

“All Just One Big Lie”
Parashat Vayeshev 5769
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Many of us have been pained to watch the constant upheaval of the stock market and world financial markets over these last several months, which has claimed major companies, cost people jobs, and hammered our own investment and retirement portfolios. Well, just when we thought the news couldn't get any worse—we find out about Bernie Madoff and his Ponzi scheme which cost his investors oh, \$50 BILLION dollars or so. This former chairman of NASDAQ played all of his investors and was finally exposed by the world financial crisis—he could no longer cover his massive losses.

The list of Jewish tzedakot affected includes some pretty big names—Hadassah lost \$90 million, YU over \$100 million, our local JFGW \$10 million, just to name a few places that were hit; a number of major philanthropists and foundations have been decimated or wiped out as well.

The description that had been on his web site is quite ironic under the circumstances—“In an era of faceless organizations owned by other equally faceless organizations, Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC harks back to an earlier era in the financial world: The owner's name is on the

door. Clients know that Bernard Madoff has a personal interest in maintaining the unblemished record of value, fair-dealing, and high ethical standards that has always been the firm's hallmark.”

That's how he marketed and branded himself. And yet, when it came right down to it, as the SEC documents indicated—Madoff told his sons--the business was “all just one big lie”.

Unfortunately, as we know, lying and deception are not just a product of our times, but a distasteful aspect of human behavior that goes back thousands of years. This week's parasha of Vayeshev is not the first biblical parasha containing lies or acts of deception, but it is an interesting coincidence that we actually have **three** pretty big lies in our parasha today. Can anyone identify any of these three incidents? (*question*)

- 1) Jacob's sons allowing Jacob to believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal when they had actually sold him into slavery
- 2) Tamar/her father-in-law Judah
- 3) Potiphar's wife and Joseph

Let's see what lessons we can learn from the biblical characters' reactions to being deceived, in the hope that we can find some helpful insights in our response to the Madoff scandal.

1) Jacob's example—it's hard to come to any conclusions on this one—because he didn't actually find out that it was a lie until much later, but probably never actually found out the whole truth—that the brothers had sold him to slavery—he just learned that Joseph was not dead. So I don't think we can say how he reacted to finding out that he was deceived.

2) Judah/Tamar—when Judah realizes that it was his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar, rather than a prostitute, who had seduced him by the side of the road, and that he was the one who impregnated her, he backs off his threat to have her killed and recognizes and admits that he was actually at least partly responsible for this deception, since he did not fulfill his promise of giving her his third son Shelah as a husband to fulfill the levirate obligations.

Judah's response fits with the theme of Jeremy's d'var Torah—taking responsibility—though it was Judah who was deceived, he realizes that he is also at fault for actions that he took (or, as in this case, didn't take). Note that one of the children born to Tamar is a boy named Perez, who is the great ancestor of King David, suggesting that the biblical text does not hold her responsible in a negative way for what happened.

3) Joseph/Potiphar's wife—

Joseph is thrown into prison, to the lowest of low places, and yet he picks himself up from the depths, and shows his strength and resilience in establishing his role as the jailers' assistant, and, then, as the interpreter of the dreams of Pharaoh's butler and baker. He goes to them and asks, "why do you appear downcast today?" He could be wallowing in his own misery, and instead he's looking out for others and their well-being.

Joseph responds to being the victim of a lie with kindness and righteousness. People need help, and he aims to provide it.

So what can we learn from these cases about responding to "the big lie?" of this last week? Can we trust and have faith again? Madoff was a "member of the tribe", one of us made good, using the money he saved from being a Long Island lifeguard and building it into a successful family business.

What does this incident say about the future of Jewish philanthropy—do we trust the charities to make good choices about how to protect/invest/use our money?

ANSWER: Like Judah, individuals and institutions who invested with Madoff, have to take some responsibility for what happened to them—

Madoff's firm was not transparent whatsoever, it was shrouded in secrecy; without transparency, these things can happen. It doesn't excuse what Madoff did in the least, but we can learn a valuable lesson about carefully researching potential investment outlets and making sure there are ways to hold them properly accountable before it is too late

And, like Joseph, we need to pick ourselves up off the ground and realize that this, more than ever, is the time to care about the well-being of others. Reportedly Hadassah received two significant donations this week to help make up for the loss and ensure the continued building of the Hadassah Medical Center Tower (that we saw in its early stages this past summer) in Jerusalem. We still need to trust, we still need to give—the value of tzedakah is still pre-eminent and its purposes are still sacred.

This topic of tzedakah is also particularly relevant given that Hanukkah begins tomorrow. The custom of giving gelt originated as a way to give to teachers and support those who teach Torah in the community, an extremely worthy cause. Now we can continue that tradition of giving gelt to causes that are worthy.

We can respond to Madoff's deception that has damaged Jewish philanthropists and philanthropies by stepping up to perform greater acts of

tzedakah ourselves—we respond to deception not by despairing or losing trust or faith, but with truth and righteousness.

Those who need help to do their important work now may need that help more than ever before—even before the Madoff affair, things were tough because of the economy, and it's only been exacerbated in this past week—some charities are hurting, and some big donors are hurting and may not be able to help in the same way as before, and so the burden of responsibility falls on the entire Jewish community to pick up the slack.

We will get through this. But we can each take steps to emphasize the culture of philanthropy. Let's make the contributions we can make before 12/31 and throughout the year—tzedakah has never been more important.

No, Madoff is “not good for the Jews”. But in our response we can still show that we can be a light unto the nations—thus bringing the light of Hanukkah, and the miracle of the continued survival of our tiny people, into its fullest and most blessed expression.