

Desecrating and Sanctifying God's Holy Name in the NY Times

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I have a love-hate relationship with the New York Times.

On the one hand, there are times when its coverage of Israel infuriates me. Its reporting is often biased as stories omit context or important background information. Other articles subtly distort or underreport certain facts and misrepresent events, showing Israel in an unsympathetic light. And some of the writing on its editorial and Op Ed pages is so biased against Israel's positions that any portent or claim of fairness is not supported by objective analysis of the content or orientation of the opinions expressed.

Significantly, when Richard Goldstone sought to have a column he wrote, in which he recanted the conclusions of his infamous UN report about the war in Gaza, the Times refused to give him space to do so. So obvious is the nature of its proclivity towards criticizing Israel that when offered the opportunity to submit a column this past fall, Prime Minister Netanyahu declined, pointing out that something like 39 of 41 columns and op Ed pieces in the past few years have expressed positions antithetical to Israel.

So what's to love?

Despite these grave concerns and serious problems, there are times when it covers Jewish issues and trends in the Jewish community and about the Jewish religion in a way which no other mainstream newspaper in America does. And you have to appreciate a paper that uses an important Hebrew word from this week's Torah portion, *hillul haShem* in a front page story.

A story in Thursday's New York Times mentions the word and correctly defines it as a desecration of God's name. It even correctly links it to another Hebrew word and Jewish concept, *mesirah*, an ancient prohibition against turning fellow Jews over to non-Jewish authorities. Unfortunately, the reference is correct, and important, but not something we can be proud of.

In the first in a series of articles, this one is called "Ultra-Orthodox Shun Their Own for Reporting Child Sexual Abuse." It details the disturbing tendency in the Hasidic community of Brooklyn, home to between 200 – 250,000 Hasidic Jews to turn against those in their community who report instances and individuals who commit the sin of molesting minors. In graphic detail the important expose, brings to light events which have also been reported in the New York Jewish Week and Jewish Forward, and which as I said, have to do with a concept in this week's Torah portion.

While many believe that sexual abuse is no more or less prevalent in the ultra- Orthodox community than it is in the rest of society, the problem, like the problem in the Catholic church is what happens when an already closed society, suspicious of the influence of the outside world, closes ranks to protect its own and believes that by doing so it protect its reputation.

Hasidic families or individuals who report that their children have been molested by rabbis or other respected figures, individuals in positions of authority, may be shunned and ostracized. In a cruel role reversal they are the ones who become the outcasts. The pressure exerted on them makes them feel as if they are the ones who have done something wrong. The result is that it takes great courage and

fortitude to come forward and report the abuse as they must resist and fight tremendous pressure brought against them. Rather than have sympathy for those who suffer at the hands of their abusers, the community tends to close ranks and express concern for the feelings of the ones who are accused. Too often the result is that the victims are the ones whose reputations are tarnished. And sadly, those who commit the offensive behavior retain their positions. Even more tragically, they are able to continue to commit the offenses on other unsuspecting innocent victims and children.

The powerful organization, Agudath Israel proclaimed last year that observant Jews should not report allegations to the police unless permitted to do so by a rabbi. But in a positive development a Chabad religious court in Brooklyn declared last year that it is forbidden to remain silent in such situations.

To understand the actions and rulings one must know something about Jewish history and the Talmud. The words and principles, both mentioned in the Times article are: mesirah, and the other is Kiddush and hillul haShem, from this week's Torah portion.

From the time of the Middle Ages on, but before it as well, Jews were necessarily cautious about turning over fellow Jews to non-Jewish authorities. They knew that there was no way that a Jew would ever receive a fair trial in places such as Cossack-dominated Poland, or Tzarist Russia. Furthermore, Jews had an elaborate system of law that governs all aspects of life and a system of justice based upon the Talmud's regulations. Jewish courts, known as batei din consist of three rabbis who are bound by legal precedent, guided by principles of fairness and who seek to interpret and apply the law to the cases brought before them.

But the Talmud also teaches that *dina demalchuta, dina hu*: the law of the land is the law. We are duty bound to follow civil regulations. One could make a compelling case that this is especially true in a democracy, where we are equal citizens and participants. And the laws of mesirah, against turning over one's own to biased civil authorities clearly do not apply to 21st century America.

The concern about desecrating or sanctifying God's name, is a distortion and misapplication of the concept as well.

Hillul Hashem, the notion that we can desecrate or diminish God's name because what we do is a reflection on Him and on the Torah does not allow us to cover up shameful acts. It means that they should not be committed in the first place.

Kiddush HaShem, sanctifying or magnifying God by reflecting positively on how we act does not mean that God's Holy name is sanctified by hiding embarrassing behavior. It means that we should strive to bring honor to God's name by doing good deeds, by performing mitzvot, by doing the right thing, and by treating each and every human being with respect and dignity.

As Jews, we are commanded to dedicate our lives to seeking to live in a way that ensures that our actions reflect positively on God, based on how we treat others.

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