

In Defense Of 'Offensive' Journalism

How does — or should — a family deal with internal conflict? One way, perhaps natural, is to ignore or deny the trouble, hoping it will simply go away. Another is to blame it on outsiders as a means of protecting one's own. The most mature approach, though, is to acknowledge that a problem exists, and seek to resolve it through talking it out or seeking outside help.

The same goes for communal conflict, and too often we choose to deny the difficulty or blame it on others — or both — rather than find constructive ways to deal with it.

For a journalist writing about his own Jewish community for 35 years, these issues are not new. "Kill the messenger" has long been the approach of many when faced with crises that become public. But I am still surprised and disappointed at times at the inability or unwillingness of our community to recognize and grapple with inconvenient truths.

Sometimes we don't want to face reality, especially through the pages of a Jewish newspaper that we read, in part, to make ourselves feel good about who we are and

what we do as a community. But it's only when we face problems that we can begin to deal with them.



What prompts these thoughts is the reaction from some about several difficult stories I have written in recent weeks. The most vocal criticism has come from some in the Orthodox press and from bloggers, whose writings are not accountable to journalistic standards of fact checking and editing. What they have in common is the assumption that it is not the place of Jewish journalists to publish stories that may embarrass elements of the community. But I believe it is one of our most vital responsibilities, however unpleasant, and can be a corrective, as well.

If charitable organizations that do a world of good require more transparency at the top in terms of financial dealings, better for them to police themselves from inside than wait until the situation has become so upsetting, and unaddressed, that word comes to the journalist to explore the situation. (Make no mistake: the whistleblowers approach the press only after trying unsuccessfully to have the problem handled within the organizations themselves.) And then, inevitably, when the

story becomes public, there is an outcry from some quarters, not against the organization for its lack of governance and for creating an embarrassment, but against the press for exposing the problem.

Similarly, when spiritual leaders are accused of violating a sacred trust with those in their charge, is it not a misuse of the notion of chillul Hashem (desecration of God's name) to invoke it against the press rather than the individuals whose conduct causes the community shame?

I make plenty of mistakes in judgment, which I try to correct when possible, but there is a difference between criticizing a newspaper for its style, timing and presentation of facts — all legitimate — and questioning the very nature of its work: to serve at times as a watchdog.

We expect our daily newspapers to shed light on issues that are in the shadows, to probe and explore; would we rather our Jewish newspaper simply act as cheerleader for the communal organization? If so, what credibility would either have?

In fact, we the People of the Book have a model far more compelling than the daily press. Each week in our synagogues we read from Judaism's core text the narrative of the

lives of our greatest heroes, from Abraham to Moses. And it's worth noting that the flaws that made these biblical figures human, and real, are not censored — from Sarah's jealousy of her maidservant, to Jacob's favoritism of Joseph, to Moses' anger in hitting the rock. The Torah is teaching us that the story is only credible, and instructive, if it is complete. That is a powerful lesson.

Too often in reporting on a controversy I encounter a disturbing rationale. It's when insiders who know of a problem that surely will cause criticism and lack of trust continue to ignore or cover up wrongdoing in the mistaken belief that they are protecting the organization they love. But they are only prolonging and compounding the pain. Perhaps the knowledge that Jewish newspapers will not look the other way in the face of communal problems will spur individuals and organizations to clean up their own acts. That would be a welcome outcome.

We journalists would rather focus on more positive stories, including the countless charitable acts that come from the community. But that doesn't mean we're prepared to abandon our mandate to tell the whole story. ■

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