

December 20, 2008, Vayeshev, The Legacy of Rabbi David Lieber Z"l

I have spent this past week talking about two very different kinds of people, two very different individuals, one of whom I had not heard of until a few weeks ago. And the other whom I've known over 25 years, and who has affected my life profoundly.

The one I'd not heard of until a few weeks ago is named Bernie Madoff. And I spent the good part of this week talking about him, deploring what he did, talking about the Jewish implications and other implications, worrying about what it will do to charitable giving and charitable causes and individuals. And I suppose given as much talk as I did about that individual and the money that he stole, that it would have formed for very good reasons, an appropriate topic for a sermon on this Shabbat morning.

But then someone else whom I did know passed away, and that was Dr. David Lieber. And I thought, I have a choice—I can talk about a righteous person or a wicked one, about the way we should be or the way we should not be. And it was both consonant with our tradition and also better for our souls to talk about a righteous man than to talk about an evil one.

But in a sense, the two come together in terms of the criteria by which we measure their lives. And so in order to tell you about Dr. Lieber's life, which I intend to do this morning, I'm going to do it the only way that he would ever allow me to do it, I know, which is to teach and to talk less about him, although I will, than about a section of the Talmud and what it teaches us about who we should be and what we should be. Because I know that my teacher would disapprove of my speaking about him if I didn't teach something.

One of the passages that has come to mind again and again in this past week in connection with both men is the questions that we are to be asked, according to the Talmud, after we die, the Talmud tells us what it is we are going to be asked before the throne of judgment in order to evaluate our lives, sort of the very final exam. And I'm going to tell you the question so you can start preparing now, and God willing, get the right answer. And you know the very first question, according to the Talmud, that we will all be asked when we get, before the throne of judgment, the first question is, "were you honest in business?"

That is the first question the Jewish tradition teaches that you will be asked. Why? Because you want to know, were you honest where the temptation was to be dishonest? Did you cheat on your taxes? Did you get too much change back and not tell anyone? Did you shave the deal a little bit, even though only you knew it?

Now about the first individual I mentioned, you can imagine how he's going to answer that question. But here is an evaluation of—did you conduct your life in an upright way? Dr. Lieber was an institution builder, what we now call the American Jewish University, which was previously the University of Judaism. He didn't found, but he practically created along with his wonderful partner in arms, Jack Ostrow. It went from a small institution of almost no account or influence to a major force in the Jewish and educational world under his leadership.

But you might like to know what he was before he was president of the University of Judaism. He was rabbi of Sinai Temple in 1950. Before, I dare say, most of us were members. And as the head of these institutions, he built them, not just to be better, but of course to be good. The second question you're asked is, did you set aside time to study Torah?

Now, of course, Dr. Lieber was a scholar, but that isn't actually the part of the Torah that I want to call your attention to, because you may not be aware how much you benefit from the scholarship of Dr. Lieber and even more from his character.

When I was in high school, I had a history professor who taught us about the founding of the United States, and he paraded before us a galaxy of impressive, more than impressive, remarkable men, Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams, Burr, for a while anyway. And he said, but among these and all the others, Franklin, there was only one indispensable man. The indispensable man was Washington, because Washington was the only one whom everyone else respected so much that he could pull them together long enough to found a country. No Washington, he said, no America.

Now, I know this may come as a shock to you, but sometimes when you get a bunch of Jewish scholars together, they're not perfectly peaceful and in accord, there are rivalries, there are jealousies, there are old slights, new slights. In fact, the great scholar, Saul Lieberman, a Talmudist, was once asked, is there any humor in the Talmud? And he said, yes. There is actually a line that's clearly a joke where it says, scholars increase peace in the world. He said, anybody who's ever taught at a university couldn't believe that that's anything but a joke.

And the Conservative movement many years ago decided that the Hertz Chumash, which was almost a hundred years old, needed to be replaced. And he had a galaxy of very impressive scholars and teachers, rabbis, but you needed an indispensable man. You had to wonder, to whom would they all listen? All these people who would get Harold Kushner and Nachum Sarna and Chaim Potok and on and on and on in a room and get them all to cooperate?

The editor of the Torah that you read from this morning was Dr. Lieber. He was the one who did it because not only did he study Torah, but he had the respect of other people who did as well. And that's something that's worth remembering, which is that part of the skill in succeeding. That's right. If you open the page, you'll see him as the editor. I hear the crinkling of pages. That's all right. Go right ahead. I don't want to stop you.

I had the privilege to work on this chumash under his editorship, and I can tell you that he had an extraordinarily keen eye and that nobody in the world could make criticisms more gently than Dr. Lieber. You never came away angry.

That's the second question you get asked. Were you honest in business? Did you set aside time to study Torah? The third question, did you build a family? Dr. Lieber and his wife Esther had four children, all of them kind, good, caring, the same as his grandchildren. And in fact, although

I'm not going to speak to you about all of his children, because I am speaking and I think that it's important to say that I'm not saying this just offhandedly, a couple of years ago in the worst moments that my family has had in a long time, when I was first diagnosed with cancer. In those first few minutes when we discovered the diagnosis and my wife and I looked at each other and said, who do we call now? What do we do? We called Dr. Lieber's son, Dr. Danny Lieber, and asked him, what do we do now? Because we wanted someone knowledgeable and wise and kind and good. All his children have the qualities, the parents have those qualities. And sometimes in this world, righteous parents get righteous children. Doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does.

But here's the second part of this, which is that the rabbis tell us that anyone you teach is considered your offspring, which means that in fact, we are all in the Talmudic sense, Dr. Lieber's children. Because directly or indirectly, he has been all of our teachers as well as every student who passed through what is now American Jewish University, for years and years. Not just because we took classes with him, which we did, but also because he taught our teachers.

And then the last question you're going to be asked, after you're asked, were you honest in business? Did you study Torah? Did you build a family? *Is "Tzipita l'Yeshua,"* did you expect salvation? In other words, did you have hope in the future? Did you plan for the future? Did you believe that the future could be better? Did you not despair?

I said at the beginning that I was taking this sort of personal privilege to speak about my teacher because he had a profound effect on my life. Now, let me tell you concretely what I meant. I've had many teachers and many wonderful teachers, but when I graduated from the University of Judaism, which was after my second year of rabbinical school, and it was when I was there, a five-year program, and I was going off to Israel and then to the seminary, Dr. Lieber, who was of course the president of the university, called me into his office and he said, when you graduate in three years, I'd like you to come back to Los Angeles. And I said, no, I don't want to come back. I mean, it's a nice place and all, but I grew up on the East Coast. I really don't ever intend to come back to Los Angeles.

But I want to tell you, when the president of the university calls you in and you haven't even graduated yet and says, I want you to come back, it stays with you. It doesn't go away. It's the power of someone saying to you, I believe in your future. And sure enough, when I graduated, I came back to what was then the University of Judaism. Were it not for Dr. Lieber, I don't know where I would be, but I know I wouldn't be here. And I say that because *Tzipita l'Yeshua* doesn't only mean did you expect the Messiah, but did you plan as though there was going to be a future? Which after all, if you build an institution, is exactly what you're doing. You're planning as though there's going to be a future.

And if you go up to the American Jewish University now and you realize that it has expanded to what used to be Brandeis-Bardin, and it's so much greater and bigger than it was when it was at the athletic club on Sunset, do you see that Dr. Lieber was right. He had a vision of the future and he helped the Los Angeles Jewish community to create it.

And now I want to say something about how our teacher passed away. Dr. Lieber suffered from a lung ailment. He was 83 years old. He'd been born in 1925 in Poland and came here at the age of two. So he lived what is a relatively long life, though certainly not as long as any of us would hope. And gradually it became more and more and more difficult to breathe. And that ailment was irreversible.

Several times, in fact, over the past, even year, perhaps longer, we thought that he would not make it through this or that crisis and that the end was imminent. And I have my own pet theory about why it is that Dr. Lieber lived longer than any of us expected him to. It's because after all, spirit or wind or breath in Hebrew is *ruach*, *neshama*, the same word for breath and for soul. And maybe if you have a lot of *ruach*, it takes a long time for it to pass from this world to the next. But of course, it never completely passes.

And I hope that each time that you open the Chumash, you will remember the legacy of the man who helped us have this Etz Chaim, this tree of life, who not only was the leader of this community of Sinai Temple, but really of the Los Angeles Jewish community.

I spent this past week part of it with my father, and he was remembering Dr. Lieber. And I told him that I was going to speak about Dr. Lieber on this Shabbat, and they were at the seminary together and have known each other most of their lives. And he said, do you want a title for your sermon? I said, yes. He said, I have one. I said, okay. He said, call it "The Quiet Shepherd," because that's what he was like. He led people, but gently, so that eventually they did what they needed to do, even though they may have thought it was their own decision.

I thought that I decided to come back to Los Angeles, but now I'm not so sure. But it is a beautiful thing for a community to claim a *tzadik*, a righteous person. It blesses all of us. And in a time and in an age when we are far too focused for reasons that I understand. And so to you, on the misdeeds of a *rasha*, of a wicked person, I thought how important it is for us to remember the deeds of *tzadik*, of a righteous person, and to know that it is a good community that creates such good people. Not only should we remember him, but we should feel a little proud of ourselves for having had him in our midst. *Yehi zichro baruch*, may his memory be forever a blessing. Amen.