

Guilt is Good!

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Guilt is good! Lingering guilt is not. Guilt is to the soul what pain is to the body. Imagine what life would be without pain. Sounds delightful for the pain-ridden individual but for the average healthy Joe it would spell disaster. By the time we noticed what had gone wrong it would be too late. Our limbs would be mangled and missing due to slight incidents of clumsiness. We'd be leaning on the stove wondering why we smell something burning only to discover the horrific truth moments too late. What a benefit to have a hand that is reactive to a hot stove and learns to stay away. Similarly in a world without guilt people will tend to do unimaginably destructive deeds and then continue as if nothing had happened.

So you see guilt is a good thing. It's like the amber light on the dash board that reads, "check-engine". No one likes to see that signal because it could be costly and it certainly is inconvenient, but it would be far more expensive to learn the hard way when smoke is billowing from the under the hood. So guilt is good, right?

Where did guilt get such a bad rep? I believe that there are many situations when guilt is not beneficial. If one does not know clearly what their true obligations are there is room to be manipulated and made to feel arbitrarily guilty. There's a task in psychology, like the game of "hot potato" to figure out with sober Torah standards, "Who owns the problem?" And in the business world, "Who owns the dept?" Once the doubt is eliminated then all that remains is the dept. There is no need or benefit to remain guilty longer than necessary. If one pays what's due or does what has to be done then there is no greater feeling of relief or release.

A zealous young man was standing by the side of busy road in Israel shouting, "Shabbos!" as cars raced by. (An editorial note: I don't believe this is the way to go about educating and I am not endorsing this approach.) A car came to a screeching halt and a big tough guy stepped out holding a tire iron in his hand.

He approached the fellow threateningly advising him to say his last prayers because he's about to meet his Maker. The young man asked him why he was so violent and angry. The man growled back at him, "Because you're out here shouting 'Shabbos'!?" The young fellow answered him softly, "You didn't stop your car because I shouted 'Shabbos'!" Angrier than ever, the tough fellow shouted, "Don't tell me why I stopped my car!"

The young man tried again, "I can prove it to you! If I was out here on Tuesday yelling, "Yom Shlishi!" would you have stopped your car?" "No!" the fellow admitted. "I would just think you're crazy." The young man concluded, "When I shouted "Shabbos" something inside you shouted "Shabbos" That's why you stopped your car!"

Guilt can be a great thing if it invites change, but unheeded it can turn to rage and worse yet a deadening of emotions. Making mistakes is normal and expected. I saw such a quote some place: "The successful person is not the one who makes the least mistakes but the one who learns the most from his mistakes." On one refrigerator I saw the words, "Our definition of failure is not falling down but staying down." So too King Solomon, the wisest of all men said, "The righteous one falls seven times and gets up." People fail all throughout life but the righteous way is to keep getting up.

A friend trying to call me Erev Rosh HaShana years back misdialled. A lady with a thick Russian accent answered the phone and not recognizing the voice he asked sheepishly, "Is this the Lams?" She responded boldly, "I am afraid you are a mistake!" He then correctly called our home and with a whisper of the whimsical he related the dialogue. He told me that he thought his parents loved and wanted him. Now he finds he is a mistake. Together we outlined the crucial distinction between "making a mistake" and "being a mistake". On Yom Kippur we have a great chance to acknowledge mistakes made and realize guilt is good! Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).