

OBJECTIVELY HONEST

by Rabbi Dovid Green

"Don't wrest judgment and don't give (special) recognition, and don't take bribes, because bribes blind the eyes of the wise and pervert correct judgments" (Deuteronomy 16:19).

These laws have many applications. Among them is the law not to place a judge in office just on the merit of being a friend or colleague. This applies especially when that judge is less knowledgeable in comparison to another candidate. This is called wresting judgment since the more knowledgeable judge is more expert, and can better apply his broader knowledge to each case.

"Don't give (special) recognition" is a warning which applies itself to a judge who is hearing the testimony of two or more plaintiffs. One should not treat one plaintiff better than another. Doing so causes the other plaintiff to close up and despair of getting justice.

Don't take bribes is a warning to a judge not to take something from a litigant even if the litigant says "this is so you'll judge fairly. G-d, the creator, knows the nature of humankind. Even if the litigant does not request that the judgment be in his favor, the gift will corrupt the perspective of the judge and he will favor that litigant.

Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman, of blessed memory (d. 1941), asks a key question regarding a law found in the compilation of laws by Maimonides. It states that there is an obligation to believe in G-d. This is best understood as there being an obligation to cultivate one's already intact belief in G-d through analysis of the creation, and various other methods. Consequently, everyone who is obligated to observe commandments, girls, age 12 and up, boys, age 13 and up, are obligated as well to believe in G-d. Rav Elchonon asks how it is reasonable to expect such a thing from a child? Even great philosophers had difficulty in issues of faith in G-d's existence! Rabbi Wasserman further asks how it can be that a person ignorant of the responsibilities placed upon him by G-d can be held responsible for not having performed them.

Rabbi Wasserman answers that really the question should be just the opposite. How is it possible that a wise philosopher could have questions of faith? He says that if you found a beautifully written paragraph, and you were told that it is the result of a monkey randomly spilling ink on a sheet of paper, you would not consider it remotely possible. Yet when we observe a world infinitely more complicated than a paragraph, and obviously belying design and purpose, we fail to recognize a Designer, and even make claims to the contrary!

Rabbi Wasserman's answer, then, is that since it really is simple for a reasonable person to believe in The Creator, even those with untrained minds such as the young, and even the most unsophisticated people can be held responsible for not recognizing Him, and feeling indebted to Him.

Why then did great philosophers have questions of faith? Rabbi Wasserman explains that it is because of lack of objectivity. People understand that if they accept the concept of a G-d then it follows that He created the world for a purpose which involves them. That means that there is something they need to be doing that they aren't presently doing. In other words, they feel that belief in G-d will prevent them from continuing to attain their earthly desires which run contrary to G-d's dictates. Rabbi Wasserman points out that in Jewish law the minimum bribe prohibited (which can corrupt one's perspective) is the minimum amount of money that people ascribe value to. Approximately the equivalent of one nickel is enough to sway a mind ever so subtly. This prohibition even applies to Moshe Rabbainu! Applying this reasoning, Rabbi Wasserman says that even some of the greatest minds can lack objectivity in matters of faith because of something relatively small which they fear they will lose. However, an objective mind can easily recognize the hands of a designer in the creation.

Don't take a bribe is a law given primarily to judges. However, the student of Torah understands that he is also a judge in the broader sense. The way he chooses to live is based on his perceptions of the world. If his perceptions are not objective, then his conclusions can be no better. May we be given the wisdom to understand our motivations and base our conclusions on objectivity.

Good Shabbos!

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