

# THE ART OF THE DEAL AND IT'S IMPACT

*by Rabbi Yehudah Prero*

The month of Elul, which began Sunday, August 23, 1998, is the last month in the Jewish calendar. Because of its proximity to the High Holidays, on which G-d judges the entire world, the days of Elul are traditionally set aside for repentance and introspection. The month of Elul is a time in which we should review how we conduct our lives, make commitments to change those areas that we find lacking, and start acting on those commitments.

The Talmud (Baba Basra 89b) discusses different ways storekeepers might shortchange their customers. After listing several deceptive practices, the Talmud relates that Rabi Yochanan ben Zakkai said: "Woe to me if I should speak [of them]; woe to me if I should not speak. Should I speak [of them], scoundrels might learn [them]; and should I not speak, the scoundrels might say, the scholars are unacquainted with our practices' [and will deceive us still more]." Rabi Yochanan was troubled about whether he should give a lecture on the laws that concern deceptive business practices. The Maharsha, a Talmudic commentator, explains that Rabi Yochanan's concern on not giving the lecture was not just that the "cheats" would continue their evil ways, unaware that scholars knew the "tricks of the trade." The Maharsha writes that Rabi Yochanan did not want the scoundrels to say that if the scholars knew about these tricks, they would use them for personal profit as well. Therefore, Rabi Yochanan felt that he should disclose that the scholars knew about these deceptive practices, and that they still did not engage in trickery.

Rabbi Henschel Leibowitz asked why Rabi Yochanan would be concerned about what scoundrels have to say. These people were far from being of high moral caliber. Their judgement as to the character of others, let alone of scholars whose devotion to G-d and the Torah was unwavering, is nowhere near accurate nor reflective of the truth. Why, then, was Rav Yochanan concerned with their opinion of the scholars?

The answer, Rav Leibowitz said, is Rav Yochanan was not worried about the scoundrels' character assessment. He was worried that they would not be aware of the truth of the situation: The scholars knew about the tricks and they did not use them. If the tricksters knew this important fact, it could potentially have a great impact. It could cause a crooked businessman to straighten his ways. When a dishonest shopkeeper would see that there are people who fully know how to cheat someone out of a their money, but they do not do so purely because it is wrong, because G-d said not to do so, it may inspire him to realize he can do the same. He can know how to take advantage of someone and not follow through. Rabi Yochanan felt perhaps giving a lecture on the laws of trickery would be

worthwhile, although others might learn new deceptive practices, since it might cause scoundrels to repent.

Did Rabi Yochanan give the lecture? The Talmud tells us that he did, but not to address the concern he initially voiced. The Maharsha writes that Rabi Yochanan felt it was extremely important for the students to be versed in all forms of trickery. In this way, should they ever chance upon a situation where they may inadvertently deceive someone, they could realize what they were doing and not engage in deceit, albeit inadvertent. Rabi Yochanan felt that it was so important that people recognize what constitutes cheating that he had to lecture on the topic, even if it resulted in some people using the lecture to cheat people in ways that had not previously known. Cheating and tricking people are great sins, even when done unconsciously, and therefore Rabi Yochanan had to lecture on the topic, negative consequences notwithstanding. In today's business climate, success at all costs is often the goal. While the business world hails integrity and honesty as worthwhile traits, it is shrewdness and acumen that make the businessman worthy of respect by peers. In Elul, we are to engage in self improvement. We are to improve our relationship with G-d, and equally important, our relationship with our fellow man. When we think of improving interpersonal relations, we often think of being nicer, treating people with respect, not slandering, not harboring baseless hatred. Do we think of business dealings with our colleagues as a realm of interpersonal relations that may need improvement? If we do not, we should. As Rabi Yochanan illustrated, dealing honestly is so important that he had to prevent even an inadvertent fraud. Secondly, the impact of dealing honestly is greater than one might imagine. Rabi Yochanan saw that even hardened swindlers may repent when confronted with blatant business integrity by someone who knows about the other way of doing business. In Elul, by striving to make money the old-fashioned way, by earning it honestly, we can improve our relationship with our fellow man and G-d, and perhaps inspire others to do so as well.