

THE PATH OF THE JUST - CHAPTER 11:2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The pull is real. You'd only have to step up, make sure no one was watching, and then take what you want for free. Yet most of us don't steal (thank G-d). After all, as Ramchal worded it, "we know that most people aren't out-and-out dishonest and wouldn't actually reach out to take someone else's money, then slip it in their pockets" he allows; nonetheless our sages pointed out that "in terms of prohibitions, people (ourselves included of course, not just other people, you understand) are especially drawn to thievery and promiscuity" (Makkot 23b). So we'll try to uncover the subtle though real ways we're often guilty of stealing. (We'll discuss promiscuity later on as well.)

Ramchal asserts nevertheless that "most people are involved in acts of petty thievery in their business practices" all the time which they dismiss with the reasoning that "business is different". But the point is that theft is theft, whether in the marketplace or in a living room.

In fact, the Torah speaks of a variety of acts of thievery (including misappropriating someone's trust in us), when it warns "Don't steal" (Exodus 20:13), "Don't rob" (Leviticus 19:3), "Don't extort" (Ibid.), "Don't lie" (Ibid. v.11), "One shouldn't deceive his fellow" (Ibid. 25:14), "Don't falsify your neighbor's borders" (Deuteronomy 19:14), etc. For "not just the obvious, flagrant violations of extortion or thievery ... are forbidden"; even "things that lead to them are included in the prohibition as well" we're warned. So there's obviously a lot to be cautious of.

We're warned not to enter into unfair competition with others' businesses for example (see Sanhedrin 81a, Baba Metzia 60a), or to busy ourselves with private projects while on company time (see Berachot 16a, Ta'anit 23b). For as to the latter, as Ramchal words it "the principal of the matter is that someone who's hired to do something 'sells' his part of the day" so "whatever you'd take for yourself in such an instance) would be (considered) stolen".

In fact, "even if you were to do a mitzvah when you were supposed to be doing your job it wouldn't be accredited to you as a righteous deed, but rather a sin -- because a sin (like misappropriating time) is simply not a mitzvah" (see Baba Kama 94a, J.T. Sukkah 3:3).

The prohibition lies in the fact that G-d loves honesty; as it's said, "G-d protects the honest" (Psalms 31:24), "Open up, gates, so that a righteous, an honest nation may enter" (Isaiah 26:2), "My eyes are towards the honest of the land, to those who will sit with Me" (Psalms 101:6), and "Are not Your eyes directed towards honesty?" (Jeremiah 5:3).

So if we love G-d and want to draw close to Him in all "innocence" we too should love and live

honestly.

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