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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Reform Judaism is the official voice of the Union for Reform Judaism, linking the institutions and affiliates of Reform Judaism with every Reform Jew. *RJ* covers developments within our Movement while interpreting world events and Jewish tradition from a Reform perspective. Shared by 305,000 member households, *RJ* conveys the creativity, diversity, and dynamism of Reform Judaism.

DEAR READER

Collective Shame Is Our Lot

Every few months, it seems, I turn on the television and see another group of prominent Jews—sometimes rabbis—being paraded in handcuffs before the cameras. There have always been Jewish criminals, but nothing in our history prepares us for the sickening and increasingly common spectacle of communal leaders being hauled off to jail.

Notably, many of these lawbreakers are *haredim*—ultra-Orthodox Jews. Some *haredim* are scrupulous in observing traditional Jewish law, but are less than scrupulous in obeying the laws of their country. That said, there is no place for self-righteousness here. Bernie Madoff is not an Orthodox Jew, and I remember the president of a Reform congregation who disappeared with his family in the middle of the night after bilking fellow synagogue members of considerable sums.

Judaism teaches, of course, that guilt is always individual: Criminals alone are responsible for their actions. Nonetheless, many of us, including myself, respond to news reports of Jewish malfeasance with profound unease. It is not guilt that we feel, but a sense of collective shame.

But why should this be so? Why do Jews experience an outsized sense of collective shame when one of us commits a widely publicized crime?

It is our feeling of failure, I suspect. Judaism is not a confessional faith. We Jews are a people, linked in a bond of shared responsibility with every other Jew. Individually and communally, we undertake to pass on to other Jews the ethical principles of our heritage. Then comes a distressing newspaper headline, and we feel that somehow we've failed to do so. When a member of my family goes astray, I feel pained—and responsible; so too when a member of my larger Jewish family turns to crime.

Our shame and discomfort are also rooted in an ancient fear. For much of our history, a high-profile crime committed by a Jew would have unleashed a vicious storm of anti-Semitism. While that is not likely to happen in North America today, the fear endures, at least on a visceral level.

And, finally, our shame bespeaks anger and indignation. Judaism rests on a demanding code of ethical conduct. Without individual righteousness and social justice, there is no Judaism. Jews who have turned their back on these fundamental values are guilty of betraying their faith and their people.

Is there an antidote to collective shame? There is not—nor should there be. As committed Jews, we take pride in the accomplishments of Jews everywhere. Therefore, when prominent Jews or Jewish leaders dishonor the tradition they profess to uphold, collective shame is our lot.

Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie
President, Union for Reform Judaism

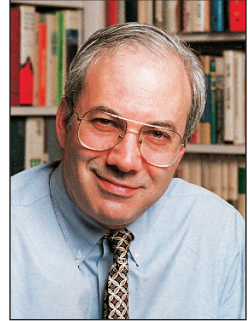


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