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Guest Opinion

# Was Epstein suicide an effort to saving the Jewish community from a “Shonda?”

Amy Neustein Thursday, August 7, 2025 5:03 am

In the swirl of conspiracy theories targeting Jeffrey Epstein’s cadre of high-profile clients for naturally wanting to see him silenced, I’m afraid the real motive behind Epstein’s suicide at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in 2019 may have been overlooked.

I had a brief encounter with Jeffrey Epstein myself. It was sometime in the '90s when I was at my parents’ home in Brooklyn. My father was a prominent rabbi whose synagogue, The Jewish Center of Brighton Beach (where Nicolas Cage would later be filmed in “Lord of War”), was a stone’s throw from where Jeffrey Epstein grew up in the Seagate section of Brooklyn. My father would often be called upon to privately counsel those facing the difficulties of public life. As a member of the clergy he kept these matters confidential.

One day I recall how the phone rang at the Brooklyn home. I took the call. It was Jeffrey Epstein on the line asking to speak to “the rabbi” about a “highly personal matter.” Epstein was noticeably upset. Writing in the San Diego Jewish World shortly after Epstein’s suicide, I said:

“I could see my father was visibly shaken (after the call) and I knew something was wrong.” My father never uttered a word because confidentiality was sacrosanct to him as a member of the clergy.

Years later when I read the headline news reports of Jeffrey Epstein having strangled himself with his bedsheets at the Manhattan jail where he was awaiting trial on child-sex trafficking charges, I realized that this detestable child-sex trafficker who had reached out to my father for rabbinic guidance so many years prior might have actually taken his life to spare the Jewish community a “Shonda” — a profound community shame.

Epstein, raised as a Jew in Brooklyn, with strong family ties and a solid commitment to Israel, may have sought to end his life as a sacrificial act. After all, a protracted trial or a stringent plea agreement would have landed him in prison for years. The swarm of press stories would have inevitably damaged the name of the Jewish community, using Epstein as the emblem of a Jewish sex trafficker. News reports showed how much he detested being called a pedophile. But having his name emblazoned as a “Jewish pedophile” would have been far worse.

“Shonda” is a socially regulating principle that controls much of Jewish life. The fear of a Shonda causes members of the Jewish community to act in ways they have never done before. For example, sex abuse coverups are common in the Orthodox community for fear of a Shonda. And in extreme cases, sexual predators have taken their own lives. Just a few years ago a famous Jewish children’s author, Chaim Walder, committed suicide when it came out that he was a pedophile. Ashamed of his actions for both his family and for the community, Walder ended his life.

No one would dispute that Jeffrey Epstein had a strong Jewish identity. His passionate commitment to Israel and to Jewish causes was evident in his tax filings. He gave money to a study program in Jerusalem, to a Jewish day school in Manhattan, and he gave handsomely to the UJA-Federation of New York, an umbrella Jewish philanthropy organization providing grants to Jewish groups in Israel and throughout the U.S. The list goes on, and it even includes Jewish women’s organizations in spite of his sexual exploitation of young girls.

Epstein’s suicide in 2019 coincided with a very important day on the Jewish calendar. It was one day before “Tisha B’av,” regarded as the saddest day of the Jewish year when as a community Jews commemorate the destruction of their Holy Temple. It is a day of mourning, when fasting and reflection occupy the minds and hearts of the Jewish community. The reason for the destruction of the Holy Temple was because of aberrant and transgressive behavior of members of the Jewish community.

Epstein, having taken his life right before the pivotal fast day makes it hard to escape the fact that his suicide was arguably a sacrificial act in his own mind. He knew his name would soon become the blight on the Jewish community, and he couldn’t bear to see that happen. By strangulating himself he hoped to smother and suffocate the raging antisemitism that his name would engender.

This was an ultimate act of self-sacrifice. But one may argue that his self-strangulation boomeranged. It left the world figuratively “hanging” as to what lies beneath his extensive network of sexual exploitation and trafficking? Who was involved and who benefitted?

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