SHAME ON JEWS
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Let's try a little word association, I say a name and you give me the first thought that comes to mind.

- Bernie Madoff
- Maurice Greenberg – Chairman of AIG
- Jack Abramoff
- Aaron Rubashkin
- Dick Fuld – Chairman Lehman Brothers
- Marion & Herb Sandler – inventors of the Option ARM loan
- Rabbi Naftali Weisz of Los Angeles – the grand rabbi of the Spinka Hasidic movement – indicted along with 5 other rabbis in his sect on 37 federal counts of money laundering, mail fraud and conspiracy.
- A dozen Orthodox Rabbis from NY & NJ – led away in hand cuffs for dealing in organ trafficking and money laundering

I heard a lot of words, some I won't repeat from the bimah – but I also heard first whispered and then more loudly – the obvious association – beyond their actions and crimes, I heard the word "Jew". I'm sorry should I whisper it too? Are we nervous that the anti-Semite worshiping among us will use my sermon for a hate filled rant on the Internet? Sadly they don't need my sermon to fuel their hatred and loathing – they have the criminal records of prominent Members of our Tribe for that.

There is only one reason people whisper – to say something true that we don't want anyone to hear. We whisper to hide shame. We whisper because we don't like the sound of what we know needs to be said. Shame on Jews! – not all of us, but some of us, enough of us, that Madoff is not just on a list of criminals, but a list of Jewish criminals.

I can hear the *Oy Veys* from the back of the room – "the Rabbi shouldn't be talking about this – airing our dirty laundry in public." "The year has been hard enough – why make us feel worse, none of us are on that list – we didn't steal billions!" No we did not – but friends we are on that list too. As Jews we have long enjoyed 'pride by association' – we celebrate the fact that we are just .02% of the world population but 27% of all Nobel Prize winners. But we must also accept the other side to that coin; if a Jew misbehaves, he or she brings shame on all of us. Is that fair? Is it reasonable? No. But it's true anyway. *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bzeh* – the Talmud declares - *all of Israel are held responsible for one another.* (Shevuoth 39a) If I misbehave, or you misbehave, it brings shame on all Jews.

From the time our grandparents got off the boat at Ellis Island, immigrant

Ashkenazi parents would instruct their children in Yiddish "Don't be a *shandah fur de goyim.*" Fearing that the bad acts of a few Jews may bring great shame to our people's reputation in the eyes of the broader gentile world not to mention un-wanted attention.

Two thousand years ago the Talmud decreed that individuals that bring embarrassment and shame upon the Jewish community should be punished with expulsion – a sentence worse than death in the Talmudic period. (Avot v11) It was a ruling that came both from self preservation – the fear of reprisals on all of us for the actions of a few of us and out of profound collective shame – an acknowledgement that as God's Chosen People we are supposed to be better than that.

We can argue over the meaning of "chosenness" but we can agree that we were not chosen to steal money from holocaust survivors, retirement funds and charitable organizations! We were not chosen to deal in organ trafficking as the 17 Orthodox Rabbis from New York and New Jersey are accused of doing. We can agree that we were not chosen to create predatory financial instruments and shady investment plans that bring our nation to the brink of an economic depression and put tens of thousands of people out of their homes and into bankruptcy. We are commanded to *care* for the widow the orphan and the stranger – not to make more of them. *It is a Shanda!*

This is not an easy sermon to give and I know it is not easy to hear. These were not crimes of passion or anger, they were crimes of money and greed, lending credence to the very worst stereotypes about Jews and money. It's a *shanda l'yehudim* – it is a crimes against the Jews – perpetrated by our fellow Jews.

Bernie Madoff stole money from Eli Weisel of all people. "The man survives Auschwitz, lives to serve as the moral conscience of the world, and then in the twilight of his noble life sees his charitable and personal wealth destroyed by a fellow Jew. No one could plumb the darkness of a soul that could do such a thing"[i].

Aaron Rubashkin single handedly destroyed the town of Postville, Iowa - a town in which many had *never seen a Jew* before he and his large, observant Jewish family arrived. Rubashkin's family took over what was already a profitable meat packing plant and turned it into the largest processor of kosher meats in the world. Postville welcomed him and his business with open arms and banks. Because there were no Jews in Postville before Rubashkin's group moved in, the Rubashkins became representatives for all of us, and our reputation is forever linked to their conduct. What did Rubashkin do in his name which is our name? He fired the local employees of the plant; brought in hundreds of illegal immigrants; paid them slave wages, and forced them to work in a plant that had health and safety violations reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's, "The Jungle".

Those actions are shameful, but what came next was despicable: when authorities threatened to shut him down for his deplorable working conditions, he struck a deal with immigration officials, and had all of his employees arrested and deported *at their own expense*. And when did Rubashkin cut his deal with Immigration? Two weeks after Passover, when he, like most Jews, had been sitting at his seder table telling the story of the cruelty of Pharaoh. *It is a Shanda!*

We are supposed to be better than that – not by birth but by creed. Orthodox Jews in particular are by definition supposed to be the most observant of these teachings amongst us. So when you hear of *Orthodox rabbis being indicted for money laundering and organ trafficking*, you have to ask, how did this happen?! Why did Jews - Orthodox, Reform or otherwise perpetrate such heinous and shameful crimes upon Jew and Gentile alike? There may be many <u>reasons</u> – but there is only one <u>explanation</u> – *al tifrosh mi hatzibor* –Don't separate yourself from the community – the Talmud proclaims. Bernie and the banking boys ignored that commandment – the community and its fortunes were expendable in service to their own greed. The Orthodox Rabbis who flaunt the laws of the state behind self imposed ghetto walls – violate the very Torah they claim to be the only true guardians of. And friends we are no better when we say, "I'm a Reform Jew – therefore Jewish law doesn't apply to me".

Judaism teaches that responsibility is inseparable from freedom. As slaves in Egypt we had no freedom and no responsibilities – we simply did as we were told.

Then in the Sinai desert, before receiving Torah, we had freedom but no responsibility. We were an unruly mob of ex-slaves – and so – unable to govern our own desires we built the golden calf and worshiped a false God of glitter and gold.

All of that changed when Moses brought down the Ten Commandments from Mount Sinai, with Torah came community standards, a way to distinguish right from wrong. Instead of only obeying the orders of Pharoah, or succumbing to our inherent desires as we had up to that moment, we now had to take responsibility for our actions. In a phrase you could say that the Torah is our marriage contract with God, our ketbubbah – binding God and the Jewish people in a sacred relationship that stretches back to Mt Sinai. We are not slaves and we are not wholly free – we are beholden to God. Like partners in marriage we are responsible and accountable to each other. Bernie and the boys divorced themselves from God and Judaism – they broke their marriage vows - worse still by trading on their Jewish identity to gain trust and favor they prostituted Judaism. And like the family in a damaged marriage, we will all suffer for their misdeeds.

Two thousand years ago – a non-Jew went to the great sage Rabbi Hillel and said, teach me the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel with abundant patience and insight – said to the man – "do not do to your neighbor, that which you <u>would not</u> have done to yourself. That is the whole Torah, everything else is commentary, go and study it!" Whether one believes that God created the Torah or that we

created God to add force to our ethical teaching, right and wrong in Judaism is rooted in the way we treat other people. Do not do to your neighbor, that which you would not have done to yourself. That is the whole Torah – all the rest is commentary on that fundamental truth.[ii]

When I ask our Bar Mitzvah kids what it means to be a Jew, they tell me with pride to give *tzedakkah* and do *tikkun olam*. They are only half right – being a good Jew is also about the things that we don't do. Not only the "thou shalt" commandments, but also the "thou shalt nots" – and friends, there are more "thou shalt nots." It is easy to say yes – a slave has no choice and an ego-centrist has no compunction. But being a Jew means that sometimes our responsibility to each other commands us to say "No" – even when we think we could get away with saying "Yes."

In the old movie, "The Ten Commandments" with Charlton Heston, Moses descends Mount Sinai and sees the golden calf. He holds the two tablets above his head and shouts to the Israelites, "There is no freedom outside the Law!"

The actions of our fellow Jews have highlighted one of the truly unfortunate situations in our society today, many people believe that autonomy and freedom in their life means freedom from the Law, freedom to do whatever they want as long as they don't get caught. Lynn Harold Hough wrote, "The escape from the Ten Commandments through violating them has never kept its promise of giving a new freedom. The experience is like the attempt to escape from the law of gravity by defying it. The result is likely to be at least a bad fall… You cannot become free physically by defying the laws of nature. And you cannot become free morally by defying the laws of ethics."

Bernie, Maurice, Dick, Jack and Aaron ignored that eternal truth – they thought that money and power meant that the rules of right and wrong that apply to the rest of us did not apply to them. That money and power somehow made them exempt from the moral obligations of being a Jew. They were wrong, and so are we when we say, "I'm a Jew but can do whatever I want." *It's a Shanda!* when we do to others the very thing that we so despise when it is done us. *It's a Shanda!* when we take advantage of the kindness and trust of others; benefiting from acts of Tzedakkah but seldom doing them. *It's a Shanda!* when see our neighbors and community as resources to be exploited but not supported. *It's a Shanda!* when we game the system – following the letter of the law but ignoring its intent. And yes, *It's a Shanda!* to hold extravagant B'nai Mitzvah receptions but pay less than minimum dues to our synagogue. These actions too are a *Shanda l'yehudim* – an embarrassment to our people and its higher calling.

People ask me all the time if Judaism believes in an afterlife – the answer is yes and I explain that when a person dies it is Jewish custom to say of the deceased "may their memory be a blessing". That is the afterlife in Judaism – we live on forever – for good or for ill - in the memory of those that came in contact with us while we were in this world. Our reputations are the only thing that truly outlives us.

"May their memory be a blessing" is as much a question as it is a statement. "Will people speak favorably about us after we are gone?" is not only a question for after we leave this world, but a question for after we leave this room.

A *Midrash* teaches that a man is given three names – one that his father and his mother call him, one that his fellow man calls him, and one that he acquires for himself. (Tanhuma, Va-yak'hel). Bernie, Maurice, Dick, Jack and Aaron have been called many names over this past year – but the name they have acquired for themselves by their shameful actions will follow them the rest of their lives and beyond. What will be your name in the coming year? What will people say about you after you are gone? Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are a time to reflect and examine our soul – we should do that – reflect on our soul, the soul of the Jewish community and the name we are acquiring for ourselves. The good we do, the awards and accolades our community receives may indeed outweigh the bad – but that does not excuse the bad – it only makes it more shameful and hypocritical.

Friends if you remember nothing else from this sermon please remember and take to heart that being Jewish is about living an ethical life. Its about how you treat others, the respect you show yourself, it is about integrity and honoring our sacred relationship with the God and each other - that **is** the whole Torah all the rest is commentary in support of that fundamental teaching. Your reputation and that of the whole Jewish people depends on living that teaching. We've had enough shame – go out from here and be a blessing – for your sake and for all of us.

[i] Rob Eshman, "Madoff" The Los Angeles Jewish Journal 12/17/2008
[ii] Hope Not Fear, by Edgar Bronfman p. 195