

SHABBAT SERMON
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Michael Jackson ... of blessed memory?

Even though I was away on vacation in Ocean City, I still heard that Michael Jackson had died. The fact of the matter is, had I vacationed on Mars I would have heard that Michael Jackson had died! His death sent shock waves around the world. A New York newspaper headlined: "Jacko has gone to Neverland." In Paris, the noted LeMonde newspaper had a front page declaration: "Michael Jackson: Death of a Planetary Icon." In Berlin the papers said: "King of Pop is Dead." And the China Post stated: "Michael Jackson, King of Pop, Dead at 50." What we have seen unfold is absolutely unbelievable!

As you might know, there are 54 Torah portions but there are only 52 weeks in the year, and some of those Sabbaths we don't read a regular Torah portion but we read a Torah portion for the holiday that might fall on it. In order to balance the Torah portions with the appropriate number of Sabbaths there are times when we have to combine two Torah portions to keep the balance intact. In some of the years, two of the Torah portions we combine are found in the Book of Vayikra where we take the Torah portion titled "*Achrei Mot*" – "after the death" – referring to the death of Aaron's children, and connect it with the following Torah portion named "*Kedoshim*" meaning "holy," referring to the laws of holiness that are to follow in that Torah portion. Jewish folklore has pointed out that when you put the names of these Torah portions together, you get the words, "*Achrei Mot Kedoshim* – after death people become holy" ... which over the centuries Jews have used to refer to the natural tendency there seems to be that, irrespective of what a person was in life, when he dies we always tend to exaggerate the person's merit. That most certainly is what the world had done with Michael Jackson. And not just the world, but the Jewish world as well!

Jewish newspapers got caught up in this madness. Any Jew who had ever been near Michael Jackson was writing about their encounter. From Rabbi Shmueley Boteach's perspective, if Jackson had just remained close to him, he would still be alive. David Soussia writes when, as editor of Olam Magazine, he sang a song for Jackson. Many writers pointed out that in recent months, Jackson had been seen wearing a red *bendel* ... a lot of good that did him! But for me, perhaps the most disturbing headline was on the front page of June 29th USA Today where there was a picture of a young woman lighting a candle in memory of Jackson with the words: "Israeli soldier Elinor Cohen lights a candle at a makeshift memorial Sunday for Michael Jackson in Tel Aviv." What bothered me was the fact that I personally would have mourned the death of that Israeli soldier much more than I would mourn the death of Michael Jackson. What

bothered me was that one Jewish blogger, in writing about Jackson, concluded with the words, “*Hamakom yenachem etchem b'toch shaar aveili tzion v'Yerushalayam.*” That is the traditional statement that one paying a condolence call is to say to the mourner: “May the Almighty comfort you amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” Who was the blogger saying these words to ... LaToya Jackson? Or was it to Joe Jackson who was peddling his new record company before his son's body was cold! Before I go any further, let me tell you something about Michael's father, Joe Jackson. Anyone whose closest advisors are Jessie Jackson and Al Sharpton needs a lot of help.

Two other bloggers I read wrote of Michael Jackson, and after his name included the words “*zichrono livrocha*” which we translate as: “May his memory be for a blessing.” You sometimes see these words abbreviated after the name of the deceased with a *zayin* and a *lamed*, or a ZL or sometimes OBM – “of blessed memory.” This phrase, *zichrono livrocha*, has two sources. One is found in the Book of Proverbs where we are told: “*Zecher tzaddik livrocha* – remember the righteous for a blessing.” Another source is found in the Talmud where we are told: “One who mentions a *tzaddik* must bless him.” We take these words very seriously. We don't just say them about anyone! For example, there is one person in history for whom these words have, in a sense, been attached to his name ... and that is the Ari Hakadosh – “the Holy Ari” - Reb Isaac Luria, the great Jewish mystic. We refer to him as the “Ari Zal, the Ari of blessed memory.” We use these words in regard to a person whose memory is worthy of blessing. Now, I ask you: what part of Michael Jackson's memory should be for a blessing? Yes, he was a great entertainer, a great singer and dancer ... but even there trouble lurked beneath the surface. Look at the names of some of his songs, “Bad” ... “Beat It” ... “Dangerous” ... “Scream” ... “Dirty Diana” ... “Smooth Criminal” (You tell me how many Orthodox rabbis know all this!). Should we remember the plastic surgeries and the masks and his holding a baby - his son, named Prince Michael II, aka “Blanket” - over a balcony? Should we remember the obscene dance gestures? Or the charges of child abuse or sleeping with children? Should we remember his marriage to Elvis Presley's daughter? Or the other one with Debbie Rowe with whom he might – or might not – have had children? Or should we remember the medications, the Xanax, the Zoloft, the Paxil, the Vicodin, the Demerol? May his memory be for a blessing? May his family be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem?

I know that I am sounding like an “old fogey” but I think something has to be said because the reality is: we make these pop singers into idols that our children seek to emulate. We provide the publicity and the adoration; we pay for the tickets and buy the magazines. And with Michael Jackson, we are doing it for someone who was given the nickname of “Wacko Jacko.” And if you think I'm being overly harsh, just ask yourself: would you want your children or grandchildren to grow up to be like Michael Jackson? Would you let your children or grandchildren BE with Michael Jackson?

Oh, and one thing more: it's very possible that Michael Jackson was an anti-Semite. You see, in 1995 he issued a song that had the words “Jew me, sue me, everybody do me/kick me, kike me, don't you black or white me.” Jackson, at the time, rejected that he espoused anti-Semitic feelings; simply saying, “I am voicing the pain of

prejudice and hate.” After much pressure, he removed some of the words from the song. But soon thereafter, when he appeared on ABC’s Good Morning America, Jackson was heard using anti-Semitic language in a voice message to one of his former advisors. He was quoted as saying, “They suck ... they’re like leeches ... it’s a conspiracy ... the Jews do it on purpose.” This led the anti-Defamation League to issue a statement claiming that Jackson, “Has an anti-Semitic streak ... it is sad that Jackson is infected with classically stereotypical ideas of Jews as all-powerful, money-grubbing and manipulative.” His family should be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem? His memory should be for a blessing?

When you really think of it, I can’t think of a single Jewish entertainer, athlete, man of wealth ... any of these that our tradition turned into a hero. When some of these types passed away we would add the words, “*olov ha-shalom*,” which in contemporary terms can be best translated as “May he rest in peace.” But *zichrono livrocho*? Those words we save for our saints and scholars. We Jews are very careful in those we hold up as heroic figures for others to emulate. A good example is found in today’s Torah portion. Our Torah portion was entitled “Pinchas” ... Pinchas, we are told, was so zealous in his dedication to God that when he saw a public act of immorality take place within the camp of Israel, he immediately took the law into his own hands and slayed the perpetrators. For this we are told, God bestowed upon Pinchas the *Brit Shalom* – the covenant of peace. There are differences of opinion over what that “covenant of peace” means and whether, in fact, Pinchas’ act of zealotry was to be rewarded or condemned. For some, the “covenant of peace” means that Pinchas was going to be protected by God from any of those who would attempt to avenge the execution he performed, thus putting Pinchas in a bright light. Others say the “covenant of peace” was necessary because Pinchas was now a murderer; Pinchas was a zealot and he needed to be blessed with peace before he would perform more acts of destruction. Our sages are never completely satisfied or unanimous in their understanding of Pinchas ... whether, in fact, his act was meant to be applauded or condemned. Because our sages were never clear in how exactly to judge Pinchas, we find a very strange and interesting aspect of this Torah portion which carries his name. Remember I told you before how sometimes we combine two Torah portions to keep our calendar in balance? Well, oftentimes this balancing act takes place at this time of the year ... last week we read two Torah portions, Chukat and Balak. Next week we will also read two Torah portions, Mattot and Maasei and then the calendar will be balanced. The fourth Lubavitcher Rebbe known as Rebbe Maharash, when just a child, was asked by one of his friends: Why do we combine the two Torah portions of last week and the two Torah portions of next week but we never combine either of them with this Torah portion of Pinchas which always stands alone? And the Rebbe replied that since the act of Pinchas was so controversial we never wanted to connect him with any other Torah portion. He was to be left standing by himself.

It would have been best if Michael Jackson had been left alone, both in his life and his death. His life had its triumphs, but he himself was a tragic figure. And anyone dying at the age of 50 is a tragedy. Yes, for him I can say: May his soul rest in peace. He deserves the peace that he never found in life – or in death. But for that Israeli soldier, Elinor Cohen, whom USA Today showed lighting a candle for Michael Jackson ... next

to her name I would add words (usually used for men) that we include for the righteous ones who are living: “*Neiro yair* – may her candle continue to glow” ... and may we all see the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah: “*Bila hamoves lonetzach umocho Hashem Elokim dimah meal kol panim* – May He swallow up death forever and may God Almighty wipe away tears from every face.” Amen.

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