

Paying to Play in the Jewish Community

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֶחָיו הַיּוֹשֵׁב בְּסֻפֵי וְגַם הֵנָּה בְּאִמְתַּחַתִּי וַיֵּצֵא לָבָם וַיַּחֲרִדּוּ אִישׁ אֶל־אֶחָיו לֵאמֹר מִהֲזֹאת עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לָנוּ:

רבותי, when we want to shake us from our smug self-satisfaction, they remind us that we have much to learn from our juniors. In the Gemara, the sage cites a series of exchanges between ר' יוחנן and his nephew, the son of the late ר' לקיש, in which the younger generation bests the older. On one occasion, the boy is in the midst of studying a פסוק from משלי:

אֲוֹלַת אָדָם תִּסְלַף דַּרְכּוֹ וְעַל־יְהוָה יִזְעַף לִבּוֹ:

It is a man's foolishness that twists his path, but his heart is angry with the Lord.

Hearing the familiar words in his nephew's young voice, ר' יוחנן hears them as if for the first time and ponders them anew. There is no idea in the Hagiographa that does not have at least a רמז in the Torah. Where, he wonders aloud, is this idea foreshadowed?

ר' יוחנן does not have long to await an answer. His nephew responds with a פסוק from this week's פרשה. When ר' יוחנן opens his sack of grain and finds his money has been returned, the news dismays his brothers, filling them with fear. "What has the Lord done to us?" they cry out.

ר' יוסף's brothers, our ancestors, have learned nothing from the elaborate fulfillment of the dream whose authenticity they had so bitterly denied. Their own foolishness set these events in motion and yet their first impulse is to blame a power outside their control, the will of God.

One cannot pass by a newsstand in New York these days without seeing the name Madoff. This is understandable in a city whose economy is so dependent on the financial markets. The scandal is a fitting cap to an absolutely horrific year on Wall Street. As the markets began to stabilize at sharply lower levels, the search for a credible villain was inevitable. How relieved Alan Greenspan and Robert Rubin must be that their support for self-regulation by the financial sector has at least temporarily been forgotten while Bernard Madoff has his fifteen minutes of infamy.

Friends and relatives around the country, though, tell me that the fall of Bernard Madoff and his investors has a strange fascination far away from the Upper East Side and Worth Avenue. In the Jewish community, there are at least three reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that Mr. Madoff is himself Jewish. We remain מעטים בידי רבים and our first reaction to a Jewish miscreant in the news remains מה יאמרו הגוים. The second reason is that the Jewish community including important institutions of learning and philanthropy are among the financial losers in l'affaire Madoff. The third reason is that there is a disquieting sense that there is something systemic in the Jewish community that might need redressing, a problem so fundamental to the way that we do things that we are afraid to verbalize it.

Jewish organizations, from schools to shuls to charitable foundations, bestow upon wealthy donors all manner of awards and honors. In and of itself, there is nothing untoward about this. The רמ"א in סי' ס"ג in רמ"א cites a תשובה of the רשב"א that it is not only permissible to attach one's name to a public gift but it is fitting (ראוי) to do so. The רמ"א notes that this is only if the intention of the donor is not to gain glory. Public gifts may encourage others to donate as well.

Conferring seats on the shul board, trusteeships in the local yeshiva, and other positions of leadership in the religious community for no reason other than the appointee's ability to pay is morally bankrupt. Inheriting money or even earning it on one's own does not qualify one for religious leadership. Rather it engenders the kind of cronyism among members of a particular social set that allows a wink and a nod to replace strict controls and separation of powers. Some of the most well-heeled icons of Jewish philanthropy have turned out to have feet of clay.

This is nothing other than a variant of the pay-to-play politics that has infected the public sector. When the nominating committee for a day school asks how much a candidate for the board would be prepared to donate in order to secure nomination, are we not dangerously close to the kind of politics of which a midwestern governor has been accused? Of course, it is not for personal enrichment that the Jewish community kowtows to wealth. Nevertheless, pay-to-play in the Jewish community created the backroom cronyism that cost yeshivot millions of dollars when Madoff's self-described Ponzi scheme collapsed.

Furthermore, what does it say about the Jewish community's commitment to charitable giving? Is an honor that is purchased worth the plaque upon which it is engraved? What has happened to our noble tradition of מתן בסתר?

Although only Mr. Madoff can know what he was thinking in the decades that he defrauded investors, it seems clear that past a certain point the accumulation of wealth is about more than acquisitions and financial security. To achieve prominence in our contemporary Jewish community, one must be able to give large amounts of money. What a perverse lesson this is to young people. When one of my children heard that a father of a classmate had been named to the board of his yeshiva high school, he commented as if it were the most natural thing in the world: "I didn't know my friend is rich." Is that all Jewish leadership means today?

So what's an institution to do? Which shul or school will be the first to break ranks with the legions of worthy causes that have been forced to celebrate wealth over commitment, inheritance over character, and street smarts over wisdom merely in order to survive? How can an institution compete for the tzedakah dollar when everyone else accepts the culture of pay to play in the Jewish community?

The Jewish community requires voices of moral authority. Sadly, those whom we would have once perceived as the most obvious candidates, our rabbis, are themselves coopted into the same process. How can a rabbi deliver a tough message to his community when he is dependent upon the process for his own livelihood?

Speaking up is never without risk. I am mindful of the continuation of the גמרא in תענית, the aftermath of the exchange between רבי יוחנן and his precocious nephew:

דל עיניה וחזא ביה. אתיא אימיה אפיקתיה. אמרה ליה תא מקמיה דלא ליעבד לך כדעבד לאבון.
ר' יוחנן raised an eye and stared. The boy's mother rushed over to lead him safely away.

She said to her son: Come away from יוהנן ר' lest he do to you as he did to your father.

The widow of ריש לקיש fears the intense look that her brother gives her son. She remembers the look he gave her husband on another occasion which appeared to cause ריש לקיש to be stricken by the illness that eventually killed him.

No one likes to hear uncomfortable messages, even when they are sincere and heartfelt. It hurts to remind the Jewish community, and especially our Orthodox wing, that we have a long history of ignoring the still small voice that tells us that something in our community is horribly wrong or that certain money may be tainted.

רבותי, we must prize truth over accomodation. This is our religious and moral responsibility as teachers of the Book that prizes truth over all else.

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