

## Shabbat Shalom

In all different positions of authority we say things and wonder if we are heard. Frequently, I know parents say "I told my child over and over again, he just doesn't seem to get it." Teachers also know that feeling when they try to pass information to their students. I know doctors find patients who simply don't comply and a variety of professionals have the same type of frustration. "I explained it to the customer, but somehow they didn't seem to remember."

Well, certainly it is true with rabbis. We often give sermons and we are told: "That was a great sermon, rabbi," but then we wonder if it really makes a difference beyond the experience of Shabbat morning. With all the sermons that I have given over my years, there are a few that have come back to me. Someone will say to me in different circumstance, "Rabbi, I remember that sermon that you gave" and then they will repeat it. It is particularly gratifying when they repeat it correctly.

There was a sermon that I gave a number of years ago that was based on a simple story. Coincidentally, TWO people repeated the story to me this week. I want to tell it again. It goes like this:

There a simple fisherman in Mexico who in addition to catching fish would take vacationers out on his boat to make a few extra dollars. One day he took a wealthy Wall Street investor who was on vacation with his wife. They fished for a while. The New Yorker asked the fisherman why he doesn't get himself a larger boat. The fisherman asked, "Why would I want a larger boat?" The investor said, "If you had a larger boat, you would be able to catch more fish. If it were larger you would be able to hire another fisherman." The fisherman inquired "Why would I want to do that?" The visitor said, "If you did that, then you would be able to sell more fish and make more money." The fisherman said, "Why would I want to do that?" The man said, "If you make more money, you would be able to buy the cannery and make larger profits. Who knows, maybe one day you could even go public." The fisherman said, "Why would I want to do that?" The trader said, "Then you would be able to get an apartment, perhaps on the Upper East Side and perhaps even a big home on the Island and you would be able to live the life of a very wealthy man." The fisherman said, "Why would I want to do that?" The trader said, "THEN you would be able to take a vacation to a small fishing village on the West Coast of Mexico and go out with the fishermen."

It is such a simple story and very poignant. During that time, five years ago, I delivered the sermon to help us look at the materialism, desire and even greed in our culture. We laughed when we heard the story, but now the story has come home. It is also a very painful story.

This past week we learned about Bernard Madoff and the manipulations fueled by his greed which has created tremendous so much pain amongst so many people. Lifetimes worth of savings and wealth have been lost. Fortunes have disappeared. Foundations that were established to insure the future and support worthy causes have been destroyed. This event has dangerous proportions. Its impact will be felt far and wide.

Truly our hearts go out to those who have lost so much. There are many of you here this morning. And we, as friends, and as a caring community, we have to be there to offer, not only solace, but help and hope. For some people the financial losses are simply disastrous. For others, there is a knowledge they will get by, but life has taken on a very different sense, a very different meaning. Priorities are being examined. We are not judges, we can only express the sadness for the people who have lost so very much. Hopefully, it will bring families and friends closer, understanding truly that when you have love and when you have health there is a future.

And Bernie Madoff himself will need to face the judge...the earthly judge and the One above. In some ways, from all I heard and read and you have told me, he was "quite a guy." But this guy is now shamed forever, he has brought shame on his family and yes, his people. The implications for anti-Semitism are profound!

When reading a commentary on the parshah I learned of a connection between the great sin of Joseph's brothers, throwing him into the pit and then selling him into slavery and the great sin of Judah; the illicit adulterous relationship with Tamar. Seemingly unconnected, the rabbis taught that these were not merely reprehensible acts. In fact, there was a connection. In both cases they people were treated as objects. When people are taken advantage of for lust, or gain, a part humanity is diminished. There is a failure to see the uniqueness, the Divine image, in a person. There is a failure to perceive "the other" as holy is neglected. God is shut out. Sin enters the world. For Bernard Madoff every investor was an object for his personal glory, his wealth, fame and fortune. And so he could steal, lie and cheat from friends and families and worthy causes. He stopped seeing "the other" as humans worthy of respect. Rather people became objects through which his desire for wealth and power could be realized. And others saw him, because of his wealth and subsequent power as being more than human!

I would like to go beyond a consideration of Madoff and what he did. I believe the situation forces us to examine very important, essential questions about our own lives, our existence. In some way, Madoff was a creation of the culture we are a part of and have supported.

We must ask a lot of questions.

What did we work so hard for, for so long? Ultimately, what does all our material success mean?

We keep hearing that the economy is bad, that the economy is going to be bad, but until very recently, the vast majority of us have only "heard" reports. We have not really experienced what it means. Now, in fact, there are many in our midst, including our

schools and synagogues, like this one, experiencing it. Young and old retirees are uncertain as to what will be. We have learned that some of the great projects in the Jewish community have closed overnight. I have heard of a major Federation that closed its doors. The impact is only beginning to be felt throughout our world.

Is there some kind of response that can be of some help? Like any loss, there are a series of emotions and responses that we will be going through. There is shock and disbelief and there is anger and resentment and profound sadness. It is followed by some type of healing that will need to take place.

I'd like to look back for a minute, a simple historical view of what has brought us to this situation. We are the children and the grandchildren of a generation that came to this country without the two proverbial nickels to rub together. Most in our community are not in the United States because our ancestors ran from anti-Semitism. No, most are here because our ancestors had nothing and knew of no way to make anything. They wanted a better life for their children. They often skimmed and saved and sent one, maybe two kids to the "*goldeneh medinah*" to make a few quarters and send for more relatives. A generation came here and through really hard work, long, long hours, built businesses and began to give their children educations. We became doctors and lawyers and entrepreneurs. We found a world of opportunity and wealth, where the sky was the limit. We would earn more and have more and grow in ways that our ancestors would not have even dreamed about. We achieved, we contributed and we became very powerful.

And along the way we lost something. A disproportionate amount of attention was paid to "making it." "Making it" was defined in material ways. On the High Holy Days I spoke about the dreams we had for our children. There was a generation before that dreamt for the success of our sons as doctors or lawyers. Then came another generation where it was not a dream of medicine or law (not to mention the possibility of becoming rabbis). American dreams shifted from public service to the massing of wealth for its own sake. Money was the goal. Money defined success. Now we wanted our sons to go into finance. To really make it would be to become bankers or to financial traders. Although, those can be worthy professions, as ultimate values they represent wealth. Something very important, but not the ultimate. We, as a community of Jews lost a spiritual dimension. We lost the connection to The Ultimate. And so we quantified and objectified, but we no longer mystified. Meaning was exchanged for money.

The arrest of Bernard Madoff this week and the pursuant loss of fortunes is a tragedy on so many different levels. It is an embarrassment. It is an embarrassment to our people. I have always believed that Jews are essentially no different than non-Jews as individuals. We have our heroes and we have our criminals, because we are human beings. Yet we have a different standard which included the communal. We exist in relationships to others. We live with responsibility for others. We reflect the families and people we come from.

What makes us special is found in the call to raise our level of humanity by connecting to a value system and community in relationship with God. This is the essence of brit, the

covenant. It ordains mitzvot which impose upon us obligation. The primary value is not the success of the individual, but it is about the life of the individual lived in the context of community.

Two weeks ago, we read about Jacob's dream. We read about a ladder to heaven. In their wisdom, the rabbis pointed out that the gematria, the numerical equivalent of "*sulam*" ladder is equal to the numerical value for "mammon" money. Ladders go up and down. Money can be used for great things. But money can corrupt. It can spoil. It can destroy the spirit. It can create a sense that a man can be all powerful. A man can be a god!

I know that we all feel the tragedy of the loss on many levels. So much trust was destroyed. Questions are being asked, "Who can you trust?" Well, there are people we can trust and we know that. We have to know that. There are institutions that we can trust and we know that and we have to know that. But, in order for there to be trust, there has to be a sense of responsibility to something more than individual success to a type of higher calling. Regulation must be built into every human system.

I often think that there is something essential in the Jewish tradition that recognizes that human beings have all sorts of desires and drives. Yet, we are called upon to harness them. That's why we have a tradition that deals with the most basic elements of human life. It has to do with acquisition and spending. It has to do with food and eating. It has to do with sex and mating. We recognize human drive, human desire, but we say that it all needs to be controlled. Honest weights and measures is a divine commandment.

We will read the story of Joseph interpreting Pharaoh's dream. Pharaoh dreams of fat cows and thin cows and Joseph says you will have some good years, but it will be followed by lean years. Joseph devises a plan of action to save for the lean years. That whole notion that saving for the lean years maybe a little bit different than investing to go from fat to fatter. What we may have to learn in all of this is there is a time to be able to say, "*savati*", I am satisfied, "*dayenu*," We have had enough. That's the challenge, because human nature is such that we never really feel that we have enough. The implications of unbridled greed are very severe. Just maybe we have reached a place in our own evolution where we finally realize that the requirement of "*anavah*" humility places limitations on what we are and what we have in spite of the desire to be more and more and more and have more and more and more.

In a couple of nights we are going to begin to celebrate Chanukah. A wonderful celebration. Chanukah is a celebration of a miracle. It is a military victory. But the miracle is only assumed when we realize that the "light" of God, the spiritual parts of creation must be recognized. The essential message of Chanukah has always been contained in the prophecy that we read by Zechariah. "*Lo b'cheil V'Lo b'koach*", Not by might and not by power. But it is by God's spirit that we ultimately succeed.

A good friend of mine told me that the way we face hardship is not by trying to relive the past, but by moving forward with what we have to create a different future. This is the moment that we are called to create a different future. Our power and our wealth were

not earned and we were not blessed by them in order to repeat the mistakes of the great empires of the past in order to assert human mastery over the universe, but rather believe to rededicate our lives in such a way so that we are rooted in the values that matter most. That calls for an end to human selfishness and greed and the beginning of the sense that we are created for a purpose. The purpose is "*l'takein olam b'Malchut Shadai*" to fix the world, to repair humanity by seeing where God is found. God is in every human being and each human task.

Shabbat Shalom