

The first *parsha* of the Torah provides endless material for philosophical discussion. It is known in Hebrew as *Bereishit* which roughly translates to “in the beginning.” This parsha contains the creation of the world, the Garden of Eden, the temptation of the snake, the Fall from Grace, Cain and Abel, and we even are introduced to Noah at the very end.

Eve’s legendary bite from the fruit of the Tree of the Recognition of Good and Evil has functioned as a symbol across an array of artistic genres. Obviously, nothing about the significance of this parsha on Western literature and art can be overstated. The entire section is like crack-cocaine for philosophy and literature professors.

An entire book could be written on a few paragraphs or even lines from this parsha. So I will have to limit my focus.

As I read *Bereishit* this week, I was drawn to one particular moment. It is the line having to do specifically with the concept of *shame*. After all of the animals and man and woman are created, the sentence reads that the man and his wife were naked, and they weren’t ashamed. However, tempted by the snake, Eve and Adam bite into the apple from the Tree of the Awareness of Good and Evil. So, as they become aware of good and evil, their first thought is their awareness that they are naked. They immediately sew themselves “aprons” made out of fig leaves to cover themselves.

The word “naked,” in fact, occurs more than a few times in this section—four, to be exact. After they were naked and not ashamed, they recognized they were naked, and became ashamed. When God calls out to Adam, he hides, explaining that he didn’t want God to find him naked. To this God responds: who told you that you were naked?

Here is what we can conclude so far. Knowledge of Good and Evil leads directly to a feeling of deep shame. Shame, moreover, is evidenced when one is afraid to be naked before others—in the case of Adam and Eve, literally naked, not symbolically.

Shame is a word we toss around a lot. We use phrases like “fat shaming” or “shame on you” or “that’s a shame.” I think we could do more to appreciate the gravity of this word shame.

If there was one German philosopher who was particularly fascinated by shame, it was Friedrich Nietzsche. And he detested it. He saw shame as the most unhealthy, poisonous, unnatural emotion that a human could experience. As we all know, animals cannot feel shame. No, your dog has never really felt embarrassed, despite the look he gave you. And we saw how before Adam and Eve ate from the tree, and were therefore more like animals than gods, they also had no concept of shame.

Here are some of Nietzsche’s quotes about shame: From *The Gay Science*, “What do you consider the most humane? - To spare someone shame. What is the seal of liberation? - To no longer be ashamed in front of oneself.” From *The Gay Science*: “And as long as you are in any way ashamed before yourself, you do not yet belong with us.” In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he wrote, “Shame is the thief of sleep. It always creeps in late at night. But he without shame is the

night's guard. Without shame he carries his horn." Another line from *Zarathustra*: "Oh, my friends! So speak those who know: 'Shame, shame, shame. That is the story of humanity.'" So it's fair to say that Nietzsche despised shame. But why? What is so bad about shame? First of all, it needs to be said that nothing infuriated Nietzsche more than to see a "human" *pretending* like he didn't have human desires, urges, instincts. And what particularly pissed off Nietzsche was when he saw people tricking themselves into believing their denial of their human drives was actually something admirable. For example, let's say you are poor and see someone who is wealthy. Nietzsche would have an issue if the poor person became jealous of the rich person. But what really drive Nietzsche up the wall is if the poor person actually *judged* the rich person and theorized and philosophized that the act of being rich itself is somehow evil. Nietzsche would call this *ressentiment*, a French word similar to resentment. Not only did the poor person envy the rich person, he actually went so far as to deny this feeling of envy to himself and to *pretend* as though he were somehow more holy and better for being poor. Underneath all of this, Nietzsche would say, lies shame. The poor person cannot reconcile his human desires (the will to be more wealthy and more powerful) with the moral ideology he created (that being wealthy is evil).

Now at this point you might be thinking: isn't shame good sometimes? After all, if someone does something "evil," then shouldn't they feel ashamed?

It is important to distinguish between shame and guilt. A way to think about this difference is that "guilt" is feeling bad about something you've done, whereas "shame" is to feel bad about *who you are*. Have you ever seen mafia movies where one of the mob bosses shows his softer side and admits that he committed some crime he shouldn't have, that he regrets? Despite his admission of guilt and regret, it is clear that the mobster doesn't feel *shame*. That is, he still retains pride in who he is at his core. In short, he compartmentalizes his wrongdoing.

In Franz Kafka's novel *The Trial*, or in German, *Der Prozess*, the main character, Josef K., is in many ways the opposite of a mobster. He is polite, law-abiding, concerned with what others think of him, obeys all social norms. At the beginning of the story, Joseph K. is arrested, despite not having committed any crime. He pleads to the authorities that he has not broken any laws. Yet he remains under arrest and—spoiler alert—is ultimately executed. Joseph K. confuses guilt with shame. He has not done anything "wrong" which he should feel guilty about, but in a sense, his entire life is "wrong," and for that he feels shame.

Shame, indeed, hangs over the entire novel. Like Eve, Josef K. symbolically takes a bite from an apple he has on his nightstand when he is first "arrested." He becomes paranoid about his neighbors watching his arrest from across the street, hiding from their eyes just as Adam and Eve hid from God in the Garden of Eden. Finally, at the end of the novel, after K. is executed for his unknown crime, the last line reads: "only the shame would outlive him"—"es war, als sollte die Scham ihn überleben." All of this torment and punishment for Josef K., despite having tried to live an "ethical" life. This is the power of shame. We can see how Nietzsche would have viewed a mobster's way of thinking—despite the terrible crimes which mobsters commit—as actually healthier and more vibrant than Josef K.'s.

Nietzsche saw shame as sickly. He wrote in *The Genealogy of Morals*: ‘I want to state very clearly that in that period when human beings had not yet become ashamed of their cruelty, life on earth was happier than it is today, now that we have our pessimists. The darkening of heaven over men’s heads has always increased alarmingly in proportion to the growth of human beings’ shame *before human beings*. [Today] we witness sickly mollycoddling and moralizing, thanks to which the animal “man” finally learns to feel shame about all his instincts. On his way to becoming an “angel” (not to use a harsher word here), man cultivated for himself that upset stomach and that furry tongue which not only made the joy and innocence of the animal repulsive but also made life itself distasteful.’

Now, at this point you might be wondering: Is Nietzsche telling me that I should be a “bad” person? That I should behave like a mobster? No. First, as a kind of aside, we should note that Nietzsche himself was actually a quite kind and generous and law-abiding person. I think what Nietzsche is saying is that we should be honest with ourselves about our true motives and true drives, not to disguise them to others or to ourselves, and to show ourselves self-compassion. To accept that even if we have done something “wrong” that doesn’t mean that we ourselves are “wrong.” Even worse is if we really have done nothing wrong and *still* feel shame. I mean, how effed up is that, when you think about it? The morals of our society are, to say the least, a bit misguided. Our first reaction to feelings of shame is repentance. Repentance, in fact, is the last thing you should do when you feel shame. For guilt, repentance is appropriate. But, counter-intuitively, the antidote to shame is not repentance but self-love. Self-compassion is, in fact, the antidote to shame. Shame is, at its core, self-hatred. Pride and honesty with oneself are, at their core, self-love. Shame and self-love cannot co-exist. And we can only love ourselves if we accept who we actually are. And we must acknowledge that on many levels, we are still animals—and there’s nothing wrong with that. Obviously, in many ways, we are rather different from animals. My dog, for example, noble as she carries herself and adorable as she is, could never record this podcast or conceive of these ideas. But in many ways my dog and I have an awful lot in common, more than I think most people would care to admit.

Where do morality and “good and evil” fit into this? Remember: Adam and Eve did not just eat from any tree, but from the tree that gives one knowledge of good and evil. Somehow, understanding morality leads to shame. But should it? Must it? Actually, we would think it would be the opposite. That the more we understand good and evil, the more we can know how to behave properly, the more we can avoid feeling shame. But it doesn’t seem to work like this. But, at the same time, greater knowledge of morality also does not lead to greater feelings of shame. After all, God is the supreme judge of morality, and there is no indication in the Torah that God ever feels shame—perhaps guilt, as when he went back on his decision to annihilate the Hebrews in the desert after the persuasion of Moses, but surely never shame.

This is because, again, shame must be kept separate from guilt. You will notice that Adam and Eve do not hide from God or put on fig leaves as clothes because they feel *guilty* about disobeying God and eating from the tree. Rather, they feel *shame* for being naked. Shame for being naked—here, the Torah could not be more explicit that Adam and Eve feel disgust with *who they are*, not for what they did. But who are they? Well, they are now “humans” because they understand morality. So it is fair to say that they are ashamed of being human. But more importantly, they are ashamed of understanding morality. Why should shame and morality be

related? The answer is not as simple as you might think. Here, I think we need to distinguish between morality and *moralizing*. Morality is not shameful, but *moralizing* seems to be intertwined with shame. How often have we encountered moralizers who are not really concerned with morality at all, but with, instead, their own passive-aggressive power grabs.

Here we return again to Nietzsche. As much as Nietzsche despised shame, he equally despised moralizing. But in a way, for Nietzsche, they were one and the same. Shame and moralizing were one and the same. Now, this is not a fancy way of saying “judge not lest ye be judged.” Rather, for Nietzsche, it is to adopt the attitude of the poor person—the slave—alluded to earlier. When one has a kind of kneejerk impulse to immediately condemn certain actions as evil and to praise others as good, he is exploiting morality as a way of feeling more comfortable with his own station in life.

In *Beyond Good and Evil, Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, Nietzsche wrote that, “For someone to be ashamed of his immorality: that is a step on the staircase at the end of which he is also ashamed of his morality.” What is this quote saying? When one feels shame for immorality, eventually one feels shame for morality. It seems to be saying that when one feels shame for being *human*, one eventually turns to moralizing, which is just a further manifestation of shame.

Is this not the case of Adam and Eve? When they ate from the tree providing knowledge of good and evil, they were, given the power to feel shame at being human and to moralize simultaneously.

Now, here you might think: why does understanding good and evil lead to moralization and shame? After all, there are many great figures in history who understood good and evil and were not moralizers and were not ashamed. I believe here the Torah is using the phrase “good and evil” a bit ironically. After all, do Adam and Eve suddenly morph into great and wise sages after eating from the tree? No, they are still rather childlike and uninformed about the ways of the world. “Good and Evil” here seems to stand for a kind of crude, simplistic, superficial understanding of morality—the kind known to moralizers.

Throughout the rest of the Torah, of course, we have great figures who will feel guilt, and perhaps sometimes even shame. For example, when Joseph’s brothers attempt to murder their little brother Joseph. They do not succeed, and Joseph winds up becoming second in command to the Pharaoh in Egypt. Decades later, the brothers prostrate themselves before Joseph. This is one of the most moving scenes in the entire Torah. And indeed, the brothers should feel guilt, and perhaps, in this rarest of circumstances, even shame, considering the heinousness of the offense. But what makes them different from Adam and Eve? By now, the answer should be obvious. The brothers felt this sorrow as a result of committing a series of specific actions. This would make their feeling more akin to guilt than to shame. With Adam and Eve, we have perhaps the only characters in the Torah who feel true shame—that is, shame over who they are at their core. No other figures from the Torah demonstrate this phenomenon. We would need to wait for a character like Josef K. before again encountering a figure who feels this deep embarrassment for no ostensible reason. The only reason Adam and Eve feel “bad” is because they’re naked. Again, this word “naked” appears over and over in the passage. And indeed, the last gift God gives them before escorting them out of Eden, is to clothe them with “garments of skin”—significant

upgrades from the fig leaves they were wearing before. Here, again, the Torah is a bit ironic. Garments of skin could naturally mean “leather” or the equivalent. But in a sense, it is also as though God is giving them *new skin* to cover up who they really are. It is a rather grotesque gesture, in which Adam and Eve must clothe their entire bodies in a kind of *mask* in order to feel right with themselves. Freud would perhaps have substituted “defense mechanisms” or “repression” for the “skin” which God used to clothe the first humans.

I recently learned that the word in German for the pubic bone is *Schambein*. That is, the bone around your pelvic area—your so-called private parts, would literally translate in German to “bone of shame.” Native German speakers are not aware of the connection their language inherently makes between sexuality and shame. Native speakers generally speak their language unconsciously, unaware of the connotations and etymologies of their words. But I noticed it right away, and was quite amused, if also a bit discontented. *Schambein*. Perhaps it is time that we use the story of Adam and Eve, and the philosophy of Nietzsche, to find a replacement for this most moralizing of words.