

The Madoff Scandal and Anti-Semitism

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We can be proud of the historical fact that Jews were uniquely tolerated in the Middle Ages precisely because they so successfully fulfilled crucial economic functions for the Christian world. We can be proud of the historical fact that Jewish involvement in finance and commerce made possible the emergence of capitalist society. We can be proud of the historical fact that Jewish financiers used their newfound wealth to create and sustain a most impressive system of communal institutions charged with responsibility to take care of the poor.

This Shabbat is given a special name. It's known as *Shabbat zachor*, the "Sabbath of Remembrance." Since Shabbat Zachor always falls on the Shabbat before Purim, this special Shabbat signals that Purim is just around the corner.

Here at Temple Sinai, we will celebrate the festival of Purim next Monday evening. I hope you will be with us for the reading of *Megillat Ester*, the scroll of Esther. You will also get the opportunity to see Cantor Merel and me make fools of ourselves in outrageous costumes.

On this Sabbath of Remembrance we are asked to remember two events. We remember how the Amalekites ambushed our biblical ancestors as they travelled through the Sinai desert to the land of Israel. We remember how Haman attempted to destroy all of Persian Jewry and failed. In other words, Shabbat Zachor is all about remembering the existence of anti-Semitism.

Reading the scroll of Esther every year, I suspect that at least some of us have found this story about anti-Jewish hatred to be increasingly anachronistic in the modern world. After all, look at the rate of Jewish intermarriage and how desirable Jewish partners have become to others. Look at all the metrics of Jewish acceptance in the non-Jewish world. One could reasonably conclude that anti-Semitism was outdated and surely on its way out.

But the aftermath of the Bernie Madoff scandal is a sobering reminder that anti-Semitism is still with us. Madoff did not create anti-Semitism. What Madoff did was to lend legitimacy, to give credence to historic anti-Semitic myths about Jews. What Madoff did is to damage the image of American Jewry. In response to the Madoff affair, the ADL reports an upsurge in anti-Semitic postings that speak of Jewish greed and blame Jews for the world's financial crisis. Of course, these accusations are not new. The scapegoating of Jews and the disparaging of Jewish character are both classic anti-Semitic canards. What

is new and cause for concern is that these statements have appeared, not only on extremist web-sites, but also on mainstream websites, blogs, and financial chat rooms. Let me cite just three unpleasant examples.

This one was posted on the website of Florida's Palm Beach Post newspaper: "Just another Jew money changer thief. It's been happening for 3,000 years. Trust a Jew and this is what will happen. History has proven it over and over. Jews have only one god – money."

Here's another posted on dealbreaker.com: "Ho hum, another crooked Wall Street Jew. Find a Jew who isn't crooked. Now that would be a story."

Finally, here's a comment that appeared on Yahoo's finance discussion group: "Jews should be banned from working on Wall Street. All they do is steal our money."

These comments remind us that the reality of Anti-Semitism is not a history lesson but a current event. We have work to do. We must refute these anti-Semitic diatribes. We need to talk with the media about their coverage of the Madoff affair. I am concerned by the choice of the press and media to always make specific reference to Madoff's Jewish identity or his prominent position in the Jewish community.

While every race, religion, and ethnic group has its own share of scoundrels, it is noteworthy that the media and press do not identify others by their religious or cultural affiliations. For example, nowhere have I read any reference to Roy Blagojevich, the impeached former governor of Illinois as "the prominent Serbian Roy Blagojevich." Why do such references seem to be reserved for Jews? It is deeply unfair that Madoff's Jewishness has been made such a big part of the Madoff story.

The third action item is that we need to educate ourselves about the true facts of the history of Jews in business. We need to become more conversant with the enormous contributions that Jews have made to the economic and financial welfare of the Western world.

In the middle ages, Jewish survival depended upon demonstrating Jewish utility and usefulness to the Christian world. Denied access to most other professions, Jews involved themselves in commerce and finance as a matter of necessity. At the very same time, Jewish economic creativity and industriousness were used as instruments of hostility against them.

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What we learn from the study of Jewish economic history is that Bernie Madoff's criminal acts, as heinous as they are, cannot erase centuries of Jewish contributions to the world's financial health and prosperity.

What we learn from knowing Jewish economic history is that it is incumbent upon those who still have the means to step up and to support the noble charities and non-profit institutions that have been brought low by this financial crisis. This is precisely what our people did centuries ago. This is precisely what we must do today.

The Madoff affair is all the more reason why I hope you will join us next Monday evening, March 9, at 7:00pm, when we come together as a community to celebrate the festival of Purim and to hear once again the triumphant tale of how Esther and Mordechai, through courage and quick thinking, saved the Jewish community of Persia.

Yes, we expect many children and lots of noise, but the message of Purim could not be more serious or more adult. We celebrate Jewish survival and the defeat of anti-Semitism with laughter, with song, with cheers, and with pride. The festival of Purim speaks not only to the reality of anti-Semitism in the past and in the present. The way we celebrate Purim underscores the way we respond to anti-Semitism: we refuse to let it get us down. We do not permit anti-Semitism to hurt our Jewish self-esteem; we poke fun at ourselves instead. Nor do we allow ourselves to become bitter and resentful toward the world. On Purim, we conquer anti-Semitism with peals of defiant laughter.