

WHAT CAN BE SEEN IN A MIRROR

by Rabbi Label Lam

He made the Laver of copper and its base of copper, from the mirrors of the legions who massed at the entrance of the tent of meeting. (Shemos: 38:8)

Rashi tells us that women donated their copper mirrors that they had used to seduce their husbands, and for this reason Moshe felt it was inappropriate to accept these as gifts for the holy temple. Moshe was told, to the contrary, the women used these mirrors to instigate desires that created the legions at who massed at the entrance of the tent. At a time when the men were encumbered by the stress of the Egyptian servitude these women had the vision and confidence to produce a future generation.

What can we learn from a look into the copper mirror?

There is a world of difference between an incentive and a bribe. An incentive is legal because it gets a person to act in accordance with his higher will. Sure I love to learn in the morning, but as Napoleon said, "When I am awake I am Napoleon, but when I am asleep I am like a horse!" It's hard to get the horse started so I employ some form of blessed coercion to get him to take me to the study hall on time. Therefore the Talmud says, "A person should always begin Torah and Mitzvos even for ulterior motives, because from ulterior motives proper motives will emerge.

The Nefesh Hachaim compares this to the situation of a worker who is told to go to the roof. While he climbs the ladder, nobody can complain why he is not on the roof. The ladder is leaning towards the goal and no person can be expected to have arrived before they arrive.

Maimonides says that a person should encourage his children with candies and such when they are young. When they are older they should be told that if they learn well and apply themselves, then they'll be fitting to marry a lovely bride. Now the youth harnesses all his male passion to plow in the field of the Talmud. When he gets older you tell him to learn more and soon people will rise out of respect and call him "Rabbi". By the time that he has gained sufficient honors, he may begin to appreciate that truth means more to him than any external form of applause.

A bribe is encouraging a person to violate their principles. Let's say that my wife makes delicious chocolate chip cookies for Shabbos on Thursday night. All the kids coming home are immediately intoxicated by the aroma and begin to clamor for the contents of the cookie jar. Everyone is met with the same firm, "Wait till Shabbos and then you can have some!"

Later that night, I come home exhausted and exasperated yet inspired and stimulated from a late night class. I need something to calm myself down to make sleeping an easy task. My olfactory system is suddenly gripped by irresistible smell. I remind myself that, "these are for Shabbos", but the desire of the flesh for sugar pulls me down or rather up to the cookie jar. I take a few crisp samples to test for quality control and a few more to make certain I am able to make an after blessing according to all opinions. Milk, the universal solvent for cookies are required as well.

Just at that moment a door opens down the hall and the shuffling of tiny feet is heard. Before I can say, "whoops", two brown eyes are staring accusingly, saying silently, "Hey, those are for Shabbos!" I say to the child, "I'll get you three cookies and chocolate milk and neither of us will have any memory of this little meeting here tonight!" That's a bribe! (This story is not a true story. Nobody has any recollection that it ever really happened!)

I remember once offering big chocolate bars to my boys for memorizing the 54 parshios of the Torah. I never saw kids so motivated. One boy made it into a song so the others could memorize it easier. Soon everyone was singing the song. Within a short time I owed three huge chocolate bars. We made a grand ceremony humming the tune from the Olympics and pressing golden doily certificates on the bedroom doors. Then each kid proudly received his big bar. In about two minutes the bars were gone. I took the wrappers and pasted them also to the door. They stayed there for years. Now the decorations on the door are gone, the chocolate bars were finished almost instantly, the teeth are gone, the dentist bills were eventually paid but the knowledge they acquired in a few focused hours remains happily etched into their psyches forever.

If we could collect essential artifacts from all of Jewish History, along with the shiny copper mirrors we might also find a few chocolate bars on display with a batch of those cookies that made it to Shabbos. Together, each piece contributes something crucial to a single and continuous ladder that stretches from here to the heavens. See what can be seen in a mirror!

Good Shabbos!

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