

# WHERE THE WAR IS FOUGHT

by Rabbi Label Lam

*Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe will blind those who see and corrupt words that are just. (Shemos 23:8)*

The word in Hebrew for bribery is "shochad". Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out that the Hebrew word helps to explain the dynamic of the concept. A person is caused by some level of self-interest to look at a situation with one "chad" eye instead of with the balance of the two eye approach.

It is for this reason that a person has a hard time evaluating himself. Since we have various biases, objectivity becomes an almost impossible mission. The Talmud says it best, based on the premise that a relative is not a valid source of testimony, "A man is a relative to himself."

The famous psychiatrist and author of many Torah books, Rabbi Abraham Twersky had just finished telling us that he had not written fifty some odd books, but he had only written one book fifty different ways. His singular and constant theme is the idea of authentic self-esteem. I asked him for a working definition of self esteem. He said simply, "Knowing your good points and your bad points simultaneously!"

It took a bit of good thinking to come to appreciate how wise these words were. If a person looks at himself alternately as good or bad then the score is always lopsided. If I am only aware at a given moment of my good points, I'll likely become intoxicated with my own success and fall prey to the ills of hubris. If I see my faults and failures alone, I am a serious candidate to become lazy and depressed. If however a person sees both simultaneously, one cures the other.

King Solomon opens the conversation in Proverbs (1:8) speaking as a father would caution his own child. "Listen my son to the admonitions of your father and do not abandon the Torah of your mother." Two different types of requests are being made. In one case, the child is being called to listen and grow up to the standards of a father's vision. This is an endless unfolding ladder of expectation. The one with his eye to sky may grow discouraged by feelings of inadequacy. The task may seem too tall at times.

On the other hand, in the same breath, that same child is being told not to abandon that which is inherently good. It only needs protection that piece of perfection. The mandate is only not to jettison those qualities which, either acquired or inherited are considered worthy.

Every person has a little of both. There are points that need constant improvement and at the same time there are sterling qualities that are installed as part of the furniture of our being. King Solomon seems to be cautioning for the need to look with both eyes.

One of the great experiences in Yeshiva was when a new fellow would arrive that unfortunately didn't know Hebrew from Hieroglyphics. When any of us would be given the chance to begin to learn with such a novice there was an instant sense of accomplishment. Six months earlier I didn't know which way to hold the siddur and now I'm capable of coaching him on a thing or two. This was a simple way to measure growth and progress.

Lest we delude ourselves and presume that we had graduated to prophecy and were ready to hang a shingle, Talmud class was a taste of humble pie. By observing the Rabbis and their children who knew more at a tender age than even we with advanced degrees was a swift reminder of how far we were from the goal.

Holding those two pictures simultaneously may not give us the perfect picture of self but it helps avoid the problems associated with over and under estimating ourselves. It also serves to keep us appropriately motivated as one constantly bridges the healthy tension between the "is" and the "ought". That's where the war is fought.

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