

**Chillul Hashem  
Shemos 5778  
Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky  
Shaare Tefilla**

I'd like to tell you two stories this morning. The first is about a generous family man, a father of a large family, a wonderful Jew who was pillar of his community and who supported many charitable causes, providing gainful employment through his meat business to hundreds of people who loved and respected him. In an effort to keep his business afloat, he might have made a small error of financial judgement, one no different from those made by countless others in his line of work. Despite this minor error, he routinely paid his bills on time, yet *he* incurred the wrath of the local anti Semitic authorities and was singled out for punishment. A local judge with no love lost for the Chosen People had multiple conflicts of interest in his case yet refused to recuse herself from his case. The terms of his sentence for his financial misjudgement were linked to the amount he owed; the government placed onerous terms on the sale of his business, including the illegal provision that he could not sell to relatives, and sought perjured testimony that no such condition had ever existed. As such, he was forced to sell his business at a significant loss, and was left owing his creditors and the bank millions of dollars. Because of the significant debt he had accrued, he was handed a sentence even longer than that sought by the prosecutors, one many legal scholars and public officials agree was excessive, especially

considering that he was a first time offender. Throughout his ordeal, this man- a modern day Mendel Beilis or Alfred Dreyfuss- displayed unusual equanimity and uncommon faith in God. Even in his darkest days, he served as a model prisoner and an inspiration for his friends, family and community. After serving some time in prison, the benevolent ruler commuted his sentence. The newly released man visited the people and institutions who rallied behind him, and celebratorily thanked them for their support. He lavished blessings on all those who had him in their thoughts and prayers and, once out of prison, he began immediately to advocate for the downtrodden and help those in need. The correction of this egregious injustice, the way this man provided hope to those who desperately needed it, the way he behaved throughout his unjust incarceration, and the optimism this man's release provided to so many represents a modern day miracle and is the ultimate *kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of God's name. Anyone who disagrees has no love for his fellow Jew and is a hypocrite anyway, for they are not blameless in the very sins they seek to cast upon him.

Now let me tell you another story:

A venal and deceitful man, a member of a prominent Jewish family known for running afoul of the law, willfully inflated his earnings to secure

fraudulent lines of credit to keep afloat the kosher meat business he ran. The business was the subject of warranted scrutiny from governmental authorities, as it was the site of inhumane conditions for the illegal workers, who were forced to work overtime for no pay and had to pay for their own safety equipment; conditions were such that severe injuries and even amputations were commonplace. Included in the number of these illegal immigrants were many children. In addition to the inhumane conditions facing the workers, the animals there were also found to be kept under cruel conditions. While the government did drop charges on many of the violations they found, it only meant that they declined to prosecute for them, not that this man was not guilty of these offenses. This man's sentence may have been a tad excessive, but it was within sentencing guidelines, which need reform on a systemic level. This man never expressed remorse for what he did, and never apologized to those who were hurt by his business practices. In keeping with his life as a wheeler and dealer, he secured a dream team of the finest legal minds to fight his sentence while others who are also victims of unpredictable sentencing guidelines, often on the low end of the socioeconomic scale, have no one to advocate for them. He also went on a PR blitz, building himself up as an inspirational person so as to obfuscate the very real nature of his serious crimes. When this man's sentence was commuted, he went on a victory tour, stoking his supporters' cultural mistrust of secular authorities so they

would stand behind him while either being ignorant or uninterested in his crimes, or their refusal to acknowledge that he committed any crimes at all. The behavior of this man before his incarceration and after his release, and the actions of a community that lionises a scofflaw, represent the ultimate *chillul Hashem*, and anyone who disagrees has perverted priorities, is complicit in fraud and is responsible for bringing about an inexcusable *shanda far de goyim*.

As you have no doubt already surmised from the very first sentence of this speech, both these stories refer to the same person- Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin, whose sentence was commuted during the waning hours of the final day of Chanukah this year. Depending on what you think about the American justice system, or your political opinions, or the amount of legal training you possess and, increasingly, where on the Orthodox spectrum you identify, you will either subscribe to the first version or the second. So which is correct? I think that question is less interesting, because this entire saga presents us with a teachable moment. The terms *chillul Hashem* and *kiddush Hashem* are bandied about with such frequency in describing anything a Jew does. But what do they really mean?

In this week's Sedrah, we are introduced to the character of Moshe. A pampered youth raised in the palace of Pharaoh, he had every reason to

ignore the plight of his people, yet he ventured past the palace precincts to participate in their suffering. Shortly thereafter, the Torah describes Moshe's call to leadership, in which God appeared to him from a flaming thicket, charging him with the thankless task of liberating the Jewish people from slavery, convincing them that salvation was on the way and representing their needs to the intransigent Pharaoh. Moshe is deeply concerned, though; when he meets the Jewish people, and when he speaks to Pharaoh, who should he say has sent him? What is the *name* of the being that beckoned from the bush? God reveals to him that his name is *Ehyeh*, the name by which he has always been and will always be known. But why is it so important for Moshe to know God's name? Isn't it more important just to carry out the mission?

The 12 century French commentator and Tosafist Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor answers this question with a profound insight.

ואמרו לי מה שמו. וכי אדם הולך בשליחות ואיני יודע לומר מי שלחו:

How can a person embark on a mission and not be able to identify the One who sent him? How can you faithfully fulfill a job when no one knows who you are working for? *This* is why it was so important for Moshe to know Hashem's name. We are all on a *shlichus*, on a mission. And we must always know- and everyone else must always know through us- who our boss is,

and on whose behalf we are fulfilling this mission. That is why the name of God is so important.

The term *chillul Hashem* is literally translated as a “profanation of the Name,” a desecration of the name of God. Understood in light of the comment of the Bechor Shor, the nature and severity of this offense becomes abundantly clear. The Torah uses this term in a number of different contexts; First, the Torah commands us to be prepared to sacrifice our own lives rather than committing one of the cardinal sins of murder, forbidden sexual relationships or idolatry<sup>1</sup>. Indeed, the same is true if one is forced to commit *any* sin in public, or to violate a mitzvah if the mitzvah is prohibited by a foreign government. The term *chillul*, desecration, is also used to describe taking God’s name in vain to swear falsely<sup>2</sup>, giving up one’s children to the worship of the idolatrous fire ritual Molech<sup>3</sup> and the defilement of sacrifices by Kohanim through consuming them while in a state of ritual impurity<sup>4</sup>. The prophet Yechezkel describes *galus*, exile, as itself a form of *chillul Hashem*,<sup>5</sup> when the nations of the world proclaim that we are God’s people, but have left His country.

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<sup>1</sup> Vayikra 22:32

<sup>2</sup> Vayikra 19:12

<sup>3</sup> Vayikra 18:21

<sup>4</sup> Vayikra 22:2

<sup>5</sup> Yechezkel 36:20

These are fairly disparate uses of the term; what do they have in common? In each of these violations, the offenders have forgotten that they are on a mission from God (and not in the Blues Brothers sense); it is no longer evident from their actions that God sent them. *And if that person purports to live a God centered life and behaves otherwise, it reflects poorly on God, as it were, for making such a poor choice of messenger.* People who aren't willing to give their lives for transcendent values are people who are firmly in the center of their own universe. Someone who gives her children over to an idolatrous ritual is sending the message that it is not the eternal God whom she worships, and it is not God to whom which she is raising her children. Someone who takes God's name in vain to swear falsely has no regard for truth and will use the name of God to advance his own man-made nefarious schemes. Eating sacrifices in a state of impurity shows that even when working in God's house, we focus our attention on our physical urges alone. And exile- the bitter exile in which we find ourselves and whose responsibility rests on our shoulders alone- shows that we are not interested in being in God's employ when we refuse to live near the headquarters of His corporation.

In his sermon last week, my friend and colleague Rabbi Evan Hoffman, Rabbi of Congregation Anshei Sholom in New Rochelle, New York, suggested that what *chillul Hashem* has come to assume a connotation far

removed from the original biblical context, and has taken on a cultural significance instead. Rather than being a violation of specific biblical precepts, *chillul Hashem* has come to describe what happens *when a Jew fulfills the worst stereotypes people hold about Jews*. I think this is a brilliant definition, and, if my understanding of his intent is correct, I only disagree with Rabbi Hoffman in that this definition is not a *departure* from the scriptural tradition, but is actually its very *essence*. It is certainly true that many of the behaviors that we describe as a *chillul Hashem* are illegal and immoral, yet many of them are not, and are not even *halachically* prohibited. There is no explicit passage in the *Shulchan Aruch* that prohibits pushing ahead in line at an amusement park, that sanctions acting rudely at a sporting event, or proscribes haggling over money (especially small sums), yet I think we can all agree that these behaviors are *chillulei Hashem* where they are not culturally endemic, because we confirm the worst views people may hold about Judaism and its practitioners. Of course, it is possible to be assertive without being obnoxious, and it is possible to be frugal without being money grubbing. But when our behavior does confirm these stereotypes, no longer are we viewed as God-centered, as agents of His mission for us. How can our actions promote faith and connection with God- how can we proclaim the name of the One who sent us- when our selfish actions show that we don't believe we've been sent at all?



Since you asked, my understanding is that parts of both stories about Sholom Rubashkin are correct. In my view, he was given a raw deal in many aspects of his prosecution, to the degree that it verges on anti-Semitism- a term Jews should be exceedingly careful before using. Now that he has paid his proportional debt to society, I am thrilled for him and his family that they are reunited, especially with his severely autistic son, on whom his imprisonment was especially hard. I am also deeply impressed at the level of faith and commitment he maintained under circumstances that might have broken others. He has every right to celebrate his release from prison and, if he still maintains his innocence, it at least provides a legal basis for why he has made no formal apologies. At the same time, I am also disturbed at the raucous celebrations of other fellow Jews, portraying him as another Natan Sharansky. Our community has been burned repeatedly in its poor choice of role models, and we should be careful before we beatify someone who is not a טלית שכולו תכלת, someone who is clearly not pure as the wind driven snow. But this is much bigger than Sholom Rubashkin, isn't it? Focusing our attention on whether *he* made a *chillul Hashem* diverts them from where it should be trained- one whether *we* are making a *kiddush Hashem*. This will only happen if it is clear to us, and to everyone else who knows us, who we work for. May the name of our master always be clear, and may our actions be a credit to Him for

His choice of emissary. May God look at our actions and say to us, those in  
His employ<sup>6</sup>:

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי עַבְדִּי אַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר בְּךָ אֶתְפָּאֵר.

You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will display my splendor.

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<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 49:3