

SHABBAT SERMON
MAY 22, 2010
RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG

Who Do You Trust?

Okay, class, here is today's question: What is Lady Gaga? And the answer is: I haven't the foggiest idea! But she must be something really different as an entertainer given the name "Lady Gaga!"

There was an article in last week's *Jewish Times* about names and the first sentence read: "Our names are the key to who we are." And Jewish tradition very much agrees with that. And yet, it's not always so! I think back to a religious site I once visited where I saw a sign, "Do not step over the chain fence ... all trespassers will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Signed: The Sisters of Mercy." Yes, a name is important but it is equally important to remember that it doesn't tell us everything we need to know. And that lesson is learned from an aspect of this morning's Torah portion.

Our Torah reading this morning listed the names of the princes of the twelve tribes of Israel as they offered gifts at the dedication of the Tabernacle. My friend, Rabbi Jack Riemer, in one of my favorite, oft-used *divrei Torah* points out that if you look at the names of the princes of the Twelve Tribes you will notice something very strange about them: 11 of the 12 have religious names; that is have the name of God within them. They have names like Elitsur which means "God is my rock" or Nitanel which means "God has given" or Elishama which means "God has heard." One even has a quadruple form of the name of God within his name. One is called Shlumiel ben Tsurishaday. Shalom is a name of God. El is a name of God. Tsur is a name of God. And Shaday is a name of God. So this man's name is really a four-fold praise of God.

And yet, strangely enough, for some reason these 11 princes who had the name of God on exhibit as part of their names turned out to be not such a great credit to God. They were, according to the Midrash, timid and cautious, and even cowardly when it came to the service of God. And the one who had the quadruple name of God within his name turned out, ironically, to be the biggest disappointment to God of them all. Shlumiel ben Tsuridhaday, according to the Midrash, turned out to be the one who had the sordid affair with a Midianite woman. He was the greatest sinner of them all.

What is significant is that 11 out of the 12 princes, the 11 who had pious names, all turned out to be not such pious people. Among the 12 there was only one who was really noble, really brave, and really devoted to God. Do you know what his name was? It was the prince of the tribe of Judah whose name was Nachshon ben Aminadav.

Do you know what Nachshon comes from? It comes from Nachash which means snake. Go figure that out. The 11 who had God's name on exhibit as part of their names turned out to

be not such a great credit to God, and the one who had the worst name of all, the one who for some reason that I cannot comprehend was named for a snake, turned out to be the bravest and the most loyal servant of God of them all. When the Israelites stood at the edge of the Red Sea, all the other princes suddenly became very polite. Each one said to the other: "After you." But Nachshon had the courage to jump into the sea before it split and he was the one who saved the Jewish people.

The Jewish people have remembered these names ever since. And this is why in modern Israel the ones who go first, the ones who take the lead in a difficult or dangerous assignment, are called Nachshonim. And someone who is a fool or a dope is called a Shlemeel, after the only person in the Bible who had four names of God within his name, and yet turned out to be not such a great credit to God.

Perhaps what the Torah is telling us is that there ought to be a truth in advertising law, not only for products but also for people. And that we ought to be wary, we ought to be careful and suspicious of those who advertise their piety and exhibit it because if you are really religious then you don't flaunt it. And if you flaunt it, if you go around with not one, not two, not three, but four names of God within your name, as if to say, "Look how pious I am..." then you are probably not pious at all.

I point this out this morning because of three events in recent weeks which underscore how important this lesson is, and how we as Jews must take it to heart.

Goldman Sachs – now there's a Jewish name if there ever was one! It is not just a Jewish name, but until recently one of the most highly respected names on Wall Street. Wall Street – the financial capital – has taken quite a hit the last few years. From Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme to Lehmann Bros. collapse ... we thought nothing would surprise us anymore. But the latest news from Goldman Sachs is a real shocker. Goldman Sachs was always considered a 'cut above.' It's Chairman, Lloyd Blankfein, said his company was doing "God's work." Its business principle was: "Our clients' interests always come first." But now Goldman Sachs stands accused of having marketed mortgage-backed securities, while at the same time looking to make a profit by betting that the securities would plunge in value. I am not much of a financial maven so let me explain this in terms that I understand ... you challenge me to put together a basketball team to play against your team. And I put together a team with four other shleppers and me playing center. And then, without telling anyone who comes to watch the game, I go and bet against my team. That's what Goldman Sachs stand accused of. They sold people something and told them they could make money on it ... and without them knowing Goldman Sachs went and bet against them. They bet against the product they were selling! When I grew up I didn't know anyone who owned stocks, stocks were for the very wealthy, but all that has changed with IRA's and 401K's and pension funds and mutual funds. Many Americans now own a share in the market but like me they don't really understand the market ... they depend on the advice given them by the professionals. Now Americans have to wonder if the professionals are out to help them – or help themselves! "Our client's interest always comes first." That is what Goldman Sachs claimed made them special. They claimed to be better than the rest; representing a higher standard. But, now we know ... and I wonder what Marcus Goldman would say. He came to America in 1848 during the first great wave of Jewish immigration to our country.

Upon arriving here he worked as a peddler with a horse-drawn cart until he came to New York and hung out a shingle on a one room office in Pine Street in lower Manhattan with the words: Marcus Goldman & Company ... Brokering IOU's. He made quite a name for himself, but now that name is going to be associated with greed and fraud.

You know another name that is now becoming associated with greed and fraud? The name "Holy Land." In recent years it seems as if one Israeli political leader after another has been arrested and jailed for one shady deal after another. But we may be on the verge of the biggest catch yet ... and it's based on a building project in Jerusalem, named "Holy Land Properties." Now it takes a little chutzpah to name your building project "Holy Land," but obviously the owners intended that the use of that name would give off an aura of something special, indeed of a sacred space. The Holy Land Towers, which are under construction, are part of a great building boom that has swept over Jerusalem. But this one led to much opposition, not for political reasons, this was being built in West Jerusalem that everyone agrees is Israel's - it was opposed by many Jews in Jerusalem who felt that the project, standing on a prominent hillside in the city, would become an eyesore for Israel's capital. And yet, the project got a go-ahead from the authorities. And now we know why! Police have found documents that appear to show massive bribes were paid over many years to allow the project to go ahead; allowing developers to benefit from reduced taxes and administrative fees and to avoid the usual planning restrictions. And who stands accused of accepting these bribes? Many, including the former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert, and the former mayor of Jerusalem, Uri Lupoliansky.

And you know what might be the worst part of this whole story? The fact that it is not so shocking! We – the people who were given the rules, who interpreted the rules, who live by the rules – are becoming more and more the people who are breaking the rules! Indeed, some say the name should be changed from "Holyland" to "Choli-land" meaning "sick land" in Hebrew. It's not just a former Prime Minister or mayor ... they're the ones who make the headlines, but go to the blog, [Failed Messiah](#), and you will see the fraud, the greed, the misconduct that is becoming rampant almost on a daily basis in the Jewish world ... all in the name either of the "Holy Land" or seemingly holy people.

And let me tell you about some "seemingly holy people." When a Catholic man chooses to become a priest, he is said to have taken on the sacrament of "Holy Orders." But recent revelations indicate that there has been a lot of unholiness behind these Orders. The revelations of sexual abuse by priests, in most every country and under the cruelest of circumstances, has shaken the very foundations of the Catholic Church, from the parish priest and reaching close to the seat of St. Peter, leading the National Catholic Reporter to write that the Church now faces "the largest institutional crises in centuries, possibly in Church history."

What we have learned is that a white collar really doesn't tell you much about a person. But you know what? That is equally true about a black hat or a knitted yarmelka.

What I am going to now say is upsetting ... upsetting for you to hear and upsetting for me to say. But it has to be said because so much has been said about the problems with Catholic holy men but not enough has been said about the problems with seemingly Jewish holy men. You see, the problem in religious life today is not just with priests, but also with rabbis. I am

now going to read you a list of headlines compiled from various newspapers in recent weeks ... all involving rabbis:

- May 13 – Hasid claims Rabbi abused him
- May 11 – Rabbi allegedly stole professional gambler's money.
- May 7 Rabbi indicted for shooting student in Mafia style hit.
- May 6 – Chassidic Rabbi goes to prison.
- April 27 – Rabbi confesses: "I'm a money launderer – I'm going to be arrested.
- April 20 – Rabbi who solicited converts for sexual favors accused of funding extremists.
- April 18 – Rabbi linked to Medicaid scam.
- April 16 – Rabbi sent slimy email to undermine rival.
- April 12 – Rabbi sentenced to 32 years for sexually abusing teen.
- April 12 – Rabbi suspected of money laundering.
- April 8 – Rabbi on probation, under sex offender restrictions for 3 years.

And remember, April might have been a slow month because Pesach intervened ... and May still has a week to go! We've got a problem! And it is very similar to the problem of the Catholic Church and we better do something about it. Catholics are leaving their churches by the droves ... and the same thing can happen in the Jewish world as well. And one of the roots of the problem may be found in a similar source as that in the Catholic Church. In light of the Enlightenment, when people started questioning religious authority, Catholicism put into law the idea of papal infallibility; encouraging people to believe that their religious leader knew it all! The same thing happened in the Jewish community. Also in light of the Enlightenment, many rabbis underscored the concept of *daas Torah*, with the common belief being that your rabbi knows it all and is to be followed not just in religious issues but in marital and social and economic issues as well. "*Al tivtechu bindivim b'ven adam* – do not rely on nobles nor on a human being," said the psalmist. We all have put too much faith in titles and as Bracha Goetz, a woman from Baltimore, wrote in a most courageous article in the Jewish Press, "Silly me ... it took me so long to open my eyes to the fact that we could have religious leaders who appear outwardly very pious and above reproach, but really aren't. Waking up is a struggle, all right."

We've all got to wake up! Nachshon ben Aminodav reminds us that one's status tells us nothing of his stature. One's wealth tells us nothing of his wisdom. One's credit rating tells us nothing of character development. One's popularity tells us nothing of his personality. One's name tells us nothing of his nobility. One's title tells us nothing of one's true identity.

Yes, our Torah reading today tells us about the twelve princes of the Tribe of Israel. Nachshon was unique, the only one who did not have God's name in his name. But there was something else unique about Nachshon that was different from the other princes of Israel. The other eleven are identified with the title "Nasi -- the prince." Nachshon, alone, of the twelve, is not mentioned by title. And he was the most princely of them all.

Long ago the Almighty told the prophet Samuel, "Do not judge one by his appearance and by his height." "*Ki hadam yireh l'einaiem v'hashem yireh lalevov* – the man looks to the outward appearance but God looks to the heart." That is where it really counts!

Let us take this lesson to heart. The name that really counts is not the one given to us but the one we make for ourselves. Let us conduct our lives in keeping with the words of the Psalmist: “*N’ki kapaim u’var levav* – let us exhibit to one and all not only clean hands but a pure heart as well.”

Follow “What the rabbi is reading” at: rabbiwohlberg.wordpress.com and on Twitter: twitter.com/rabbiwohlberg

Sermons/052210

© copyright 2010 by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. All rights reserved.

www.bethfiloh.com