

# Jeffrey Epstein and Maimonides

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I needed distraction from hypocrisy, politics, demonstrations, and looting, this past week, so I watched a series on Netflix called “Filthy Rich.” It is about a convicted pedophile, Jeffrey Epstein, who got away with it for so long because so many politicians, lawyers, policemen, businessmen, assistants, foundations, royalty, and friends facilitated, benefitted, and covered for him. He was convicted in New York and died in prison by an apparent suicide – although no one seriously believes that. There were enough people who wanted to make sure he could not divulge anything they might not like.

I have previously argued that we, as Jews, ought not to be held to account for someone with a Jewish name or a remote Jewish background. Thank goodness the judge who finally convicted Epstein (and supported the victims) also had a Jewish name (Berman, may he be blessed!).

Yet as I watched this documentary, I experienced a profound sense of embarrassment. I turned to Maimonides for consolation and confirmation that our Jewish ethical values are paramount. Acting in a way that brings credit to us as Jews and as human beings is the foundation of our universal moral code. Giving in to other people’s distorted moral claims or tolerating them is a betrayal of our values and an act of desecration of God.

One of the most important texts in Judaism is the *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides. It was written a thousand years ago and is the first systematic documentation of all Jewish laws from the Bible through the Talmud until his era – regardless of whether they were currently relevant or not. It not only deals with laws but also the foundational ideas of Judaism.

The first section of *Mishneh Torah* is called The Foundations of Torah, *Yesodei HaTorah*. After discussing God and the soul, Maimonides goes on to deal with the rest of the Halachic legal system. And you will never guess what the first of these laws is. Not ritual, keeping the Sabbath, what you eat or how you pray or go to synagogue. No, it is the obligation to sanctify God’s name. To glorify God by behaving in a way that encourages others to behave likewise – ethically, sanctifying God’s name. As opposed to *Hilul Hashem*, desecrating God’s name ( literally making in mundane and ordinary).

The historical background for Maimonides's choice was the tremendous pressure, to the point of death, that both Christianity and Islam were imposing on Jews in an effort to get them to abandon their own tradition. Many Jews gave up the struggle. But some chose, instead, to choose martyrdom and sacrificed their lives. There is a debate as to whether Maimonides, in order to escape, converted to Islam when Cordoba was conquered by jihadis. But, in *Yesodei HaTorah*, he says that when one is asked to repudiate one's religion in public, it is a mitzva not to. This is *Kiddush HaShem* and a term that is applied to those who the Nazis and their allies exterminated.

The term, *Kidush HaShem*, has its origin in the Torah. The Talmud in Yoma (86a), says that some actions can be regretted, atoned for and forgiven right away. Some require waiting until Yom Kipur for final atonement. But there is one sin that nothing, not even Yom Kipur, can atone for and that is a *Hilul HaShem*.

But what is an example of *Hilul HaShem*? That Talmud explains that it is when a rabbi, a religious Jew or anyone who ought to know better, behaves in a manner that casts aspersions upon their probity and thus brings Judaism into disrepute. That is in a category of its own. And that is why Maimonides puts it at the top of his top ten list of commandments that relate to God and are the priorities of our faith. We have an obligation to distance ourselves from people who desecrate God's name and bring religion and our people into disrepute.

We are currently experiencing a torrent of public witch-hunting and ideological dogma in which people are looking for scapegoats. There is indeed a lot wrong with our societies. But there is also so much good. In such a climate, how one behaves and what one says in public is particularly important. The wise need to guard their tongues as well as their behavior. And although Epstein was a gross example of betrayal of values, he was not alone.

What disturbs me is the number of very orthodox Jews (let alone those who have so far abandoned Judaism and are only Jewish in name) who, in pursuit of money, ambition and power, think nothing of behaving in a dishonest, corrupt and immoral way – and do not seem to think twice about it. This year alone, I have come across twelve cases that have been reported in the press of Jews who have acted in such a way as to damage us in public through their selfish cupidity. We must clean out our own Augean stables. Sadly, as Ecclesiastes says, money seems to be able to take care of almost everything.

Maimonides implies that it is better to eat pork and be honest and upright

than it is to eat kosher and be corrupt. To adapt the Book of Proverbs, anyone who has lost his or her moral compass is like a gold ring in a pig's snout. Anyone, no matter how far he or she may be from Jewish identity, still has a moral obligation to avoid discrediting us all. Whether it is in matters of sex, business, or prejudice, one bad apple can ruin the whole barrel.