

[Dishonest Orthodox Jews? Is That Possible? Blog by Rabbi Marc D. Angel](#)

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Not long ago, the New York Times ran an extensive article that began: “Four high-ranking veterans of the New York Police Department were re-assigned to desk jobs on Thursday in what is likely to be a first wave of discipline stemming from a wide-ranging federal corruption investigation....” The article went on to report that the two businessmen at the center of the investigation are from Boro Park, both with distinctively Jewish names, and both presumably Orthodox. Neither had been charged with a crime. The allegations were that these businessmen provided financial favors to people in power in order to advance their own business dealings.

I do not know if these businessmen are guilty of crimes. But I do know that when I read the article, I didn't feel surprised to learn that Orthodox Jews might be engaged in shady dealings. Indeed, it seems that Orthodox Jews—at least as much as other groups—get involved in financially dubious or outrightly criminal behavior. Recent news stories have reported on investigations of yeshivot that have manipulated millions of dollars of grants to teach general studies—but then do not teach these subjects as required. Other stories have surfaced of financial mismanagement by rabbis who have used their discretionary funds in improper or illegal ways. Yet other stories have reported on Orthodox Jews accused of bribery or bilking investors of their money. A current scandal involves Orthodox businessmen who "paid for access" to the Mayor of New York City.

A while ago, Rabbi Shaul Robinson of the Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan, delivered a sermon in which he discussed business ethics. At one point in the sermon he asked: wouldn't it be wonderful if people could say that a business venture was absolutely proper because Orthodox Jews are running it? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the surest way to attest to the trustworthiness of a business was to say that it was operated by Orthodox Jews? When Rabbi Robinson asked these rhetorical questions, the large congregation spontaneously broke out into laughter!

Yet, weren't Rabbi Robinson's questions pointing to a serious issue confronting our community? Why should people laugh when the suggestion is made that the most trustworthy and honest people are Orthodox Jews? Why shouldn't this be true? After all, Orthodox Jews claim to follow the Torah, claim to live their lives in consonance with the will of God, and believe that they will be answerable to the Almighty in the world-to-come. How could they be anything but scrupulously honest and trustworthy?

It is said that the secretary of the Kotzker Rebbe told him that some of the Rebbe's silverware had been stolen. The Kotzker Rebbe replied: “But how is that possible? Doesn't the Torah forbid stealing?” The Rebbe thought (or hoped!) that the word of the Torah should be sufficient to prevent any thievery. Who would dare to violate God's word? And yet, the Rebbe's silverware had indeed been stolen.

I do not believe that Orthodox Jews are more dishonest than other people, and I like to think that Orthodox Jews are more honest. But why are we not surprised when we read or hear about Orthodox Jews accused of cheating

or bribing? Why do we laugh at the assumption that Orthodox Jewish sponsorship guarantees the trustworthiness and honesty of a business venture?

Many have tried to explain why Orthodox Jews can be scrupulous in their observance of Shabbat and Kashruth, and yet fall short in their observance of mitzvot relating to truthfulness, honesty, and interpersonal relations. The Orthodox world seems to put more of a premium on ritual observances than on ethical behavior. (For example, the popular denotation of an observant Jew is “shomer Shabbat” or “shomer Shabbos,” as though Sabbath observance is the defining quality of a religiously observant Jew.) Some have faulted the Orthodox educational system for over-stressing rituals and under-stressing ethical behavior. Others have faulted parents who set bad examples for their children. Yet others blame “society” for fostering an overly-competitive environment that encourages trying to get ahead financially, even when this entails unseemly or illegal practices. There is truth in all these theories.

Even if the Torah, Talmud, parents, and teachers all insist on ethical behavior, some people are obviously not absorbing the message. We still have our share of dishonest Orthodox Jews getting involved in unsavory business dealings. We still find ourselves unsurprised when we learn of Orthodox Jews engaged in shady or illegal transactions.

Perhaps we need to examine the problem not only from the perspective of what Orthodoxy overtly teaches, but from the perspective of messages that are conveyed almost subconsciously. Perhaps there is a spiritual “infection” within our community that makes people think it is alright to cheat...at least under certain circumstances.

Let me approach this topic from the vantage point of an anti-Semite, a person who hates Jews even though he/she may not even know any Jews. He/she has disdain for an entire community of people and is willing to cause them harm. Imre Kertesz, a Hungarian Jewish writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2002, describes an incident in his childhood before he was deported to a Nazi concentration camp. In his book, “Fatelessness,” he relates how he went to a store to buy some bread. The baker was a notorious Jew-hater and cheated the boy by short-changing him by a half pound of bread. The boy wondered why the baker hated Jews and why he would cheat them out of the bread for which they paid. “I suddenly understood why his train of thought would make it impossible to abide Jews, for otherwise he might have had the unpleasant feeling that he was cheating them. As it was, he was acting in accordance with his conviction, his actions guided by the justice of an ideal....” (p. 12).

Kertesz offers a poignant psychological insight. The baker and other anti-Semites need to view their behavior in a positive light. They do not want to think of themselves as thieves, even though they are plainly stealing from Jews. How do they justify their theft? They claim that it is the Jews’ fault! The haters allow their anti-Semitism to serve as a cover for their crimes. They convince themselves that they steal from Jews because Jews are hateful; that it is virtuous to cheat and hurt Jews; that Jews don’t deserve any better. By placing Jews in a hateful category, they maintain a clear conscience when they commit crimes against Jews. Anti-Semitism serves as a psychological device protecting the haters from feelings of guilt or moral turpitude.

This insight can be extrapolated to many (all?) examples of racial, religious, ethnic, national hatred. The haters turn their victims into despicable stereotypes, not as equal fellow human beings. When the haters perpetrate violence or thievery against their victims, the haters actually see themselves in a virtuous light. They have so fully dehumanized their victims, that it is no worse hurting them than it would be to kill vermin or mosquitoes. The greater the level of dehumanizing the victim, the greater the level of harm one can do to the victim without feeling guilt or moral qualms.

There are gradations of dehumanizing “the other.” At the extreme, dehumanization led to the Holocaust; it led to enslavement of “inferior” groups; it led--and leads--to terrorism and vicious forms of discrimination. But even at more “moderate” levels, it results in treating “the other” as having less value and less rights. If the victim is cheated or hurt, the dehumanizer does not feel moral qualms because, after all, the victim is on a lower human

level anyway.

I think it is fair to state that the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Jews do not hold extreme dehumanizing views against any other group. But I also think it is fair to state that “moderate” levels of dehumanization exist within the Orthodox community. This spiritual infection enables a shomer Shabbat to engage in criminal activity against “the other,” on the assumption that “the other” does not deserve better.

Who are “the others?” They might be non-observant or less-observant Jews. They might be Jews whose families came from backgrounds others than ours. They might be “the government” or another impersonal corporation. Most of all, they might be non-Jews or particular groups within non-Jewish society. Does the Orthodox community, consciously or subconsciously, convey to its constituents that “the others” are on a lesser level than we are.

Professor Menachem Kellner, who taught Jewish philosophy at Haifa University for many years and who now teaches at Shalem College in Jerusalem, has recently published a book (in Hebrew, Bar Ilan University Press), *Gam Hem Keruyim Adam: haNokhri beEinei haRambam* (They too are called human: Maimonides’ views on non-Jews). He makes it amply clear that Maimonides rejected the notion that Jews are ontologically different from and superior to non-Jews. The Rambam maintains the classic Jewish teachings that stress the common humanity of all people.

Dr. Kellner’s book is a fine and important academic study. But it is also an alarming wake up call to contemporary Orthodox Jews. It points out how deeply the Jewish supremacist views have taken hold among many otherwise pious Jews. It underscores the critical need to reclaim Rambam’s insights not only because they are true to our Torah tradition, but because they can purge contemporary Torah Judaism from highly negative and dangerous attitudes.

Dr. Kellner begins his discussion by citing examples of rabbinic teachers who have articulated supremacist views. Most egregiously, a book was published several years ago entitled *Torat haMelekh*. Authored by Orthodox rabbis and published by an Orthodox yeshiva, it asserts that non-Jews are not quite human in the same sense that Jews are human. Non-Jews, therefore, are not entitled to the same rights as Jews. This attitude provides justification for discriminatory policies against non-Jews, not excluding acts of violence.

Dr. Kellner cites the more “moderate” position of a well-known and highly popular religious Zionist rabbi. This rabbi has written: “We are a chosen people not because we have received the Torah; but we received the Torah because we are a chosen people. The Torah is so very appropriate to our inner nature. Our nation has a distinctive nature, character, communal psychology, a unique Godly character...” According to this view, the Jewish people has a unique spiritual nature, superior to that of other nations. We received the Torah because of our innate spiritual receptivity. Non-Jewish souls are different—and less holy—than Jewish souls.

Dr. Kellner refers to a leading Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshiva University who admits that all humans are created in the image of God, but that Jews are more in the image of God than non-Jews. Although this statement is not at all identical with the views of *Torat haMelekh*, it shares the underlying notion of Jewish supremacy. Stated simply, Jews are intrinsically holier and closer to God than non-Jews.

If rabbis and teachers are conveying a religious worldview that posits the innate superiority of Jewish souls—and the innate superiority of religiously observant souls—then it is not a long step to feeling disdain for “the other.” And it is not a long step to coming to justify oneself for improper dealings with “the other.” It would seem that the supremacist views are quite common within the Orthodox world, perhaps even more than the classic and universalist view propounded by Rambam.

Aside from the supremacist views, I have heard other “justifications” from Orthodox Jews: the Holocaust proves that non-Jews hate us, so we don’t have to be nice or fair in dealings with non-Jews; stealing from non-Jews or non-Orthodox Jews puts more money in the hands of good (i.e. Orthodox) Jews, and less money in the hands of

people who are not Torah-true; cheating the government for the sake of strengthening yeshivot or other Orthodox institutions serves to advance Torah, and advancing Torah is the ideal goal for us.

These “justifications” are, of course, clear violations of the Torah that teaches: do not steal; do what is good and right in the eyes of God; maintain honest weights and balances in your businesses; keep far from falsehood. Crimes against “the other” sooner or later become public knowledge leading to shameful desecration of God’s name and the degradation of Torah.

It should naturally be expected that Orthodox Jews are scrupulously honest in all their dealings with all fellow human beings. If this is not the case, then we have to wonder why it isn’t so. We can attribute blame to parents, rabbis, teachers, schools, environment etc. But we also need to evaluate communal attitudes that are conveyed consciously or subconsciously. Do these attitudes tend to diminish the humanity of “the other?” Do they tend to foster a self-image that makes Orthodox Jews feel spiritually superior to others, and therefore less concerned for the well-being of others? Do they serve to justify unseemly and illegal behavior, while blanketing this behavior in a cloak of self-righteousness?

If an Orthodox Jew is asked if the Torah forbids theft and dishonesty, he/she will certainly answer that theft and dishonesty are forbidden by Torah. How then can an Orthodox Jew nevertheless engage in bribery, corruption, theft, and deception...and do so without a guilty conscience? The answer, at least in part, must be that the person has somehow justified to him/herself that this particular act of dishonesty is morally justified. By diminishing the humanity of “the other,” it is possible to act unjustly and still feel just, even virtuous.

To increase sensitivity among Orthodox Jews to the ethical interpersonal commandments, our community needs to go beyond providing sermons and classes on business ethics and moral standards. These things, though important, are counterbalanced by the often unspoken attitudes of spiritual superiority of Jews (especially Orthodox Jews) and the dehumanization of “the other.” We need to honestly diagnose the spiritual infection within our community and to go to its source. The source is not in this teaching or that teaching: it is in a pervasive set of attitudes that foster self-righteousness toward ourselves, and some degree of dehumanization toward “the other.”

The day will hopefully arrive when the reputation of Orthodox Jewry will be so spectacularly honest, that everyone will point to Orthodox Jews as the best models of business ethics, trustworthiness and dignified behavior. But that day will not be arriving soon unless we all do some serious soul-searching about our attitudes toward ourselves and toward others. Until we feel God’s presence in every one of our business dealings—whether with Jews or non-Jews—we will not have achieved the lofty ideals that God set before us when giving us the Torah.

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