
Jewish leaders calling for ethical renewal

September 17, 2009 By The Associated Press VICTOR EPSTEIN (Associated Press Writer)

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — Jewish leaders are calling on U.S. rabbis to emphasize the faith's ethical requirements in their sermons during Rosh Hashana in response to recent financial scandals involving its members, including [Bernard Madoff](#).

Jews have been embarrassed the past year by the arrest of former [Wall Street](#) tycoon Madoff, who is serving a 150-year prison sentence for defrauding investors out of billions of dollars, and several rabbis who were arrested in July on money laundering charges, said Richard Joel, president of Yeshiva University in [New York](#).

Widely distributed images showed them being led into the [FBI](#) building in [Newark](#) in rabbinical garb and handcuffs didn't help.

"It's troubling," said Rabbi Moshe Kletenik, president of the Rabbinical Council of America, which comprises about 1,000 rabbis in the U.S., [Canada](#) and [Israel](#). "Ethical living is as significant a part of leading a religious life as ritual law."

Kletenik also leads the Bikur Cholim-Machzikay Hadath Congregation in [Seattle](#).

Rosh Hashana, the Jewish new year, begins Friday. It's the ideal time to re-emphasize core values that require the faithful to be honest, forthright and sincere, Joel said.

He and Kletenik joined four other top Jewish leaders in signing a letter this month that calls on rabbis to remind congregants that they are expected to meet the highest standards both in their dealings inside the temple and outside it.

The letter is a message all Americans should heed, Joel said, because greed consumed members of many groups, not just Jews, during the financial boom that preceded the recession. All humans have a responsibility to lead exemplary lives, he said.

"This is a universal call," Joel said. "But the rabbis of America have a lot of Jews trapped in synagogues this weekend, and it's a wonderful time to focus on who we are and how we are."

The letter was sent to graduates of Yeshiva University, who serve as religious leaders for 85 percent of the nation's orthodox Jewish synagogues. It also was distributed to members of the Orthodox Union, which represents about 15 percent of U.S. Jews, and the Rabbinical Council. There are believed to be 5.3 million to 5.5 million Jews in the U.S.

"These crimes were extremely hurtful and disappointing," said Rabbi Steven Weil, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union. "Judaism has to be associated with the greatest degree of integrity, honesty and sincerity."

The Jewish high holidays begin with Rosh Hashana and end 10 days later with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. It's customary for religious Jews to seek forgiveness during that time from those they've wronged.

Rabbi Melvin Granatstein, 69, said he's grateful for the letter's timely message. The head of the Green Road Synagogue outside [Cleveland](#) plans to incorporate its message into his sermons during the holidays. His congregation has about 700 members.

"It's terribly important that we all address the issue of moral decay," Granatstein said. "We have to recover the greatness of Judaism, and the only way to do that is to emphasize its moral message."

Rabbi [Shmuley Boteach](#), author of the book "The Blessings of Enough," said it's impossible to be a good Jew without being a good person, too. Jews have overlooked ostentatious displays of wealth at lavish bar mitzvahs and weddings for too long, he said.

"I salute the call to return to our call values," said Boteach, of Englewood. "We need to start filling the empty spaces in ourselves with more purpose and good deeds, instead of money and impulse purchases."

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