

THE MOST UN-JUST

by Rabbi Label Lam

You shall not pervert judgment, you shall not take notice of someone's presence, and you should not take a bribe, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and makes **righteous words** crooked. (Devarim 16:19)

Righteous words: Even words that are justifiable and true judgments. (Rashi)

A lot can go wrong in a judgment call. Here we are talking about the occupational hazards of actual judges. In a more general way we are all called upon to make many types of determinations throughout the course of our days and lives. About this the 1st Mishne in Pirke Avos cautions, "Be deliberate in judgment!" Sometimes one litigant is dressed up while the other has a slovenly appearance. One path is more attractive to us because it is easier and the alternative approach is perceived as wrong simply because it is more effortful. The imaginative powers of the mind have a way of wreaking havoc on the rational faculties when even the slightest advantage is given to one side over the other.

That much might be self evident if still hard to comply with. However, what does the Torah mean to tell us when it says that bribery "makes righteous words crooked"? Is that in reference to the words of the judge? Are they righteous words or not? If they are just, then what's the problem? If they're not then they are not righteous. Why then call them "righteous words"?

A good number of years- back I had the privilege to hear directly from Rabbi Simcha Wasserman ztl. an anecdote from his experience in Jewish Outreach in California. Reb Simcha, as he was known, was a son of Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman ztl., Reb Elchonon was one of the prime students of the Chofetz Chaim. He had gone back to Europe to join his Yeshiva after the outbreak of the 2nd World War. There he died a martyrs death with his students at the hands of Nazis. His son was an old world European bred type and not a likely candidate to be involved in outreach with young people especially on the left coast. However, his deep instinct for truth, a spry wit, combined with a grandfatherly charm helped him overcome his old worldly Yiddish accent and made him a profound communicator to young seeking Jewish hearts.

He told us that a young man had approached him in a little bit of a panicky state. He complained to Rabbi Wasserman that there's a certain Chassidic Rebbe that had been saying the same thing that Yoshke (I presume you know of whom I speak) had said. The young man wanted to know how such a thing is possible.

Rabbi Wasserman asked him, "What does he say?" The fellow told him, "You have to be more careful about what comes out of your mouth than what goes into your mouth!" Rabbi Wasserman paused and commented, "Now, I never read "that book", but I promise you that when the Rebbe said what he did he meant to make a "Chumra" a stringency in Shmiras HaLoshon" guarding the tongue but when Yoshke said it he was looking to make a "Koola" a leniency in Kashrus!" He reported that the fellow went back to check the source in "that book" and so it was recorded in that context, "Who needs Kosher? You have to be more careful about what comes out of your mouth than what goes into your mouth!"

The words themselves are certainly virtuous enough but they are capable of being perverted. In search of an easy way out holy words are pounded like plowshares into bludgeoning instruments to strike at the Torah, its principles, and practitioners. Fine phraseology is used to abuse by the "noblest" of world bodies, as wise words are woven into elaborate fig leaves and sagely sayings are hijacked to mask and justify **the most UN-just**. DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.