

Spinka

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

It was a sad day for Orthodox Judaism when the New York Times ran this story:

December 20, 2007. The grand rabbi of Spinka, a Brooklyn-based Hasidic sect, was arrested Wednesday with his executive assistant in Los Angeles on charges that they arranged and profited from inflated charitable donations that saved the donors millions of dollars in federal income taxes.

I was not at all surprised. Something like this, involving Hasidic dynasties, comes to light almost each year. I was just amazed it took so long and that only Spinka is involved, because this has been going on for so long and amongst so many different sects and on almost every continent, that I'm surprised so little has come to light.

If rebbes are endowed with hotlines to heaven, how come anyone ever gets caught? And if they are such great spiritual leaders, then I guess it's a case of "healer cure thyself". More importantly, why do people and organizations that present themselves as religious, seem to go in for this as much as if not more than anyone else? If they are, as they claim, such important charitable and educational organizations with schools and yeshivas, what sort of education are they giving? That the state is a sucker to be milked? That the Law of The Land is a joke?

There is absolutely no basis in Jewish Law for stealing from or defrauding secular authorities, regardless of their denomination. So why is fraud and dubious business practices as common as they are amongst people who outwardly proclaim their own sanctity in dress and ritual?

There is a mood in parts of the Orthodox world that justifies this because they have persuaded themselves that, as they are fighting God's battle, anything goes. But at the same time they are creating an impossible situation by encouraging mendacity. The ultra-Orthodox world has, as never before, denigrated earning a living in favor of study as a career. It can do this because the world has become increasingly friendly to the indigent and superstitious moderns seem ready to hand over vast sums to almost anyone wearing black as a sort of insurance policy for the next world.

The culture of study as a career, regardless of whether one is temperamentally or intellectually suited, is now so widespread that young Orthodox girls are conditioned to reject marriage proposals unless the young man is dedicated to "sitting and learning". The motivation behind this elevation of full-time and perpetual study is praiseworthy. It is to bring Judaism and Torah study back from the brink to which both assimilation and Hitler brought it sixty years ago. Anyway study of Torah is an essential means of expressing one's religious energy and devotion. In this it has

proved so successful that never, since the glory days of Babylon, have there been as many Jews studying Torah full time as there are today. I cannot think of a time when economic, political and social conditions been as favorable to so many Jews. But this all comes at a price. The issue is who, apart from State welfare, supports these now hundreds of thousands with no job, no means of earning a livelihood?

For wealthy families there is no financial problem. But with the sort of exponential family growth not seen since Biblical times, you have to be one of a pretty small number of magnates to fund the number of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren all clamoring for support, and still have any spare change for charity! But how many property millionaires are there?

With no family business, no rich grandpa, if getting an education that might qualify you for a job has been excoriated as anti-spiritual and corrupt, and if you are not one of a small percentage of top academic yeshiva students who might fill the small number of teaching jobs in yeshivas that are available after all the sons and sons-in-law of the Rosh Yeshiva have been accommodated, then what avenues are open to you? In the past you could rely on your wife to go out and work (as well as look after five to ten children—superwomen, saints, or victims?). But nowadays there is too much competition for too few places.

Is it surprising that, in addition to Rabbis laundering money, more and more young ultra-Orthodox men end up smuggling currencies or drugs and looking for all manner of illegal ways of turning a fast buck? The situation has gotten so serious that at grassroots levels things are beginning to change and the dreaded words “career training” are being whispered in the halls of Torah. But it is still unofficial and beneath the yeshiva radar. The biggest and best yeshivahs still preach perpetual study as the ideal.

The famous Gemara in Brachot (35b) discusses the need to combine Torah study with work. There it says many tried to follow Shimon Bar Yochai and only study and failed and many followed Rabbi Yishmael’s instructions to combine study with a career and succeeded. That was then. Nowadays full-time study too often means unproductive attendance at a dubious institution for the whole of one’s working life, and anyone who doesn’t study full time is regarded as a bad catch!

Now if there were no pressure to make money, or if a person were not judged by his pocketbook—that would be one thing. But in the most Orthodox of circles the demands of the materialist society are increasing all the time, to the point of sickness. Increasing and exaggerated material aspirations without the means of satisfying them, leads inevitably to a culture of deceit and dishonesty. It is hardly surprising that this has become institutionalized and so widespread. And even without being a materialist, simply educating children in the USA is a massive commitment.

It is a sad reflection on current religious leadership that their only response is to try to justify, explain, or even blame the wicked prosecutors for not turning a blind eye. What a crushing condemnation of our present

religious climate. All of this is reminiscent of what the Talmud says were the conditions that led to the fall of both previous Jewish States and Temples: excessive materialism, disdain for other humans, and a failure of leadership. I don't want to be a prophet of doom but it seems to me that we are heading for another major disaster.