

Apologize?

Apologizing, if we mean it, is an essential part of Jewish religious tradition, not to mention psychological health. Perhaps there is a connection to Jewish guilt, self-criticism, and a host of other moral sentiments that are excellent unless they are taken too far and become obsessive. I am beginning to think we have reached that point with apologies.

What are the issues? Well, let's take Madoff first. It appears (prior to the court case) that this guy is a self-confessed crook who beggared rich and modest, charities and businesses alike. I still don't know whether he was always crooked, whether he became crooked out of malice or desperation, or whether he miscalculated. The evidence so far does not seem to indicate an honest man. But the way everyone, rabbis in particular, are falling over themselves to curse him, excommunicate him, get on their high horses, is beginning to get nauseating.

I am in no way excusing him. But where were those voices these past fifteen years as everyone rode the waves of boom, bust, and boom, and huge profits, and rising home values and pension funds, and "irrational exuberance", and let us grab as much as possible and who cares? I cannot remember a lot of rabbis warning us then about the dangers of overreliance on materialism and the need for ethical standards, due diligence, and being wary of unrealistic gains.

Yes, there have always been voices in the wilderness, like the amazing and impressive Dr. Meir Tamari, formerly of the Bank of Israel. For years, he has relentlessly campaigned throughout the Jewish world for high standards of business ethics, simply quoting our holy sources, writing, and lecturing. And being ignored by almost everyone, from saints to sinners, and certainly getting hardly any support from rabbis, as he himself has often lamented.

One of Dr. Tamari's many achievements was the creation of centers for business ethics. One has done important but unappreciated work in London, supported by the Chief Rabbi, and circulating material to all synagogues, but still largely ignored—certainly by those to the right. Then there is the Business Ethics Center of Jerusalem, whose website ought to be on every Jew's list of favorites.

But Madoff is not typical. We have our good guys and crooks, just like everyone else. We are not better than anyone else, even if we are called upon to try to be. We have our doctors and charity workers, our Nobel Prize winners, and our hookers and murderers. I may be responsible for the welfare of my brothers and sisters, but I cannot be held responsible for their evil deeds unless I participated, encouraged, or could have stopped them. Do I expect Italians to apologize for the Mafia, or Catholics for child abusers, or Cambodians for Pol Pot, or Russians for Stalin? I have nothing to apologize for. I am embarrassed that a Jew should desecrate our good name—but the law is against desecrating God's name, not mine, and He'll deal with it no doubt.

I feel the same way about all those supposedly religious people around the world who are fanatical murderers, political extremists, power hungry or honour obsessed pursuers of self-interest using religion "as a shovel to dig" their own graves with, as the rabbis say. But why should I apologize for them—just because I happen to love my religious life and since I am overtly religious some might confuse us and assume we are all the same? I have nothing more in common with corrupt religion than I do with left-handed dyslexic chimpanzees. Sure Dawkins and Hitchens can make a good living showing what a mess religious people have made of life, and how much cruelty they have inflicted. On that issue I completely agree with them. But I am no more to blame for religious abuses than they are for the abuses of antireligious leaders like Mao Tse Tung.

In Gaza, Israel has killed too many civilians, but it certainly has not targeted them. Regardless of what their errors were, it has not used, say, the tactics of both sides in the Yugoslavia wars. It has not sent random rockets at civilian targets year in year out. Neither has it lined up opponents and shot them in cold blood as Hamas has. No doubt it will be argued that it's Israel's fault because Israel brutalized them. But I will not apologize for Israel's right to defend itself even if I believe they might have contributed to the situation in several ways. It is sad to see both Neturei Karta on the one hand, and renegades on the other, groveling as if that can either do any good or change anything.

I will try my best to do whatever I can to correct errors, to campaign for honesty, fairness, kindness, and humanity. I will work to build bridges and bonds with caring honest men and women of other religions and nationalities, but I won't apologize for existing and wanting to protect my home even with deterrent force. If I have offended someone personally, I will apologize. If a soldier knowingly kills innocents, then that is on his conscience, not mine, unless I gave him the order to do it.

I think we can be too easily swayed by the howling chorus of condemnation, particularly aggressive in Europe, that is motivated by other criteria than honesty. We can be browbeaten into feeling we are in the wrong and need to apologize. Perhaps the insecurity of the Diaspora leads to this kind of effete guilt. This does not mean that I do not welcome constructive criticism, but it needs to be even-handed. And if one needs further evidence that the situation is not so black-and-white as the BBC might imply, it is that Egypt is clearly interested in seeing Hamas dealt with. War is awful and terrible. It must be avoided at all costs. But a war to eradicate attacks on civilians cannot be apologized for.

Was Moses right to slay the Egyptian? Some Jews clearly did not think so then. But he did not apologize. Times haven't changed