

Parshat Vayakheyl-Pekuday  
I Know Madoff  
Rabbi Alan B. Lucas  
March 21, 2009

I have a confession to make – I know Madeoff.

Actually we call him Madoff but Madeoff, Madoff – what difference does it make – I just feel badly that I have been holding out on you and I want to confess my association and friendship with him. The fact is I have known him for some time – roughly 15-20 years by my accounting. He has been a guest in my house many times, spent a few *Shabbatot* with us, he has eaten at our table – he was a guest at my daughter Dina's wedding, in fact he was supposed to be a witness on her ketubah but he was held up in traffic and we had to find a last minute replacement. And most importantly I want you to know that I am proud of my association with him – I like him very much, always have, and in many ways I think he represents the best of who and what we are as a people.

Now for those of you who are trying to figure out what the heck I am talking about – allow me to explain that the Madoff I know is not the Bernie Madeoff who is currently sitting in a jail cell in lower Manhattan, but Jonathan Madoff originally from Owings Mills, Maryland who is a friend of my kids from their days at Camp Ramah in the Poconos and is currently a social worker working with “at-risk” minority kids in a depressed neighborhood of Philadelphia where he currently lives. He will be leaving this job this summer to work with our kids as a *Yoetz* – a counselor for our teens on Ramah Seminar in Israel and then he will be joining *Nefesh B'nefesh* and making *aliyah* to Israel. And it is a shame that everyone knows about Bernie Madoff and so few people know about Jonathan Madoff and therein lies my tale for this morning.

I was reminded of Jonathan Madoff as I was reading an article in yesterday's New York Times that was titled, “B. Madoff, and proud of it” by Clyde Haberman. He writes about one B. Jeffrey Madoff (who also pronounces his name Madoff) who has received dozens and dozens of phone calls from people who saw the listing for him in the Manhattan phone directory and figured that he might be the infamous Bernard and decided to tell him off. “The calls,” Mr. Madoff said, “have come at all hours of the day and night generally from people who are either upset or unhinged or both.” He thought things would get better now that Madoff is behind bars but sadly as Haberman writes, “rationality is not a guiding force with some of these people...”

And it is precisely that irrationality that I want to speak to you about this morning. Gail Collins wrote a wonderful op-ed piece for the Times this past week – here was her opening paragraph: “Angry. So very, very angry. Unable to speak due to mega-anger washing over every pore and fiber of my being. Anger is in. (Hope's so...January.)”

Ms. Collins accurately describes the anger that seems to have washed over much of our nation and in her column she lists the objects toward which our anger has been directed these past few days and weeks, she writes: “I am extremely angry at Tim Geithner for being such a baby that he couldn't scare a bunch of AIG quants into forgoing their bonuses. I hate those bankers. However Jimmie Stewart seemed nice in that movie about Christmas. In fact she writes, “I hate everybody in the world of finance. Also accountants, since its tax time. And I'm

totally angry at everybody in Congress for trying to pretend that they are angrier than I am. And she goes on to complain about Barak Obama. "Why doesn't he sound angrier? Doesn't he understand that his job right now is to be the Great Venter? Sure he keeps *saying* he's mad. But you can tell he doesn't really mean it as he tries and focus on more important things? If John McCain were president, she writes, you can bet that we'd be getting outrage 24-7. McCain would be so angry that we'd be scared he'd have a coronary or invade a new country. The New York Post would be running "Calm Down, Mr. President" headlines.

Of course Gail Collins was writing tongue in cheek to try and get us to look at ourselves in the mirror – and to be quite honest – what we see is not a pretty picture. Anger is in. And the media is reveling in it – showing every new outrage and raising the decibel levels to unprecedented heights – we are angry about Madoff, AIG, Congress, the loss of value in our homes, the stock market -- the list goes on and on – we have watched our savings disappear, our retirement funds are a shadow of what they once were and we are angry! What was that famous line from the 1976 movie "Network" where Howard Beale the TV News Anchor sticks his head out the window and yells, "I'm mad as hell and I 'm not going to take it any more." Well that's how we feel. Remember the rest of his rant from that movie? "I want you to get up right now, sit up, go to your windows, open them and stick your head out and yell - 'I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore!' Things have got to change. But first, you've gotta get mad!... You've got to say, 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!' Then we'll figure out what to do about the depression and the inflation and the oil crisis. But first get up out of your chairs, open the window, stick your head out, and yell, and say it: and then he screams at the top of his lungs) "I'M AS MAD AS HELL, AND I'M NOT GOING TO TAKE THIS ANYMORE!"

Feel better? I don't. And that is the problem with anger. As emotions go it is the least productive.

Someone calls you an "inconsiderate idiot," and you feel angry. Someone cuts in front of you on the freeway, and you feel angry. Someone attacks your friend, and you feel angry. Someone tells you that you will not get the pay increase you think you deserve, and you feel angry. What all of these situations have in common is that we experience a loss of control over our lives, over factors affecting us and our values and when we feel this loss of control, we get angry. We are frustrated when we can't get where we need to get on time – and we get angry. We are frustrated when we are not being treated fairly and we respond by getting angry. We are frustrated when we did everything right and our savings disappear – so we get angry. When we get angry, we usually think we know what *caused* the problem. We have some target for our anger. It may be the person criticizing you, the person who cut you off on the freeway, an attacker, your boss, or even yourself. Anger probably is one of those mechanisms that goes back to our caveman days when a burst of energy in response to a threat that made us feel helpless, was a useful tool in saving our lives. And even today, anger can be used constructively to give us the energy we need to fight back if physically attacked. However, it has been my experience that for most situations anger is counter-productive, it merely clouds our judgment and creates extra stress. It has been my experience that when anger prompts aggressive behavior toward other people, it can permanently harm relationships--especially with those we love. Prolonged or frequent resentment another name for mild anger, has been shown to be a significant cause of cardiovascular problems and heart attacks. It is the villain behind "type A" behavior.

More often than not, anger is part of our problem not part of our solution, so if you are caught up in the current anger craze – if you find yourself feeling angry about things – your life, the

world, the general state of the economy - my advice to you is, in the words of the kids, “get a grip.”

I believe this is what the *Sefat Emet* was trying to teach us in today’s torah portion. Who, you ask, was the *Sefat Emet*? The *Sefat Emet* as he was popularly known was Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger – he was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1846, he is a tamudist and Hasidic teacher who wrote a phenomenal commentary on the torah which was called, *Sefat Emet* – which means: “Language of Truth” – and that became his name as well. In 1870 he became the second Gerer Rebbe succeeding his grandfather. His commentary is wonderful in that it mines the torah for moral and ethical lessons that can be applied to life. His title, *Sefat Emet* is taken from the passage in Proverbs (12:19) *Sefat Emet tikon le’ad*, “Truthful speech abides forever.” He died in Poland in 1905.

And in his commentary on today’s *parasha*, he left us an important insight that I believe can help us through these troubled times. If you will open your *humashim* to page 553 – in Chapter 35 verse 3, in the opening words to *parshat Va-yak-hel*, it states, “You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day.” *Lo t’vaaru eysh b’chol moshvoteychem b’yom hashabat.*

Now the rabbis interpreted this verse as a clear indication that the creation of fire –*lo t-vaaru eysh* – and the use of it for cooking and baking were to be forbidden activities in the observance of Shabbat. Their close reading of the verse *t’vaaru* – led them to conclude that it was not fire that was prohibited on Shabbat but the kindling of it. And as a result there was no prohibition against enjoying a fire that was lit before Shabbat, benefitting from its light and heat. And in fact that is exactly what Shabbat candles were originally intended to be. By lighting them just before Shabbat began they originally were more than the symbolic ushering in of the holy day that they are in our time but originally the very practical lighting of the Shabbat lights at the very last moment before the Sabbath begins – so as to maximize the time their light can be enjoyed through the night that was to follow. The Karaites, a sect of Jews, read this verse very differently as to prohibit fire and its enjoyment at all - -and they would sit in the dark throughout the Shabbat.

But the *Sefat Emet*, while clearly following the laws regarding the kindling of fire on Shabbat laid down by the rabbis who preceded him saw something additional that this verse came to teach us. If you look at the note in our *humash* on the bottom of the page – right under the line, #3 “You shall kindle no fire. This is interpreted to include the fire of anger. Arguments and angry shouts are as much a disruption of the Shabbat as working and spending money.” Although he is not cited here, I believe it is the *Sefat Emet* that is being referred to. For in his commentary on this verse he wrote, “one is not permitted to get angry on the Sabbath even if it involves a mitzvah. He went on to say, “one should not light the fire of anger in his dwelling on the Sabbath day.”

Shabbat as the note in our *humash* would imply and the *Sefat Emet* makes clear is indeed a day to “get a grip”. Shabbat was a day to take a deep breath and take a rest – not only from the work that occupies us so mightily during the other six days – but from the emotions that have taken control of our lives. Shabbat is a time to reassess, regroup and relax.

With all that is going on in our world these days, we need Shabbat now more than ever. You need to set a side one day, come to shul and just sit here, take a deep breath and relax. We need a break from the relentless pounding we are getting in our newspapers, on our TV’s.

When we are mad as hell, we *can't* take it anymore and that is not healthy for anyone. So, relax, enjoy this Shabbat day. Enjoy that you are surrounded by family and friends – the joy of young people who are celebrating their bar and bat mitzvah. Enjoy the *hazzan's* wonderful *davening* – let his *kavana* and magnificent voice surround you and comfort you, inspire you and energize you.

And if you have to think about something – well for God's sake forget about Bernie Madoff and think about Jonathan Madoff – remember that not all Jewish kids have lost their way and not all of them have lost their values. There is a young man in Philadelphia, and I am proud to know him – and while no newspaper is writing about him and no TV announcer is interviewing him and while no paparazzi are dogging him every step of the way –he is quietly going about his life doing what we Jews were always meant to do – make the world a better place. So relax. And the next time someone gets angry about Madeoff, I hope you'll just smile and say, "Yeah, but have you heard about Madoff? He is this Jewish kid, a product of Camp Ramah, he is working with under-privileged kids in the inner city of Philadelphia – he'll be making *aliyah* this summer."

See you think about Madeoff and get angry – me, I think about Madoff and feel better already – Shabbat Shalom.