

BLINDING BRIBERY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"... and you shall not take bribery, for bribery blinds the eyes of the wise, and twists the words of the righteous." [16:19]

In order for us to understand the true impact of bribery, the *Chofetz Chaim*, Rabbi Yisroel Mayer Kagan, offers a parable:

If Reuven tells us that Shimon is a rich man, then in order to know Shimon's true wealth, we must first know the financial status of Reuven himself. If Reuven is poor, then perhaps Shimon is merely a member of the "middle class;" but if Reuven is actually Bill Gates, then we know that Shimon's estate may be larger than Rhode Island.

So too with regards to wisdom. If Reuven tells us that Shimon is wise, then we first need to assess Reuven's own wisdom. If the *Chofetz Chaim* himself were to tell us that someone were wise, we would know that this person was a source of truly valuable advice. All the more so if the speaker were the *Vilna Gaon*, the famed genius Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer. What if the speaker were none other than King Solomon, whom the Bible calls "wiser than all men?"

We can barely consider what level of wisdom might be required for G-d Himself to call someone "wise." Would we not be dealing with someone not far from Solomon's level?

If so, now we can return to the verse, and see the lesson that it offers. The verse says that "bribery blinds the eyes of the wise" - and who is the verse talking about? The verse isn't describing merely someone that we would call wise, but someone whom G-d himself would consider fit for that title. And it is about him that the verse testifies: bribery blinds him.

Bribery need not be merely an issue of money. Bribery is an attempt to keep us from concentrating on the main issues, and it can come up in many areas. One of my teachers (speaking to a group of young men) described a potential spouse's beauty as bribery. Why? Because beauty says nothing of the sort of relationship you will have, or what sort of wife and mother she will be.

So in all parts of our lives, we must be alert for anything that might ask us to lose ourselves in side details, preventing us from concentrating on the important issues. No matter how wise we might claim to be, bribery can still blind us to the truth.

Text Copyright © 1996 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.
The author is the Director of Project Genesis.