

# **Joseph, Madoff, Gaza and Beyond** **Who is Watching; Who Cares?**

Parshat Vayigash 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

There's a story in the Talmud about a certain rabbi who called his sons to his bedside as he lay dying. "Boys," he said, "I want to give you a blessing before I die. May your fear of God be greater than your fear of your fellowman!" "Is that all you expect of us," his sons asked. "Yes," said their father, "When a person sins, the first thing he asks is, 'did anyone see me, was anyone watching,' not, 'did God see me, was God watching?' My hope is that you will always remember that what matters is not whose watching but whether you believe that God is watching you."

I think that Jews, more than any group, are overly sensitive about their public image. We're constantly worrying about how others see us, and whether our individual actions affect how our entire community is judged by the outside world. When we open the newspaper each morning, we unconsciously look at the names on the front page. Do they sound Jewish? We feel a personal stake in the actions of others, even when we don't know them. We beam with pride when a Jew receives the Nobel Prize, as if we all had something to do with it, and we cringe when a Jew is arrested for some shameful act. Everything is personal. The actions of the one become an indictment of us all.

Some of us probably grew up with this over sensitivity to public opinion. When our mother said, 'Es pas nit' we knew exactly what she meant. We should be ashamed of ourselves! A Jew doesn't act that way. Our actions are an embarrassment to the entire Jewish people!

The truth is the world treats us that way as well. So maybe our extreme sensitivity to public perception is not so strange; it's a result of three thousand years of social conditioning. Israel is identified as a Jewish state, not just another country, and the Jewish identity of Bernie Madoff has figured prominently in much of the conversations and reporting that have appeared in the press and on line in recent weeks. If you don't believe me just try googling Madoff and Jewish and see what comes up!

I don't think this is as true for other groups as it is for us. When was the last time you saw a thief identified in the newspaper by his religious identity? To an extent, Arabs are identified by their religion today, but I don't know that they take the actions of the individual as personally as we Jews take the actions of coreligionists. Usually that only happens when Moslems are apprehended in the context of actions that are politically motivated or are somehow connected to religion. And certainly it became truer after 9/11 than it was before.

But consider the irony of what has been going on today: Bernie Madoff commits acts of fraud. Primarily other Jews and Jewish organizations are affected by his actions. And then he is identified as a Jew, as if his Jewishness was somehow responsible for his bad behavior.

Worst of all, rabbis have been falling over themselves in the last two weeks not just to condemn Madoff but to distance the Jewish community from his actions. Somehow we feel that we need to go on record as condemning this man as if his actions are a reflection on all of us. One of my colleagues even wrote a letter to the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations asking them to

revive the age old practice of excommunication. This rabbi wanted the Jewish community as a whole to excommunicate Madoff in order to show the world how horrified we are by his behavior. I wonder how much such a suggestion is motivated by super sensitivity to public opinion rather than a real sense of outrage over his immoral and illegal behavior.

This extreme sensitivity to public opinion is not new. It goes back to the time of Joseph. When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, the Torah tells us that he cleared the room of Egyptians before saying, "I am your brother Joseph." Joseph did not want to publicly embarrass his brothers in the presence of strangers. Ironically, his actions did not help. The Torah goes on to say, "His sobs were so loud, that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh's palace." Joseph, the first Diaspora Jew, was sensitive about how others would see him but he also could not hide his dirty laundry or his public image from society. Even in a closed room, even in private, his actions were known to others and they reflected on who he was and how others saw not only him but his family. Ever since the time of Joseph, Jews have been worrying, "what will our neighbors say?"

I've been thinking a lot about this problem in recent weeks. Are we Jews more worried about how others will see us than how we will appear in the eyes of God? Why is it that scandals such as the Madoff ponzi scheme or Agriprocessors only become major issues in the Jewish world when they appear on the front page of the New York Times? Why aren't we governing ourselves? To whom must we answer? And who's watching us?

Of course, I realize that it's natural to be concerned about the attitudes of others. In Judaism we call this *Kiddush Hashem*, public sanctification of God. *Kiddush Hashem* is the premise that our actions reflect positively or negatively on how others will come to see God.

When the Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetah, chose to return a precious stone that he found hidden in a pouch tied around the neck of a camel he had just bought from a non-Jewish vender, the non-Jew not only thanked him but said, "Blessed is Shimon ben Shetah and blessed is the God of Shimon ben Shetah!" But the concern here is not with, "How will other people see us? But how will people judge our God and our faith because of our actions?" The concern here is not one of social standing but theological responsibility. We are God's public face. People will decide whether Judaism is an authentic religion by what we do and how we act.

This is a major issue when it comes to the State of Israel. Israel was founded so that the Jewish people could be *K'chol Hagoyim*, a nation like all nations. But there is nothing that's normal or typical about Israel today. Israel appears on the front page of the newspaper more often than any other nation in the world with the possible exception of America, and when Israel defends itself and acts in its own national interests, the world wrings its collective hands and condemns Israel for doing what any other nation would do. Over the last five years over six thousand rockets have been fired into the Southern regions of Israel and Israel has shown amazing restraint. Can you imagine America doing that? Can you imagine any other nation in the world not reacting to such acts of aggression? And yet suddenly when Israel takes action we hear a lively debate about deterrence and restraint. And we Jews suddenly find ourselves uncomfortable with Israel being in the public eye.

There's no question: civilians are suffering and dying in Gaza right now. That is a terrible tragedy. But the guilt lies not with Israel but with leaders of Hamas and the silence of the world for the last several years. We don't need to apologize for Israel today. But I would hope that Israel would ask not, "What does the world think," but rather, "what is the Jewish thing to do – what do our values and ideals teach

us in dealing with hostile neighbors.” That is the more important question for us to be asking ourselves right now!

There was a picture in the paper the other day that said it all. It was a photograph of an Israeli school on which a bomb had fallen. The photographer snapped a picture of a class room in Beersheba with a gaping hole in the ceiling where the bomb struck. But what the photographer failed to notice or what the newspaper did not know is what was written on the black board of that class room. You can see it clearly in the photograph in *Newsday: Ezeh 'hu mikubad – hamichabed et haberiyot*. “Who is honored? One who honors all human beings.”

What an extraordinary picture this was. In the face of war, in the face of falling rockets, in the face of hatred, Israelis were still teaching their children to show honor to all human beings. I defy you to find something similar in a classroom in Gaza. When I looked at this picture I felt proud, not because of what others might think or how we might appear to the world, but because we have remained faithful to ourselves despite everything that is happening in the Middle East today. Of course Israel makes mistakes and sometimes I question its judgments – but the question is not what others think but what do we think as a people of the covenant, as a people of God.

We need to stop worrying about public opinion and ask ourselves – is God still proud of us? Have we remained faithful to ourselves? And are we taking care of our own self interests. Are we doing what is right and what is righteous? We Jews need to stop looking over our shoulders and we need to look into our hearts – because in the end that’s what really counts. Not, ‘what will the goyim say,’ but ‘what will God say?’

Throughout his life this was the standard that allowed Joseph to find his anchor and focus. When he faced temptation he asked himself how he could betray his God. And when he stood in the presence of Pharaoh he made it clear that it was not his own accomplishments but God’s strength that gave him the ability to interpret dreams. We should be no different. What is right and true transcends public opinion and perception – and it is the only value we should be worrying about.

Bernie Madoff should be condemned in the strongest of terms, not because he is Jewish but because he is a wicked, dishonest man. And Israel should make its judgments about its future not based on what the world thinks but what is the right course in the face of both security concerns and humanitarian interests – because in the end no one will take care of Israel but Israel!

Hopefully we will learn that our fear of God should be greater than our concern for what our neighbors think. That is the only standard by which we must learn to live.

Shabbat Shalom