Shame and the Resistance to Jewish Renewal
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> *A thirty-year-old man - I'll call him Robert - has been in psychotherapy with me for two years. Our work has been enormously productive: As a result of working through a number of conflicts, Robert has made profound changes in his life, including freeing up his professional ambitions and finally getting into a long-term and loving relationship with a woman.*

One of the unexpected by-products of Robert's therapeutic work was his decision to return to and renew his connection to Judaism. I therefore had a unique opportunity to observe how working through specific psychological conflicts seemed to allow Robert to seek out a deeper experience of Jewish spirituality.

Robert's conflicts primarily involved his intense feelings of shame and embarrassment when faced with or drawn to situations that seemed to invite an experience of awe, surrender, and love. Prayer and faith- even if defined within a progressive context - were just situations. Relational configurations that invited Robert to open himself to love and be loved, to let go of his customary cynical caution and to surrender to a didactic or group intimacy, tended to trigger intense feelings of shame that would invariably lead him to retreat.

The issues that Robert's idiosyncratic struggles with shame brought into bold relief resonated with conflicts of my own that emerged when I decided to convert to Judaism. Belonging to a group, ritualized devotion, the "God" word, openness to nonrational experience, recognizing the limits of human agency, all had personal meanings that both drew and repelled me. Although my formulations about Robert were highly case-specific, there were ways that his struggles felt familiar to me. Furthermore, as I talked with other Jews about our resistances to the spiritual aspects of Judaism, these shame-based reflexes seemed to emerge frequently. Thus, an analysis of Robert's unique ways of associating spiritual surrender, love, embarrassment, and cynicism can highlight a more generic problem many of us face in connecting with a spiritually meaningful Judaism.

During the course of our work, Robert discovered the extent to which he had grown up highly sensitive and vulnerable to feelings of shame. One particular memory highlighted some of the central meanings of embarrassment in Robert's development. He remembered that when he was a young child, a neighboring family used to spend Sundays together, barbecuing, playing games, singing. Robert's father was openly contemptuous of these neighbors, frequently mocking them for being like "the Cleavers." Robert inferred that his father felt it was pathetic to be so insular, something shameful about their apparent "need" to "glom" onto each other. He felt embarrassed about and for them.

Years later, in talking to me about it, Robert realized that he came to view familial togetherness itself as weak, pathetic, and embarrassing, while idealizing its opposite - his own family's experience, which was one of isolation, alienation, and disconnection. His own parents were alcoholics, his father a cynical and stoic intellectual, a "loner." Robert idealized his father and, therefore, his father's model of relatedness in which love, tenderness, and dependence were implicitly devalued and shameful. Because Robert, like all of us, continued to experience desires for affiliation and loving connection, he was always vulnerable to feelings embarrassed. If he loved someone too tenderly or openly, he fell victim to the same contempt from his conscience that he once experienced from and in his father.