Sounds of Silence

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1.

Hello darkness, my old friend
I've come to talk with you again

"Can you point me to rabbis or other leadership figures in the Orthodox Jewish community who have spoken or written about the moral aspects of the financial crash and the economic crisis – and about a specifically Jewish ethical and moral view of what happened, relating also to the prominent role of Jews, including and perhaps especially observant Jews?"

"Do you know of anyone who, in the period of the stock market and property manias in the nineties and the decade just ended, talked or wrote about the trends underway in the financial sector in the US and elsewhere, and/ or in the housing market, as moral and ethical issues that should concern us deeply -- and that Orthodox / observant/ Torah True Jews should have something to say about?

These are the kind of questions I have been posing to (an admittedly unscientific sample of) rabbinic teachers, colleagues and friends in recent months. The responses can be categorized as follows:

a. "No, but why don't you ask so-and-so, he's 'into' that kind of thing."
b. "Yes, you should see/ look up / speak to so-and-so or this-and-that." However, these references led to material that was either overtly halakhic and very narrowly focused, or that indulged in very general ethical reflections (such as that the crash and crisis highlight the role of Divine providence at the global and individual levels, or the need to adopt and maintain a modest lifestyle).
c. "Yes", followed by a referral to articles or speeches by relevant Jewish personalities – but addressed to non-Jewish audiences.

Taken together, these responses are profoundly discouraging. The answers translate as follows:

a. Even people who have a definite interest in this topic haven't seen or heard of relevant material. They, like me, want to believe that said material exists, but have no hard evidence thereof. They – we – are deliberately indulging in wishful thinking, because the alternative is too awful for us to contemplate.
b. Many people, including – or perhaps especially -- rabbis and educators actually have no clear idea what ethical and moral issues are. More precisely, they have great difficulty distinguishing between legal/ halakhic and moral/ethical treatments of issues, preferring to subsume the latter in theological, or even mystical, conceptual frameworks
c. Those who have addressed the topic from a moral perspective have preferred to direct their remarks to non-Jews. This is much the most depressing response of all.

None of this is meant to suggest that what I am looking for does not exist. Both I and most of my interlocutors continue to assume that such material does exist, that various people at various times did address various aspects of these complex and multi-faceted issues. I would therefore hope that one of the results of this article will be that kind readers will point me to 'relevant material', thereby substantiating our naïve faith.

But finding a few righteous men in Sodom will not change the basic premise of this article, which is that Orthodox Judaism, as currently conceived and practiced, is morally challenged. The ongoing financial and economic crisis is arguably not even the most severe moral challenge facing it and us. Rather, the crisis has exposed the moral bankruptcy of much of Orthodoxy – of all streams, in both the Israel and the Diaspora -- so sharply that henceforth this sorry state of affairs will be difficult, if not impossible, to continue to ignore.

To apply Warren Buffett's famous aphorism, 'you only find out who's been swimming naked, when the tide goes out' – and for the Orthodox, the tide has gone out. In the same way that the crash is already seen as marking the end of an era -- that stretched from the end of the Second World War until 2007 -- in everything from economic theory to household financial behavior; so, I believe, it marks the end of an era in Jewish history – the era of recovery from the Holocaust, which featured demographic and cultural reconstruction which came to be led by the Orthodox, but also a restructuring of Jewish values. In the latter process, some old values were downgraded, marginalized or even dropped, while others – perhaps no less ancient – were upgraded and moved to center stage.

The crisis has exposed the existence of a widespread moral darkness within, indeed at the heart of, Orthodox Judaism. This black hole expresses itself the way all such negative moral phenomena do – via silence.

2.

In restless dreams I walked alone

Let's cut to the quick. What I am looking for is moral leadership, which I define as people with the courage to tell at least the members of their flock, if not the world at large, what is wrong with what

they are doing and how they can and should do better. In the best case, this leadership should be demonstrated in real time – i.e. with regard to what is currently happening or likely to happen, but if it appears ex post, that is considerably better than nothing.

I expect this leadership to relate to the moral and ethical aspects of that broad swathe of human existence that is currently pigeonholed by the think-only-by, about and inside-the-box society that we live in, as 'macro-economics', 'finance' and 'labour'. My reading of Torah, Nakh, Talmud and Midrash suggests that this whole aspect of human activity is central to the theory and practice of Judaism. If, therefore, it is now enveloped in crisis, it is impossible that Judaism has nothing to say about it, beyond theological platitudes and/or legal formulations. It should, therefore, be impossible for the recognized leadership of Orthodox Judaism, which constantly stresses its credentials as THE ONLY authentic Judaism, to be silent.

What do I expect it to say? What, in other words, am I talking about others talking about? The simplest and best way of illustrating this is to give a concrete example of moral leadership, as defined above. The following is an extract from a speech given to a group of Canadian bankers and other financial sector types, in February 2009 at the very height of the crisis. The speaker is Paul Volcker, the octogenarian former Chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank who, when appointed by President Carter in 1979 with a mandate to end the inflation that had been eating away at the American economy and society for 15 years, proceeded to raise interest rates to 20% per annum and push the economy into not one, but two, recessions, in order to get the job done. Clearly, he is not someone afraid of a challenge or of making sacrifices to achieve essential goals. We 'join' the audience in the midst of Volcker's description of what went wrong and how:

You might ask how [the housing/ mortage boom] went on as long as it did. The grading agencies didn't do their job and the banks didn't do their job and the accountants went haywire. I have my own take on this. There were two things that were particularly contributory and very simple. Compensation practices had gotten totally out of hand and spurred financial people to aim for a lot of short-term money without worrying about the eventual consequences. And then there was this obscure financial engineering that none of them understood, but all their mathematical experts were telling them to trust. These two things carried us over the brink.

One of the saddest days of my life was when my grandson – and he's a particularly brilliant grandson – went to college. He was good at mathematics. And after he had been at college for a year or two I asked him what he wanted to do when he grew up. He said, "I want to be a financial engineer." My heart sank. Why was he going to waste his life on this profession?

A year or so ago, my daughter had seen something in the paper, some disparaging remarks I had made about financial engineering. She sent it to my grandson, who normally didn't communicate with me very much. He sent me an email, "Grandpa, don't blame it on us! We were just following the orders we were getting from our bosses." The only thing I could do was send him back an email, "I will not accept the Nuremberg excuse."

Bear with me as I analyse these three paragraphs. This is the former Fed chairman talking to bankers. Does he use jargon – let alone numbers, formulae or Greek symbols? No. In one paragraph, seven sentences, 108 words, he says everything any semi-intelligent Martian would need to know to understand the sources and development of the crisis, through to its denouement.

But these are bankers he is talking to. They already 'know' all this. Precisely for that reason, Volcker lays it out for them in simple words, and then lays it in to them with a series of powerful, accurate blows: Incompetents – BIFF! Liars – POW! Greedy and irresponsible – WHAM! And the coup de grace, conceited fools – CRACK!!

Then the switch from his audience's generalized stupidity to his own intense personal pain: his grandson decides to squander his promise and potential on the alchemy of financial engineering. Volcker is well aware that his smart grandson can and probably will (in the pre-crash world) earn millions in his chosen career, but that does not prevent him from defining this decision – entirely correctly from a moral and a *religious* perspective – as 'wasting his life'.

Most of us, even if we felt that way, would not allow it to come between us and our beloved grandchild. Volcker did – and does not shrink from telling his (now-adult) grandson that his moral compass is on a par with that of a Nazi war criminal.

That kind of thinking is what I call moral clarity and that kind of talk, in public, is what I call moral leadership. So when I ask readers to point me to written or spoken words from Orthodox Jewish leaders relating to the entire gamut of moral issues thrown up by the boom, mania, crash and bust – from systemic risk to one young man's dilemmas in life – that's the kind of thing I'm looking for.

Do you know a rabbi, of any stripe, from any stream, who stood up before, during or at least after the crash and told his congregation of real-estate/ stock-market speculators that they were scoundrels and probably criminals to boot? Do you know of a rosh yeshiva who told a talmid looking to leave the yeshiva and get a job, not to 'waste his life' in a highly-regarded and very high-paying profession? Or an Admor who told a hassid that adopting the business practices of his bosses or colleagues was morally repugnant? If you do, you have the privilege of being exposed to moral leadership. I'm looking for it, so far unsuccessfully -- and if I can’t find it among rabbis, rashei yeshiva and Admorim, I'll take it where it's available.

Yet there is a concept that "by two witnesses' testimony shall the matter be established". Let me therefore quote another prominent figure in the financial sector, this time someone in the very heart of one of its most morally problematic areas, namely mutual fund management.

John Bogle is the founder of Vanguard, a company that pioneered low-cost fund management. This is hardly the place to examine the pros and cons of Bogle's approach, but it's not irrelevant to note that his concept is based on the premise that investors in regular mutual funds are consistently and systematically ripped-off by their fund managers' panoply of fees. Here he is in an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal in April 2009:

I recently received a letter from a Vanguard shareholder who described the global financial crisis as "a crisis of ethic proportions." Substituting "ethic" for "epic" is a fine turn of phrase, and it accurately places a heavy responsibility for the meltdown on a broad deterioration in traditional ethical standards. Commerce, business and finance have hardly been exempt from this trend. Relying on Adam Smith's "invisible hand," through which our self-interest advances the interests of society, we have depended on the marketplace and competition to create prosperity and well-being.

But self-interest got out of hand. It created a bottom-line society in which success is measured in monetary terms. Dollars became the coin of the new realm. Unchecked market forces overwhelmed traditional standards of professional conduct, developed over centuries.

The result is a shift from moral absolutism to moral relativism. We've moved from a society in which "there are some things that one simply does not do" to one in which "if everyone else is doing it, I can too." Business ethics and professional standards were lost in the shuffle.

The driving force of any profession includes not only the special knowledge, skills and standards that it demands, but the duty to serve responsibly, selflessly and wisely, and to establish an inherently ethical relationship between professionals and society. The old notion of trusting and being trusted -- which once was not only the accepted standard of business but the key to success -- came to be seen as a quaint relic of an era long gone.

It's worth citing Bogle just to put that wonderful phrase – alas, of anonymous authorship – 'a crisis of ethic proportions', before a wider audience. But here, too, a few paragraphs suffice for a man with a functioning moral compass to pinpoint the moral rot that led to the systemic disaster that is still unfolding.

3.

And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence

The foregoing examples not only illustrate what moral leadership is, they also provide at least a partial answer as to why it is so rare and why, in particular, virtually no prominent Orthodox leader has given voice to the moral outrage so palpable across America since the crash, and so prevalent within the Jewish community as well – but seething beneath the surface.

Moral leadership demands a larger measure of courage than most people have. This is especially the case when your job is on the line – as it most assuredly would be for most community rabbis, if they dared take a stand that directly challenged the moral mores of their immediate community and the wider stream or branch of Judaism that they and it belonged to. And if losing their livelihood was not enough for most pulpit rabbis, school principals and even rashei yeshiva, there are also the 'knock-on' effects of their audacity on their family, from their wives – who are usually also deeply engaged in community activities, to their children, whose education and, at least in some circles, marriage prospects would be at stake.

In that sense, Paul Volcker was free to speak his mind, because he held no post and his personal and family situation is not at risk. John Bogle, of course, is independently wealthy as a result of Vanguard's success and hence similarly worry-free.

But the 'excuse' of personal/ family vulnerability does not stand up to close examination. What would the average rabbi of an Orthodox community do, if his congregants became regular visitors to gambling joints? Strip clubs? Gay bars? If board members owned such outfits? If the president was a convicted pedophile?

In fact, there is no need to use such lurid examples. Owning shops selling pork, or any business operating on Shabbat, would be quite sufficient. In any of these cases, most rabbis would be forced to take a stand, even if they were weak and sought to avoid confrontations, and whether or not their job was on the line. Nor would most school principals or rashei yeshiva hesitate to act if people engaged in these problematic activities held positions on their boards.

There's the rub. Both public Sabbath transgression and overt trafficking in pork, despite their very different halakhic implications, are clear and obvious casus belli for Orthodox religious functionaries. In such cases, accusing a rabbi of exceeding what is expected of him would strike even irreligious or non-Jewish observers, as ludicrous. Yet taking a stand against persons found guilty of a broad range of

'white-collar crimes' is not considered an obvious casus belli, even for Orthodox Jews who define themselves as observant and/or 'Torah True'. Indeed, it may well be closer to hara kiri on the part of a rabbi who tries it.

This distinction has no basis in Jewish law, let alone in the corpus of rabbinic ethical literature. But it reflects the behavioral norms of many Orthodox Jews and the mores of many Orthodox communities.

Nor is the fear, or practical impossibility, of clashing with communal lay leaders – who are usually the religious leader's employer, whether directly or indirectly – the only factor behind the phenomenon of silence. Often, the claim will be made that speaking or writing in public about these issues will cause, or spur, anti-Semitism. Today, with anti-Jewish feeling and activity on the rise almost everywhere, that is certainly not a concern that can be lightly dismissed. But it can, nonetheless, be dismissed in most cases.

Two counter-arguments immediately suggest themselves. One is that most anti-Semitism is irrational and will always find itself a 'cause', or excuse, whether we provide it or not. The other is that it is not the principled stand against moral turpitude that will cause anti-Semitism, but the failure to denounce moral breakdown and thereby facilitate its continued spread. The prominence of Jews in the hated financial elite is, in today's charged atmosphere, causing far more anti-Semitism than would the explicit denunciation of the ills of the financial system by Jewish religious personalities.

But, of course, the real reason why the anti-Semitism argument is so weak is because we cannot agree, in principle and a fortiori, to conduct our communal life on the basis of what the reaction of anti-Semites might be. The content and tone of the intra-communal debate may take account of it, but it surely cannot set the agenda.

The silence of many religious leaders in the face of moral challenges stemming from the areas of business and finance reflects conflicts of interest on their part. In many cases, rabbis have an interest in the financial wellbeing of individuals who are prominent supporters of institutions that operate under their aegis. They are therefore compromised in their ability to address problematic aspects of the business areas in which those persons are engaged – let alone the specific business practices of those persons.

Many rabbis actually seem to believe that the means can and do justify the ends, so that the worthy goal of an educational institution or a charitable endeavor may require ignoring the source of the funds that realized that goal – both the person and the business activity in which he garnered his wealth. From there it is but a short step to the implicit recognition of using wealth obtained illegally or immorally to 'buy salvation'.

Finally, as a spate of cases has shown, leadership can be complicit not by merely ignoring the issues, but by direct involvement. Obviously, in such cases there is no point in discussing moral leadership – nor do moral issues resonate with the followers.

4.

Silence like a cancer grows

Was it ever thus? Was there always a huge gulf between the moral heroes and the lofty ethical principles depicted in the sacred literature, and the grubby reality of life as people – rabbis and laymen alike – lived it?

No doubt to some extent it was. But there is evidence that Orthodox Jewish society did not always feature a warped value system in which business ethics and money morality is relegated to second-class status, at best.

One of the few people who has devoted himself to writing and speaking about Jewish business ethics is Dr Meir Tamari. His work and research has generated several books, as well as numerous articles published in general and Orthodox newspapers and magazines.

Tamari is convinced that the phenomenon of religious bifurcation, in which ritualistic and theological/ mystical elements of Judaism have risen to prominence whilst inter-personal and, in particular, pecuniary moral and ethical practices have withered, is neither very recent – meaning post-Holocaust, nor very ancient – meaning pre-modern.

He suggests that it was the demise of the kehilla as the lynchpin of Jewish society that started the rot. This development can be traced back to the impact of the Khmelnitsky massacres in the mid-17th century, and the subsequent descent of most of East European Jewry into chronic and deep poverty. The political dismemberment of Poland in the late 18th century and the Napoleonic wars were the coup de grace for the old structure, leaving a society in which a very narrow stratum had wealth whilst the mass of people had nothing – except babies, in the huge population explosion of the 19th century.

With no fiscal autonomy – because the kehilla's taxation powers were gone – the religious leadership became entirely dependent on the few rich people available for their own financial survival and that of their families and their institutions, whether these last were yeshivot or the courts of the hassidic leaders. That structure was inherently corrupt and served as a further spur to the process already underway, as Enlightenment ideas and values spread through Jewish population centers, of a growing estrangement and eventual mass flight of Jewish youth from their ancestral religion.

This undemocratic and unhealthy social structure has survived into the 21st century, and indeed thrived, despite the fact that today's Jewish society is completely different from that of pre-Holocaust Europe, with affluence having replaced poverty, especially in the Western Diaspora. Much academic work needs to be done to understand and explain how the structure has proved so robust, but for the purposes of this article, the existence of this social structure and its salient characteristics, including its warped moral value system, must be accepted as fact.

The proof Tamari cites for his hypothesis is telling, because it comes from direct documentary evidence of social, religious and economic conditions and values among Orthodox Jews over the centuries – namely the responsa literature. He notes a sharp decline in the percentage of responsa dealing with 'money matters' – as opposed to ritual (food, Shabbat etc.) and personal status issues -- in the modern period compared to the earlier period of Jewish history in pre-Khmelnitsky Poland and, earlier still, in Spain and Franco-Germany. This is certainly something for scholars to subject to further scrutiny.

In the more recent period – the last century or so -- Tamari notes another change creeping into the responsa literature, a change that resonates to the sounds of silence. A typical pre-modern responsum relating to a monetary dispute would provide a thorough analysis of the legal aspects of the matter

under discussion and conclude by presenting a legal ruling. Often, however, it would not stop there, but would append a short addendum that discussed the moral aspects of the dispute and suggest a possible extra-legal resolution which would probably require one or both parties to rise above the letter of the law and take an ethical, rather than a purely legal view of the situation. Tamari finds that this latter approach has fallen into desuetude and is rarely found in the recent and contemporary responsa literature.

This chimes well with what we see and hear all around us: rabbis and other religious functionaries have increasingly become religious technocrats, honed in their specialties and well-versed in the professional literature pertaining to these specialties – e.g. Shabbat or medical halakhot – but increasingly distant from the empathetic approach that might enable them and their questioners/ litigants to rise above the legal sphere of *din* to the moral sphere of '*lifnim mishurat hadin*'.

In fact, the contemporary questioner may not even want that kind of answer. That is what Haym Soloveitchik highlighted in his article, Rupture & Reconstruction, especially in the final sentence: "[Contemporary Orthodox Jews], having lost the touch of His presence …now seek solace in the pressure of His yoke". In those areas of their lives where Orthodox Jews seek rabbinic guidance, they want *din*, not *lifnim mishurat hadin*. And in the wider context, people get the leadership and the leadership style that they want and deserve – in religion as in politics.

5

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made

This is what John Bogle clearly understands and expressed so well in the article quoted above. The moral rot that found such dramatic expression in the financial crash of 2007-09 is rooted in the collapse of those basic human values – trust, reliability, mutual confidence – without which commercial and financial activity cannot take place. It requires no great intellectual leap to see that the same values are needed in the domestic sphere, to make marriage and family life work. The moral collapse is taking place across the board, even if the dynamics of breakdown differ between areas of human activity.

It is also essential not to fall into the trap of thinking that this is a recent process, dating back only a few years. Over twenty years ago, an investment banker of a bygone age whose name still has positive connotations for veteran New Yorkers (imagine – an investment banker who did good and was held in high esteem!), wrote a similar article making a similar point. That was Felix Rohatyn and he, too, was bemoaning the rise of a new and corrupt culture on Wall Street – a culture in which the moral concept of "it isn't done" was replaced by the legal approach that if it isn't against the law, it's OK. Once the lawyers were in control, the next stage of the collapse of ethical behavior was the rise of the compliance culture, which effectively said that no-one can be trusted not to break the rules, so we'll watch everyone all the time.

But the moral decline of Wall Street in the 1980s that Rohatyn mourned, that Tom Wolfe lampooned in *Bonfire of the Vanities* and that Oliver Stone pilloried in his 1987 movie *Wall Street*, seems minor and almost childish compared to what we have witnessed this last decade.

Yet in the 1980s there were still relatively few Orthodox Jews in the big Wall Street banks and investment houses. By the time the naughties -- as the outgoing decade is sometimes called – rolled round, there were many, the product of hard work and excellent grades achieved in the top business

schools. By this time, the obstacles to Orthodox Jews working in these lucrative and highly-regarded jobs had largely been solved – even the need to sometimes miss two consecutive working days, because of the incidence of Jewish festivals. Orthodox employees in leading firms in the world's two main financial centers of New York and London conducted minha services daily in corporate boardrooms and often managed to cram a daf yomi session, or other limmud Torah, into their long and hectic working days at the office. Their gentile colleagues thought nothing of the need to accommodate aspects of the Orthodox lifestyle. Multi-culturalism was the norm in downtown Manhattan as in London's Canary Wharf, so that trading rooms wherein bearded and skull-capped Moslems, Jews and Sikhs (turbans for them!) worked side by side became an unremarkable sight.

In between the praying, the learning, the kosher sushi and all the rest, the new generation of Orthodox youngsters participated, willingly and even enthusiastically, in the creation, design and sale to unsuspecting suckers across the country and around the world of those 'financial weapons of mass destruction' – in Warren Buffett's telling phrase -- that have inflicted massive damage on the American public and, ironically but fittingly, brought the entire Wall Street culture crashing down around them.

Most of these young people, despite (or is it because of?) their background in the world's leading yeshivot, seminaries and other institutes of advanced Jewish study, never saw the inconsistency in this behavior. They made sure to raise the point in their job interviews with potential employers of their need to leave early on winter Fridays. Did any mention to their interviewer before taking the job, or to their superiors or peer reviewers in periodic meetings while on the job, that they felt uncomfortable – nay, sickened – by the foul-mouthed patter that was standard style on trading floors, or by the crude sexist banter and 'jokes' that were the norm in most departments of most firms?

Did any of them discuss, among themselves or with their rabbis, rebbes, mekubalim and other religious mentors, the moral chasm between the readings in the Torah and Prophets they heard read in synagogue on Shabbat morning, or the sentiments contained in their kids' divrei torah at the Shabbat table, and what they heard and did when they went back to work on Monday morning (if not on Sunday)? Were they confused? Did they feel disoriented? Or were they able to live totally compartmentalized lives?

It seems that many did and continue to do just that – as a survival mechanism for religious people in a secular and hence culturally hostile world. The multi-cultural ethos of 'live and let live' allows them to fulfill their religious obligations – washing before and reciting grace after meals, praying minha and even learning or reciting Psalms at work or while commuting – and still work in any sector, at any level.

But these achievements in the area of professional and workplace integration have exacted an enormous, terrible moral price. People integrated into companies, industries and professions where moral values have eroded or diluted have, inevitably even if unconsciously, become corrupted. Many of them are today either amoral or immoral, although they delude themselves into believing that their religion, as they understand and practice it, makes them morally superior and provides them with a large measure of immunity to the immoral wider culture in which they move.

Thus it is that there are many Orthodox Jews – from 'modern' to 'hareidi' – whose minds and hearts are already lost to Judaism. They lean emotionally toward Gordon Gekko, the villain of *Wall Street*, whose motto is simple and direct: "greed is good" – because it gets you what you want. Worse still, they lean intellectually toward Ayn Rand and her hero John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*. Most of them, of course, have never heard of Rand, let alone read the ideas she put into John Galt's mouth. Yet the views of many of the younger generation of Orthodox Jews, especially but not only in the US, are aligned with

her extreme capitalist ideology, despite its being profoundly anti-Jewish and, in the deepest sense, idolatrous.

6.

And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence

The unfolding crisis has exposed the false gods once again as being unable to deliver the goods. Nothing new there – the young Abram tried to explain that to his father Terah in Ur of the Chaldees and it seems that Terah eventually got the point. Ayn Rand's most prominent devotee, Alan Greenspan – the man who followed Volcker as Fed chairman-- at least had the intellectual and moral courage to publicly admit that ideas he had held and nurtured for decades had been destroyed by the financial crash.

If Greenspan can see the light, there must surely be hope for all those others whose minds have been less severely poisoned. Unfortunately, the crash is likely to prove only the first stage of a prolonged crisis which will impose deep and painful changes on the economy and society of America and the entire Western world. But this trauma provides the opportunity for Orthodox Judaism to admit that it took the wrong turn some way back and needs to get onto a road that leads somewhere worth going.

How do we find our way back to where we went wrong, and how do we then go right?

Finding our way back is the definition of teshuva, repentance. We know that the essential first step of teshuva is to accept and then admit that what we thought and/ or did was wrong. That means ending the fraudulent pretence that current Orthodox theology and lifestyle are good enough, let alone ideal.

From there, it's got to be back to basics – and basics in Judaism means education. But education can no longer mean what it is still widely taken to mean – the maintenance of traditional religious values and practices. As Haym Soloveitchik explained 15 years ago, the assumption that basic values will be effortlessly absorbed by Jewish children growing up in a Jewish culture is not true or workable in today's world.

Basic values that used to be commonly accepted and upheld by all Western societies, can no longer be taken for granted. They are going to have to be taught, imparted, inculcated – consciously and carefully. The values governing that huge part of people's lives encompassing work, income, wealth, spending and investment must be resuscitated and these activities rescued from the clutches of 'professional experts' -- and then re-integrated into an overall moral framework, along with family, health and well-being and all the other central components of our lives.

Jews have always prized learning and scholastic achievement, but they have also always had high regard for wealth and business acumen. Yissachar and Zevulun are both legitimate role models in the Jewish tradition, especially when they work in partnership. But there was always something else, more fundamental than either intellectual or material success. This something was so taken for granted that it actually went without saying -- until it now seems that it has gone completely, without even saying goodbye.

That intangible something is morality – an amorphous catch-all encompassing values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility. In the Ashkenazi-Jewish world it was termed 'mentchlichkeit' and among all Jews it was demanded of everyone, rich or poor, learned or ignorant. Before anything else and above all else, you had to be a mentsch.

One of the many aphorisms attributed to the Kotsker Rebbe relates to the way Megillat Esther introduces Mordechai as 'ish yehudi', 'a Jewish man'. The word ish seems superfluous – but that is not the case at all, said the Rebbe. First you have to be a mentsch, only then can you be a Jew.

That's what we have lost somewhere along the way and that's what we have to get back to.