
WHAT A JERK!

Rabbi Alan Lurie
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What a Jerk!

Who is pushing?

I turned to see a tall, bald man looking down at me. The train had just pulled in and the doors opened directly in front my spot on the platform. I let two people in first, though, and that's when I felt the push. As we turned toward the seats, I felt another push on my back and again looked at the man, who now released an annoyed huff of breath. *What a jerk!* I thought. *Does he think that he's the only one who deserves a seat?* Then I felt a poke on my shoulder, and in a loud angry voice, the tall, bald man said

"What are you looking at? You got a problem, buddy?"

I saw people turn toward us.

"I don't have a problem," I answered, trying to sound calm. "How about you?"

He shook his head dismissively and found a seat. I spent the next 20 minutes replaying the incident, imagining better, more biting responses than my lame answer, and plotting what I would say to him the next time we met on the platform. I was angry and needed to show him that he was wrong, inconsiderate, and rude.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. *"Why am I so worked up over this little incident?"* I asked. As my breathing slowed I began to relax and let myself feel the emotion—the sense of indignation, personal offense, and obsessive replaying of the event. I knew

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this feeling well. In fact, I had learned of, and taught others about, this feeling and its meaning. Now I was experiencing it directly. The teaching that I learned is

That which irritates us most about others is usually an aspect of our own personality that we dislike, but do not want admit to ourselves.

Then the encounter came in to focus. I was anxious to get a seat on the train and was tempted to rush on to grab the first available seat. But because of my self-image as a “spiritual person,” I did not allow myself to recognize that I was feeling pushy, so I let others in front of me to prove to myself that not only am I not pushy, but I actually place others’ needs ahead of my own. The tall, bald man’s aggression, however, was a reflection of my own feelings of anxiety about getting a seat. I was unwilling, though, to recognize him as a kindred spirit—which is to admit that I, too, am pushy—so I vehemently condemned him to reassure myself that we are, actually, diametrical opposites and that he’s selfish and I am generous. But I knew, deep down, that the truth is not so simple, and his unwillingness to recognize me as a “spiritual person” for letting others in first brought my self-image in to question, prompting the thought, *Maybe I am the pushy jerk here.* (If he had smiled and congratulated me for letting others ahead, I would have gladly stood for the trip, feeling

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secure and validated.) But that was difficult to look at and accept, and so I immediately rejected that option and blamed him. And the internal drama grew. Whew!!

Although this dynamic—the reluctance to accept parts of ourselves that don't fit the self-image that we've created, who we like to think that we are, and who we want to appear to others—sounds rather insane, it is a universal human experience. The great early 20th-century Swiss psychologist Carl Jung first identified and studied this dynamic, and named it the “shadow” because it contains the thoughts and feelings that we've subconsciously sent to the dark shadows of our psyche, hoping not to be found, out of fear that our self-image will be challenged. If our self-image is, for example, *I am self-sufficient*, *I am humble*, *I am caring*, or *I am spiritual*, natural thoughts and emotions that conflict with this self-image, such as feelings of incompetence, need for adulation, self-involvement, or anxiety about getting a train seat, will be disowned to the degree in which we identify with the self-image. Likewise, if we've come to define ourselves as *not talented* or *bad with people*, we will reject our natural talents and personality. (The origin of these self-images, and our often fierce protection of them, is a complex topic that will need to wait for future investigation.)

When these disowned thoughts and emotions arise, we might believe that they come from outside

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ourselves, so the person that provokes them will be blamed and condemned, and we will not accept personal responsibility. That's the problem with the fear of our own shadow: There is nothing inherently wrong with anger, competitiveness, insecurity, desire for attention, and other typically disowned emotions. They are all parts of the human condition and only cause trouble when they are not understood, matured, and used consciously. When these thoughts and emotions don't fit our self-image, though, we reject them and lock them behind a wall in our psyche so that we can avoid looking at them. There they remain stagnant, stuck at the age when they were repressed, never growing, and never maturing. We might think that we've eliminated the unwanted feeling by locking it away, but there it waits, ready to emerge when provoked, usually in extreme form, and with an inappropriate level of intensity. This explains the childish, uncensored angry outburst from an otherwise mature adult, or the indulgent whining of an otherwise secure and competent coworker. If unaddressed, our shadow qualities can damage our relationships, limit our effectiveness, and make us anxious, depressed, and frustrated. As Carl Jung noted

Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. At all counts, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions.

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How can we recognize our shadow side? After developing sensitivity to it, you can realize that emergent shadow emotions have a particular quality that differentiates them from other responses. In these situations we typically over-react. As I experienced on the train, when we feel insulted in a personal way, can't forgive the other, and mount a campaign to "defend" ourselves, along with obsessive thoughts of "getting even," demonizing the "offender," and denial that we are, in any way, responsible, chances are good that our shadow has emerged. The following are a few common indicators:

- **That which bothers us most in others:**

Like a pushy train passenger. It's important to realize that this does not mean that the other person is not, in fact, insensitive, opinionated, controlling, rude, or pushy. Or that we should not react to and address bothersome behavior. And, of course this does not apply to extreme acts of cruelty and violence for which one would naturally feel a need for justice. But, as previously earlier, when there is a reaction that is disproportionate to the "offense," it is a signal that a disowned characteristic has emerged from the shadows.

- **Recurrent complaints:** When it seems that the same "offense" reoccurs, and we begin to make generalized statements about others,

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such as “Why is everyone so insensitive?” or “How come nobody ever listens to me?” or any statement that begins with “Why are people so...?” (and, of course, this condemnation of human nature excludes you!), this indicates a shadow quality. Unless we live in a sealed environment that is, improbably, composed of a particularly annoying brand of human being, we need to look to ourselves as the common factor.

- **Projections:** We might find ourselves making a snap judgment about someone that we just met, or do not know. “She seemed arrogant!” we might observe. Or “He sure thinks that he’s a big shot.” Of course it’s unlikely that we can accurately size up someone so quickly, with so little information. It is more likely that we are projecting an unwanted aspect of ourselves on to the other.

What can we do about our shadow side? Well, the good news is that we tend to unconsciously select spouses, friends, and work and social situations that bring our shadow forward. We do this because, in our hearts, we want to be known and accepted for all of who we are, and we are drawn to these people and situations that we intuit can help lead us toward repair and wholeness. The following are a few suggestions for positive actions:

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- **See the emergence of the shadow as an opportunity for growth:** As previously mentioned, the emergence of disowned emotions has a particular quality. Learn to be sensitive to it and to notice when it arises. These reactions signal an opportunity for self-awareness and growth because we are made whole and compassionate when we courageously look at our shadows. The central commandment in the Bible is “And you will love your neighbor as yourself.” The implication of this statement is that you will love others *as* you love yourself; to the degree that you can accept yourself, with all your perceived shortcomings; you will accept the same in others.
- **Ask for honest input from a trusted friend and LISTEN:** In the Bible, God tells Abraham to listen to his wife’s voice (this is my wife’s favorite Bible passage) because those who love us can be mirrors that reveal our hidden attributes, and our potential. Our friends and families usually see our shadow well before we do and often know our “blind spots”—those troubling aspects of our personality that are obvious to everyone but us. When someone points these out to us, our typical reaction might be to take offense and to say, “I’m not like that!” It requires courage to listen and seriously consider that the other person might be telling us

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something that is true and useful. It is also an opportunity to let someone be of service.

- **Don't take yourself so seriously.** Find humor in the situation. Okay, I am feeling pushy. It's not the end of the world and doesn't mean that I'm not "spiritual." It just means that I'm a human being who wants a seat—just like the tall, bald man. My mother likes to tell the story about driving up a one-way parking ramp. As she turned the corner, a car suddenly came down the ramp, nearly hitting her. *What an idiot!* she thought. *Doesn't he know that he's going the wrong way?* Soon another car came down the wrong way. *Can you believe it? Another idiot!* By the time she passed the third car, she laughed to herself, suddenly realizing who the "idiot" really was.

Carl Jung wrote

To confront a person with his own shadow is to show him his own light.

In this way, people who bring up our shadow side are our teachers, to whom, if we can, we ought to feel gratitude. So, dear tall, bald man, thank you for inspiring this message and helping me to be aware of my own aggressiveness. But, in the future, please don't push!

Wishing you well,
Alan