

Part XV in a Series On the Topic of Self-Esteem

Although a person should have a sense of self-esteem by virtue of his *neshamah*, and because we are all children of Hashem, this applies when a person lives properly and does what is required of him. If a person is disabled and can do very little, he should not lose a sense of worthiness.

However, if a person lives a profligate life and does not act as behooves a child of Hashem, there is little reason for him to feel worthy unless he does *teshuvah* and redeems himself. The Talmud tells us about Elazar ben Dordia, who lived in sin all his life but at the end recognized how wrong he had been and wept so bitterly over his sins that he died while crying, and a heavenly voice declared that with his *teshuvah* he merited Gan Eden.

We generally use the words "shame" and "guilt" interchangeably. One may say, "I am ashamed of what I did," meaning "I feel guilty over what I did." Technically, however, the two terms are differ-

ent. Guilt is about what a person *did*, and it can be a constructive feeling in that it can lead one to *teshuvah*, to take corrective action.

Remembering that we are Hashem's children should give us a basic feeling of worthiness, and the knowledge that if we have made mistakes, we can redeem ourselves.

Shame, however, is about what one feels he is. In other words, guilt is "I made a mistake," whereas shame is "I am a mistake." If one feels that he is inherently flawed, that he is made of "bad stuff," there is nothing he can do to change that. With guilt there is hope of improvement, but not with shame.

For whatever reason, a person may have shame and feel that he is inherently bad. A parent may have said, "You're a rotten kid" or used other terms that caused a child to feel not that he *did* something but that he was in essence bad. A person who has that feeling cannot have self-esteem, and he may behave according to his belief that he is bad and that nothing can change that. There is no reason to think that this person will do *teshuvah*.

That is why every person should feel that he is a child of Hashem, with a holy *neshamah*. People who feel shame should seek help to overcome this destructive feeling.

In our prayers we often use the term *Avinu*, our Father, to refer to Hashem. Remembering that we are Hashem's children should give us a basic feeling of worthiness, and the knowledge that if, as fallible humans, we have made mistakes, we are able to redeem ourselves.