



# The mesmerizing memoir of a liberal Jewish American woman

**I LIKE** reading biographies, autobiographies and memoirs. The one I just finished reading – *SHANDA: A Memory of Shame and Secrecy* by Letty Pogrebin – one of American Jewry’s best writers and most famous feminists – is one of the best I have ever read.

It is extremely well-written – serious, substantial, and sensitive. It is deeply intellectual as well as profoundly psychological. It is the story of a courageous and committed American liberal Jewish woman and that of her family. Not only has she been a brave woman in her writing and political career, but in this book, she reveals so many personal and family secrets that clearly demonstrate what an honest and serious writer she is.

This is a deeply Jewish book, reflective of the author’s very strong and sincere Jewish identity. Beginning with the title, *Shanda*, which is a Yiddish word that is explained throughout the book, Pogrebin uses many Jewish expressions throughout the book (most of which are translated or explained). She even includes a glossary of Jewish terms at the end of the book for the non-Jewish reader (or for assimilated Jews).

What is a *shanda*? It is the Yiddish word for “shame, scandal or disgrace.” Pogrebin recalls that in her youth, all it took to destroy one’s “good name” was a *shanda*. All too often, actions or stories that disgraced other Jews were kept secret in Jewish families, especially in hers. This is why the book is subtitled *A Memoir of Shame and Secrecy*. Many of these secrets, when discovered, can be very disturbing and challenging to understanding one’s identity.

The majority of this memoir is about the many secrets that Pogrebin discovered, mostly late in life, that shaped her identity in so many ways. The discovery of these manifold secrets became an obsession for Pogrebin, which is clearly why she spent the last five years writing this book. As she says:



MIKE LOVETT

Author Letty Pogrebin at her desk.

*I’m obsessed with secrets because I grew up with so many of them. Byzantine cover-ups hid my parents’ failures to meet the Jewish community’s omnipresent pressure to be a credit to one’s family, faith and people.... My mania around secrecy and shame was sparked in 1951 by the discovery that my parents had concealed from me the truth about their personal histories, and every member of my large extended family, on both sides were in on it.*

Pogrebin relates in great detail many of these secrets and how they shamed various members of her family. The stories are poignant, powerful and personal. I had to take a deep breath very often as I read one shocking story after another in her family history, and especially in her own personal history.

I learned a great deal about the author of this book whom I know personally and have great respect for. I loved her writing style which contains that utmost seriousness and

yet some helpful humor.

In addition to all her family stories, I also liked some of her commentary on contemporary issues, especially about Israel, where I have lived for the past 43 years. I found her comments in her chapters on Israel, in a section of the book dealing with Public Shame, to be extremely perceptive and to the point. For example, Pogrebin explains why she has felt that it has been important for her to be critical of Israel from time to time in a chapter called “My Cousin, Israel:”

*I feel entitled to criticize Israel not just on grounds of free speech but because I think of Israelis as ‘family.’...Painful as it is to criticize a family member, I find it harder to stand on the sidelines while the state that began as a gleam in the eyes of its founders, and the people whom God intended to become a ‘light unto the nations’ continue to stumble into the dark night of a xenophobic theocracy... When I criticize Israel’s shan-*

*das – be it the IDF’s dehumanizing treatment of Palestinians, the racist undemocratic laws passed by the Knesset or the unchecked power of ultra-Orthodox rabbis to decide who may marry whom or pray at the Western Wall, I do it from a place of love.*

Indeed, Pogrebrin has been active in Americans for Peace Now and will be honored by that organization this year. She has not flinched from taking Israel to task for many of its moral failings, just as she has done within American society over many decades.

In another chapter about Israel, she accused Israelis of being rude, judgmental, smug, brash, brusque and arrogant. I must admit that I did not appreciate this old canard. I think that is out-of-date and a gross over-generalization. Just like the term “the ugly American,” which used to be used about Americans around the world, I don’t think that it is fair to label a whole people as such. By the way, on my many trips to New York, I haven’t noticed that New Yorkers are all that polite or friendly.

What I particularly liked in this chapter was that she explained the Hebrew term for *shanda*, which is *busha v’charpa*, which means “What a disgrace!” And she gave interesting examples from the Israeli media as to how this term is used:

*A politician declared the paltry amount of the government’s old-age benefits to be a busha v’charpa. A Blogger wrote that it was a busha v’charpa for the government to give priority funding for settlements in the West Bank rather than to poor villages in the Negev.*

I found this linguistic explanation of the Israeli expression for *shanda* to be very interesting. The use of the two words together intensifies the concept. I will admit that I use this term very often about contemporary events, especially concerning some of our most outlandish politicians, like the disgraced former Prime Minister of Israel, Bibi Netanyahu, who is on trial for major indictments of corruption, and who has done the

most disgraceful act of all time recently by encouraging the most fanatical extremist right-wing politicians to be part of his block in the upcoming elections.

As fascinating as these sections on Israel were for me, they are not the main themes of this book. I would like to return to the main theme, which is the question of how to cope with secrets in your life.

On the one hand, Pogrebrin is striving for a secret-free life. But on the other hand, she knows that sometimes keeping secrets can save lives, as was the case during the Holocaust. At the end of the book, she shares her ambivalence about this dilemma.

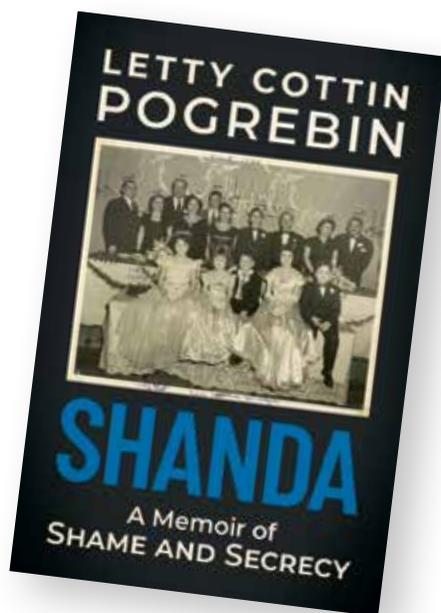
*I’ve reconciled myself to a fundamental paradox: I want to be free of all secrecy but not of all shame – only the kind that deflates, denigrates, or dehumanizes particular people or groups. Race-shaming, slut-shaming, poor-shaming, fat-shaming, immigrant-shaming, and all the other put-downs visited on those who don’t fit someone’s notion of the ‘norm,’ that’s what I want to see come to an end. I don’t wish to be shame-free or shameless. I want the specter of shame to influence human behavior for good, not ill. ‘Good shame’ is prophylactic, preventative and preemptive. It stops us from hurting other people, stealing their stuff, or fouling the environment.*

It seems to me that we all live with this paradox. None of us can lead a totally shameless life. All of us have secrets that we don’t want revealed to peers or the extended family or to the public.

Yet, for Pogrebrin – who throughout this very perceptive and personal book has struggled with these issues – she clearly strives for a secret-free life (the title of the last chapter of the book). For her, writing this book about shame and secrecy has helped her – and us – come to grips with many important issues in life, especially vis-a-vis the importance and complexity of family life. She has graciously shared so many secrets – and how she coped with them – with us, her readers. We understand

that writing this book has helped her become more forgiving of the painful chapters of her past. Through this journey, she came to understand her parents much better and to cherish what she learned from them, something we all need to do. She concludes this wonderful book with a typical Pogrebrin witicism: *I just want mine to be the last generation of Jews who have anything to hide.*

This compelling book was an intense read for me. I was amazed about how open and honest the author was in sharing so many of her dilemmas and struggles that shaped her throughout her life. This is a deeply human and profoundly Jewish book at the same time. I appreciated it greatly, and I highly recommend it, especially for people who like to read mesmerizing memoirs, with a sense of humor and great gratitude for a life well lived. ■



**SHANDA: A Memoir of Shame and Secrecy**  
Letty Cottin Pogrebrin  
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