WE, THE RABBIS. Inspired by Mr. Al Gindi's letter.

Yesterday I got an email from the president of my community, and my good friend, Mr. Albert Laboz. The email had an attachment: a letter written by Mr. Al Gindi, z"l, who passed away a few days ago. Mr. Gindi was famous for his acts of philanthropy, his integrity, and his endeavors to strengthen the religious values of the Syrian community.

The letter was addressed to Mr. Ezra Ashkenazi, a well-known community leader, and benefactor. The subject of the letter was not a personal conversation between these two community giants; instead, the title of the letter was "Hilool HaShem"- the desecration of God's name- and the letter was directed to the rabbis.

In his letter, Mr. Gindi urges the rabbis of the community to address more directly matters related to morality, business ethics, and justice. In his opinion, we -the rabbis- are too focused on matters related to ritual and ceremony and do not give enough attention to character development. Clarifying that he is not saying, God forbid, that ritual is not important, Mr. Gindi writes that rabbis, must find a balance between teaching about Mitsvottoward God and preaching about Mitsvot relating to interpersonal interactions. Rabbis should dedicate more time and more public speeches to teach the community about integrity, he posits.

And why should we -the rabbis- focus our attention on matters of Jewish ethics? Because the community needs it. In the world of business Mr Gindi a"h witnessed predatory practices, abuse, mistreatment of gentile employees; etc. These bad habits are not just intrinsically wrong. These practices also give a bad name to the Jewish community. And such behavior leads to the worst conceivable sin: the desecration of the name of God or "Hilool haShem", the sin that occurs when in our daily lives and behavior we Jews "misrepresent" the Tora that we are supposed to faithfully "represent".

Although his letter is from 2004, the message is loud, clear and still relevant in 2018. In Mr. Gindi's missive he kindly tried explaining why rabbis are not speaking out about this

issue. He said that Rabbis probably are not aware of what their congregants do in their business. That is why they don't address the issues. We need to let the rabbis know what's going on, so they can teach us what we should do.
Mr. Gindi's letter moved me to dedicate today's Halakha of the Day to his important message.
His worries resonated in my mind like an old echo of the words of Yesha'ayahu, Isaiah the Prophet, the words that we read in the Haftara before Tish'a beab and on the morning of Yom Kippur.
Yesha'ayhu, more than any other prophet, denounced very strongly the moral situation and the social injustices prevalent on his time. He accused the people of Yerushalayim of material greed and lack of integrity
Your silver coins are counterfeits, your wine is watered down. Your political leaders are corrupt… They sell themselves to the highest bidder, and grab any bribes. They do not stand up for the homeless, and do not stick up for the defenseless. (Isaiah 1:22)
Very shocking words, indeed. But the most shocking aspect of the words of Yesha'ayahu is that he denounced that in his times many people would use religious rituals like sacrifices, to cover up their bad behavior in business. To use a modern term, Yesha'ayahu accused his contemporaries in Jerusalem of "religious hypocrisy," showing yourself as pious in the Temple, and behaving like a thief in your business.
The current situation of the community, Baruch HaShem, is obviously very different from what Yesha'ayahu described. The community overall has a very good name and prestige. Community members are known to be honorable, extremely generous, family centered and principle driven. But the words of Yesha'ayahu and the letter of Mr. Gindi should make us realize the potential dangers of not paying enough time and attention to matters of religious integrity.
Much is already being done. Multitudes come to Tora classes. And virtually all community members attend Synagogue regularly. This "act of presence" alone helps people to feel a better and stronger connection with HaShem. And at the end of the day, a solid connection with God is what makes people behave with honesty and act with integrity. Mr Gindi z"l, his family and many, many other successful Jewish businessmen are

a great example of how the Tora we learn in the Synagogue stays with us, and guides us when we leave the walls of the Synagogue.
But what Mr. Gindi z’l is saying in his letter that we the rabbis should aspire to do more…. We need to speak more explicitly and directly about integrity. In in addition to inspire our congregants to have a lasting sense of awareness of God’s Presence outside Synagogue, we should also aim to equipe them with more detail and examples of what the Tora expects our behavior to be in our business, workplace and mundane affairs.
I will try to do my share.