



## **Moral Outrage Yes, Simplistic Thinking No, Shevat 5782**

### **Thoughts about the terrible crimes committed by a trusted leader**

In 1993, when the Lubavitcher Rebbe passed away, I was a young Rabbi listening to troubling statements about his being the Moshiach. This invited scorn and ridicule upon the Chabad community from the broader Jewish world. I delivered a sermon about the underpinnings of Lubavitch culture, which heightens Messianic fervor and led to these problematic claims. Disagreeing with these outrageous statements, I, nonetheless, encouraged my community to check their own Messianic temperature. Did they eagerly await redemption with the same passion as the Lubavitchers they were currently condemning? It is always easier to critique a different culture than to appreciate its core values and to inspect our own commitment to those important values.

Twenty-eight years later I feel as if I am standing in a similar position. The horrific and systematic sexual abuses by a leading charedi personality are unspeakable. Also criminal are the tepid responses to these crimes, emerging from leaders of the very world in which he assaulted young and innocent victims. I do not need to add my voice to the chorus of articles and statements which have correctly denounced both the crime and the reaction. The crimes are unspeakable, the public funeral disgusting, and the responses of numerous leaders both lack moral wisdom and will embolden future predators. Lives have been broken (literally) and hearts have been shattered. I am restating the obvious, so that my comments below are not misunderstood.

I want to address a completely different layer of this conversation. It is easy to be triumphalist, to virtue signal or to score points for your own ideology. Such is not the way of honest and G-d fearing people. In addition to denouncing, it is crucial to take our own temperature: to identify the cultural roots and communal values which led to this tragedy, assess those values and inspect our own balancing of these values. Here are two issues to consider.

#### **Indoctrination or Information**

About ten years ago, my hesder Yeshiva invited a thoughtful and well-known charedi educator for a town hall meeting. One Israeli student asked the rabbi: Why don't you bring your students to visit our yeshiva? They would meet serious-minded and religiously pious students who merge Torah study with army service, verifying that the two can be successfully blended. The charedi rabbi responded: "I can't allow my students to meet boys like you. If they realized the validity of your alternative approach, my entire effort to craft their identity would be torpedoed." I stood in awe of his honesty and thought hard about his reply.

Authentic religious development demands a calibration between "exposure" and "protection." We all seek the balance between an open encounter with "facts" and a more shielded and sheltered experience which reinforces core values. Too much exposure clouds principles and can impede religious devotion; too much molding and religion becomes synthetic. This rabbi's calibration between exposure and indoctrination was slightly different from mine. However, we were both fellow "calibrators."

The charedi approach attempts to carve out a very insular and protected "safe space" with limited exposure to the broader world. That insularity creates purity as well as clear-cut and unambiguous support for rigorous Torah study. Part of this strategy venerates (and often exaggerates) Torah personalities. Critiquing Torah

personalities would burst the bubble and subvert the agenda of honoring Torah study. An overall culture has been created in which information is more controlled and personalities more one-dimensional and unimpeachable.

If Torah personalities are adulated, Torah sages are consecrated. The doctrine of da'at Torah presumes the infallibility of Torah giants – supreme authorities whose political, moral, and ideological positions are unquestionable. Insularity, information control, and impeccable leaders are all tools of what some would call indoctrination and others would call education.

The repulsive funeral images were, ironically, a microcosm of this communal approach. In the charedi world, eulogies are greatly overstated and larger-than-life retrospectives of lives completely dedicated to Torah study or its values. Extolling the deceased in outsized and often generic fashion lends incredible potency to the core values of Torah study.

Any insular information-controlled society will be, by definition, hierarchical, absent of checks and balances and will demand less accountability from leaders. By contrast, societies with full exposure to “information flow” will, naturally, enjoy greater checks against abuses, demand more accountability from its leaders, and provide realistic views of Torah leaders and their inevitable flaws. However, these open societies will also possess less purity and greater exposure to the vulgarity of modern culture. We all try to balance between “encounter” and “shelter” but it is difficult to have both.

Each person must try to calibrate between information and indoctrination, and choose a community which matches their own brand of balance. Some may believe – and this would be a fair assertion – that any community founded on controlled information is structurally flawed and any model which limits honesty is inherently unethical, even if it provides greater purity and wholesomeness. However, it is also fair to ponder: which community will lead to greater sexual predation? For sure, insulated and hierarchical communities which empower its leaders invite the abuse of power. Alternatively, a more “open community,” with exposure to the broader world may check against abuse of power, but will also flood our minds with broader cultural influences which can also encourage sexual abuse. Encounter with the broader culture exposes us to objectification of women, general violent behavior and even sordid examples of sexual predators. How many charedim in the censored world of Me'ah Shearim –which, by the way, is far less censored than outsiders assume – have heard of Jeffrey Epstein? Exposure to salacious headlines can also encourage predatory behavior. Neither community deliberately intends exploitation; each operates within cultural norms which are geared toward religious goals but which, in our violent world, can enable or encourage abuse. Which community is more threatening to its vulnerable members? I imagine that the statistics show little difference.

### Adopting Change

Fifteen years ago, during a plane flight, a hasid who knew little about computers asked me about the internet. After describing the technology, I cautioned him that, in twenty years, he would not be able to pay his bills without the internet. He looked at me wisely and said, “Yes, but at least I will benefit from twenty years of safety.” I had initially thought I was sitting next to a caveman. I now realize that he was sitting next to a guinea pig. I would experiment with new technology, discover its hazards and create a roadmap for his eventual adoption. My failures would be his traffic signals. Who would meet with better success – the caveman or the guinea pig? It is hard to decide.

When change hits we have two options – early adoption or cautious suspicion. Early adopters – like myself and our community – reap the immense benefits of new technologies and of newly evolved social norms. Early adopters also pay a heavy price, struggling with the dangers and challenges of these new experiences and social agendas. Those who wait on the sideline and are slower to adopt, are more aware of these dangers and better skilled at avoiding them.

Unfortunately, the prevention of sexual abuse in general society is a relatively modern phenomenon. As

recently as fifty years ago, similar abuses occurred, but went unnoticed or, tragically, were whitewashed. Thank G-d, societal awareness has evolved and we have created the interest and the communal instruments to detect, punish and, hopefully, discourage these horrific crimes. Our community adopted these earlier and, assuredly, the charedi community – at some point – will fully adopt them. The pace of change isn't uniform.

This recent horror has definitely amplified the flaws of a community which is slow to adapt to social change. However, there are great benefits in delayed or cautious adaptation. What prices does our community pay as we rush to adopt social change? The answer to that question should be clear enough to every reader.

So condemn these ghastly crimes with every fiber of your religious spirit. Additionally, choose a community whose balancing of values matches your beliefs. Consider which community better calibrates and better deters potential abuses. If you value information and exposure, choose a community which is pivoted upon those values. To me honesty, transparency and accountability of leaders are values well-worth whatever prices I must pay. But there are heavy prices. In today's world there are no free lunches.

Don't simplify the equation and do not simplistically dismiss communal "formulas" different from yours because they balance our shared "core values" differently. That is intellectually dishonest and worse, diverts attention from the more important process of self-inspection, personal growth and communal development.

I wish we could create a world of accountability and exposure coupled with a world of purity and insularity. I wish we could construct a progressive and enlightened society which evolves, but avoids the undisclosed dangers which always accompany change. This is all easier said than done.

I pray for wisdom, balance, honesty and integrity. More so, I pray that not a single person will ever again suffer from monstrous crimes perpetrated by trusted community personalities.

Writing with tears,  
Moshe

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