

## The Madoff Massacre

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I am not ashamed to say that I am a Jewish nationalist. I take pride in Jewish accomplishments and in the accomplishments of Jews. I am fascinated by our disproportionate impact on the world. While I truly do not believe that we are better than others, I marvel at the achievements of my fellow co-religionists. One of my favorite songs, especially at this time of year is Adam Sandler's Chanukah song, which is basically an ode to Jewish pride. Conversely, I am ashamed and pained when the opposite occurs, when a Jew does something that violates our heritage's sacred teachings for it reflects negatively upon all of us.

The Torah differentiates between Kiddush hashem, acts which magnify God's name and hillul haShem, those acts that diminish God's honor by reflecting poorly upon Him. To call an act or an individual a hillul haShem, a desecration of God's name is one of the greatest insults that can be hurled against another Jew. What Bernie Madoff did is unquestionably an unconscionable and abominable hillul HaShem.

I have always been comfortable knowing that the outrageous preposterous claims of anti semites are not true. But what this man has done feeds into all the negative stereotypes leveled against us and our people. Some have pointed out that he has done more damage to the Jewish community than any anti semite in decades.

My own son Ezra confessed that for the first time in his life he almost felt ashamed to be a Jew.

By now we are all familiar with his actions, manipulations and exploitations. By preying on his fellow Jews who entrusted their money to him he violated their trust.

The impact has been devastating. So many who have used their wealth and resources to do good, to help philanthropic purposes and to generously support charities and honorable causes, both Jewish and secular, have seen their personal fortunes disappear. A number of Jewish organizations have lost a considerable amount of their revenue and some charitable Jewish foundations have had to cease their operations. He has managed to harm contemporary Jewry in ways anti-Semites could only dream about. He has sapped the Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles of 11 percent of its assets, or some \$18 million. In the words of prominent educator Avraham Infeld, he "obliterated" long-standing charitable foundations for Jewish causes in Israel, Eastern Europe and North America. I have spoken with several people who have told me that they are wiped out. Someone in South Florida said that the mood in the community there is as if everyone is sitting shiva.

How did we get to such a place? At a time such as this, I cannot help but wonder what the prophets of old would have said?

It wasn't always like this. There is a Yiddish saying, quoted by the Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem who said that when a Jew eats chicken, it must be because one of them must be sick.

Or I think of the story about the rabbi who was surprised when the local priest came to ask what to do about all the thieves in town. He said to the rabbi, "Almost every day a member of my flock comes to me bemoaning the fact that his house has been broken into. Yet, I notice that you Jews do not seem to have this problem with thieves in your community."

"Father, you are correct," answered the rabbi. He showed the priest the little box on his doorpost and explained, "We believe that when we attach a mezuzah to the entrances to our houses, the Holy One, protects both us and our property."

"In that case," replied the priest, "I must have one as well!" The rabbi obliged and gave the priest a mezuzah.

Two weeks later the rabbi was awakened by the sound of a loud knocking on his door. Dressing hastily, he made his way down the stairs and found the priest very distressed and complaining about what had happened since placing the mezuzah on his doorpost.

"What happened?" asked the terrified rabbi, "Have robbers or thieves struck again?"

"Even worse!" screamed the priest, "I have been overwhelmed by schnorrers!"

The mezuzah is meant to do much more than ward off bad luck or misfortune. It reminds Jews to act in accord with God's teachings when entering one's home, and when setting out into the world. On a deeper level the simple story reflects our values -- that traditionally we are not thieves, but a community that helps and supports each other.

It is most unfortunate that the current economic difficulties of recent months have involved financial misdeeds and illegal or immoral acts by members of our people. The greed is not confined to the shores of this continent. The enduring memory we will have of the Prime Minister of the State of Israel, Ehud Olmert will be of him stuffing his pockets with envelopes of cash.

A scheme like this wipes out so much trust as well as the good will generated by all the mitzvot performed by so many of our people. It leads many to overlook all the good that is done by so many Jews for so many in our society.

We have to look at this as a wake-up call. One of our strengths is the ability to look at ourselves and evaluate our faults and shortcomings, what is called a "din veheshbon." We have to be introspective and ask painful questions about how we got to such a place.

Writing in the Jerusalem Post, Rabbi Shmueli Boteach wrote a scathing piece calling upon the Jewish community to recognize what he called a cancer in our society. He suggests that we have become so obsessed with money and material comforts that we are willing to overlook and excuse inexcusable excesses. He asks why “a disproportionately large number of young Jews are running to work on Wall Street, (and do not consider) jobs like teaching, the rabbinate, or doing outreach because the compensation, comparatively, stinks?” There was a time when our best and brightest pursued careers in medicine and teaching professions because it reflected Jewish concern for the welfare of others.

In a brutally honest column he says, “For too long the Jewish community has excused all manner of material excess so long as those who sported giant jewels and enormous gold watches also gave lots of tzedaka (charity).” It begins with lavish over the top bar and bat mitzvah celebrations in which each family tries to showoff and out-do the previous affair. By allowing this to be their farewell party to Jewish commitment, the message parents give their children is to place the emphasis not on being responsible members of the community committed to continued study and a life of mitzvot but that Judaism is about material hedonism.

He asks, “And where are the rabbis through all this? Why aren't they preaching the time-honored Torah values of modesty, humility, and sincerity? Tragically, many of us rabbis are either afraid to speak out or have been bought off. We don't want to incur the wrath of our congregants and boards by criticizing these corrupt values, or we've been bought off by wealthy donors who support our organizations and who will turn off the spigot if we dare decry their excess.”

Sadly, Rabbi Boteach is right.

What would our prophets have said? What would our sages teach? One way out of this crisis is to return to traditional Jewish values. We must teach, instill, emphasize and embrace the obvious ones of honesty, decency, integrity and being ethical, as well as of modesty and humility. The many passages in the Bible, tractates of the Talmud and volumes of later Jewish writings which teach that how we deal with others in business is of paramount importance to God should once again be our guide.

Judaism says there is nothing wrong with acquiring wealth, or with being wealthy. The only issues are: Is it achieved honestly; that it not become our only concern and thereby blind our priorities, and finally, what do we do with our resources. One of the questions our sages say we will be asked when we face our Maker is “Were you honest in your business dealings?” It does not get much clearer than that.

Some have said those who enjoyed the high returns without asking enough questions deserve some degree of the blame. I would only say that it is not appropriate for us to speculate about these matters or to judge others at a time when they are experiencing so much pain and loss. What has amazed me is the resiliency of so many of the people I have spoken with. They are philosophical, with an unusual perspective and often lack anger. One person told me speaking in the past tense that they were fortunate enough

to have enjoyed a good life, and to have been able to do a lot of good in their lifetime for others. They came from humble modest means, and now that they will have to sell their home, their car, their jewelry, artwork and furniture and move in with their children, they will return to the life they once knew and go back to where they started.

I reminded them that Hillel once said that we only truly have that which we give away.

Rabbi Andre Ungar has written, in a passage which appears in the back of our prayerbook, Sim Shalom, about the significance of Chanukah. "The Hasmonean war was an uprising (against Hellenism.)....Hellenism had insidiously sobered some of the best minds and souls of the Jewish people. It seduced them into assimilation...(and) meant exchanging the gold of Jewish spirituality, ethics and law, for the tinsel of alien arts, philosophy and sports --- a slavish and self-hating imitation of a foreign culture and foreign values. Hanukkah embodies victory over Hellenism, a rejection of assimilation, a joyous reaffirmation of the authentic, timeless truths of Torah," a battle which must be accomplished anew in every age.

I mentioned how my son Ezra felt about what had happened. A few days later he said to me, "You know Dad, I realize that this was a bad individual who acted this way, and it does not mean that all Jews should be condemned for the actions of this one individual. He does not represent or reflect Jews or Judaism." He is right.

For this reason, the Talmud says that if a person wants to be a good person, he should study and practice the laws of honesty in business. The traditional prayer preceding Rosh Hodesh, the new month asks that we be granted a life free from shame and reproach, of both abundance and honor, which embraces piety and love of Torah. Let us never forget these are the values our heritage cherishes.

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