

The perfect response to the Madoff debacle

By Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz

BERNARD MADOFF'S confessed Ponzi scheme assaults four core Jewish values.

Whom Can You Trust? In the wake of Madoff's profound violation of his ethical and fiduciary duties, can we trust anyone any longer?

Sustenance and Spirituality. A classic Jewish text teaches no sustenance, no spirituality. What will happen to all those good organizations, that did all those good works, whose funding has been decimated?

Desecrating God's Name. Madoff is a Jew. Jews are supposed to sanctify God's name, kiddush hashem. That is, a non-Jew is to see how a Jew behaves in the world, in the marketplace, and sees authenticity, integrity, compassion, and says: "Wow, there is something beautiful about Jewish truth." Madoff did just the opposite: not sanctification, but desecration.

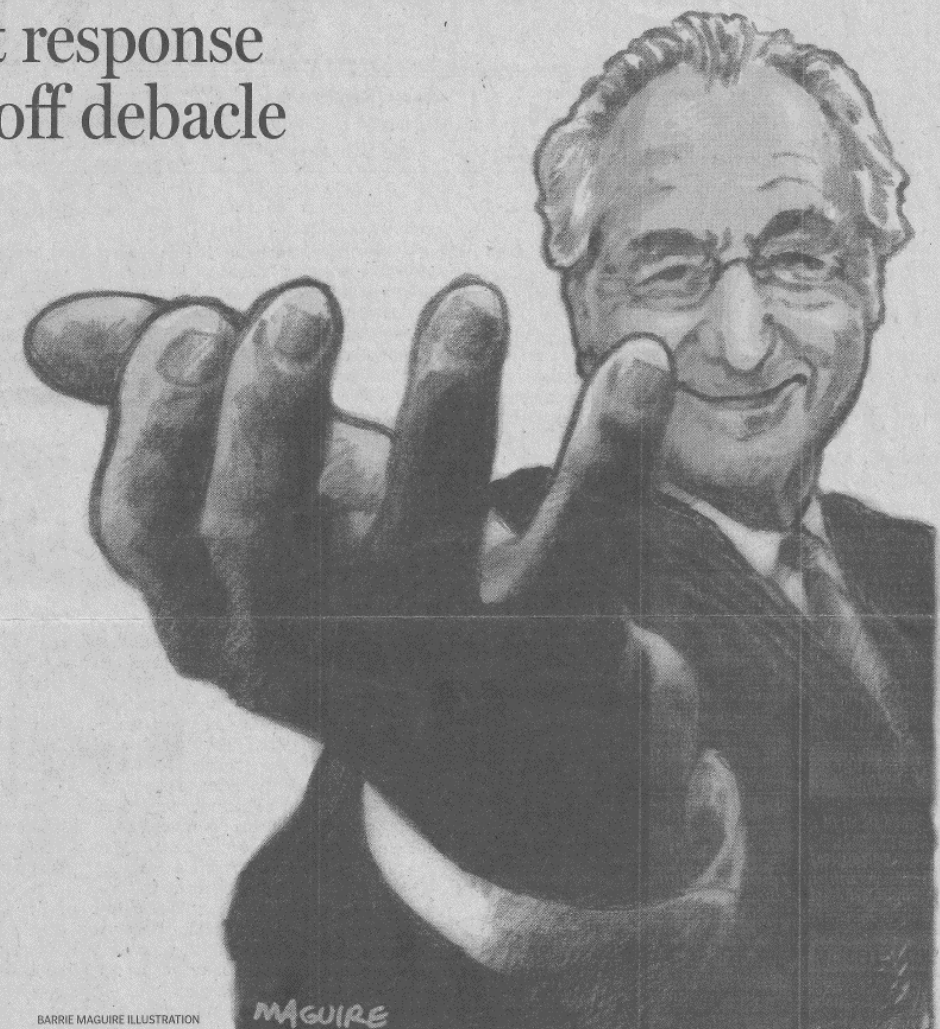
Trashing the Jewish People's Name. Jews are supposed to be an or la'goyim, a light unto the nations. But in a time of massive demoralization, uncertainty, and collapse — fertile soil for the seeking of scapegoats — Madoff gives anti-Semitic blogs just what they need: the face of a Jewish financier who is indeed unreconstructed evil.

The Madoff debacle has demoralized many. In one of those invisible lines of connection, Hanukkah, the festival of rededication, has come just in time with the perfect response.

Hanukkah is the story of a house trashed and profaned — the Second Temple filled with idols — and how it was rededicated. Dedication to truth — Jewish or otherwise — is not a one-shot deal. Dedication is a process that never ends. This festival speaks to the need to *rededicate* ourselves, both Jews and non-Jews, to values that are universal.

The Talmud teaches that when we die and account for our lives before our Creator, each of us will be asked four core questions that determine whether we have lived a worthy life.

Were you honest in business? The first question we are asked in heaven is not a ritual question, but an ethical one: How were you in the marketplace? In this age of financial scandal, an ancient voice rings true: Business integrity is of para-



BARRIE MAGUIRE ILLUSTRATION

mount importance.

Did you make time to study sacred texts regularly? Our own instincts for authenticity, integrity, and compassion need to be recharged and renewed by studying, regularly, the words of the greatest ethical minds.

Did you do your part to nurture the next generation? Raising children affords us the grace of loving somebody more than we love ourselves.

Did you do your part to make the world a better place? Home and hearth, our own health and happiness, are crucial. But they are not enough for a worthy life. The broken world beckons. At

the end of our days, what can we say we did to fix it?

Even if we can answer each question "yes," the Talmud teaches that there is still one last element to a worthy life: *yirat hashem*, a sense of God's presence. What does this mean in 2008? That we wake up in the morning and realize: it is not about us. We are not the center of the universe. We are not even the center of our own universe. There is God. However much we wrestle with God, however much we argue with God, however much we doubt God, it is God to whom we turn in the depths, and it is God whose service gives our life meaning.

And so in this dark and cold patch for Jewish people and the nation, we have a response to the demoralization. Do business with integrity. Study sacred texts. Teach our children. Do justice. Seek a relationship with God that matters daily.

Madoff is real. But we are not hopeless and we are not helpless in the face of the demoralization he has created. There is a response to Madoff, and we are it. One person, one candle, one day at a time.

Rabbi Wesley R. Gardenswartz is the senior rabbi at Temple Emanuel in Newton Centre.