticism of his wife.

Yet Dovid was not projecting himself. He was not placing his own presence at the center. His dancing was directed outward, toward honoring Hashem, not toward drawing attention to his own personality. Because the focus was entirely on *kavod Shamayim*, and not on self-display, this behavior did not violate *tzniut*. It expressed it.

AN AGE WITHOUT EMBARRASSMENT

The modern world has quietly but powerfully eroded our capacity for *boshet*. Much of contemporary culture trains us not only to avoid embarrassment, but to view it as a weakness. When embarrassment is framed as something to overcome rather than something to heed, its moral function is slowly stripped away. Visibility is rewarded, and there is constant pressure to project ourselves outward. Withdrawal, concealment, and inwardness are treated not as virtues, but as failures—signs of insecurity or irrelevance.

Social media accelerates this shift. These platforms are built around constant self-presentation: images are curated and moments are shared not because they are meaningful, but because they can be seen. When exposure becomes routine and expected, embarrassment no longer functions as a moral brake. The instinct to pause, to ask whether something should remain private, slowly erodes.

In a culture built on constant exposure, *boshet* slowly disappears.

RETHINKING BOSHET IN ISRAEL

Life in Israel complicates the question of *boshet* even further. For nearly two thousand years, *boshet* seemed well suited to our condition. We had been exiled from Yerushalayim after repeated failure before Hashem, and



Daniel's words after the first destruction became an enduring refrain of Jewish history: "לְךָ הַחֶדֶךָ וְלֹא בָּשַׂת הַפָּנִים"—"To You, Hashem, belongs righteousness, and to us, embarrassment."

History appeared to reinforce that posture. We lived as a minority within foreign and often hostile societies. Their values were alien, and at times corrosive, to our religious beliefs and practices. Humble withdrawal fit both our need for cultural insulation and the deeper logic of galut. Boshet functioned as a form of spiritual self-protection, a quiet refusal to place ourselves at the center of worlds that were not our own.

Now we have returned to Israel, and the moral landscape has shifted. We are struggling to build a Jewish State that asserts the presence of Hashem and His people in history, standing against foreign hostility and sustained opposition. We act with Hashem as our partner, carrying out His will as we attempt to redeem history and settle the Land He promised us. In such a setting, what exactly are we meant to be embarrassed about? When Jews act bravely in defense of His presence in this world, this does not feel like a moment for withdrawal.

Like Dovid HaMelech dancing before the Aron, there are times when restraint gives way to visible action because the focus is not self-projection but service of Hashem. This is not a failure of *tzniut*. It is its transformation under different conditions.

Moreover, our physical survival in this environment seems to demand boldness rather than shyness and confidence rather than hesitation. Facing the odds arrayed against us, brazenness often appears necessary. It can feel as though the trait that defined us for generations has lost some of its resonance.

The Gemara in Sotah teaches that as Mashiach approaches, the world will be filled with



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chutzpah. This line is often read as a foreboding warning about moral deterioration. It may also allude to the courage and daring chutzpah that will be required to stand firm against a world that resists our return and our mission. This gemara may be telecasting a shift from boshet to a necessary daring.

In our moral and religious inner lives, we must still cultivate boshet—the quiet awareness of standing before Hashem—but in defending Israel and advancing our national mission, we are called to act with confidence, resolve, and unembarrassed strength. Both should emerge from the same source: an awareness that we live in the presence of Hashem and act in service of His will. In private and in our inner religious lives, that awareness gives rise to boshet and inwardness. In the public arena of history and national defense, that very same awareness demands confidence and resolve. ■



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