

CORRUPTION: ARE YOU FLOATING OR DROWNING?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Corruption. It seems to be just about everywhere and on almost every level of life. Even people who consider themselves to be honest more than likely are a little corrupt somewhere, while others are so corrupt they think that they are as honest as they need to be.

Some corruption is not that bad, the result of ignorance or a simple lack of appreciation of how bad it is. Other forms of corruption are purely evil, the result of malicious intentions or extreme greed, or both. Some people do more than capitulate to the whims of their yetzer hara; they ride it like bucking bronco to get what they want from life and people.

As the Talmud states, the "seal" of God is "Emes," or "Truth" (Yoma 69b), so falsehood is not just a bad trait, it is the worst trait. In fact, if you trace the worst of sins back to their origin you will find corruption at its source. Corruption, like an infection, can begin small and manageable. If left "untreated," it can and will grow until it becomes deadly, spiritually for sure and likely physically as well.

What is worse is that it can go undetected for quite a long time, and have a corrupting influence on other more innocent people as well. It can cause people like Ya'akov Avinu, whose central trait was "Emes," to act in corrupt ways, a real twist of fate. He was happiest sitting in the tents of Torah study living by the letter of God's law. He was forced to leave his learning, deceive his father, steal the blessing from Eisav, and live with Mt. Deceit himself, Lavan, for 20 years.

I recall how, decades ago, when buying something in a Jerusalem store the owner asked me if I minded paying without receiving a receipt. Detecting my discomfort he explained, "I tried doing everything the right way, the way I prefer," he said with a clear look of anguish in his face. "But the government makes it impossible for anyone to earn an honest living and survive, so I have to resort to doing some business in the black."

I know what he meant. Most of us know what he meant. For those who have not been fortunate enough to make enough money to not worry about paying the bills from month to month, every "dollar" counts. Even though we know that our tax dollars are necessary to provide the community services that we so enjoy, we also know that they come at the cost of other personal necessities. Even worse, something they are wasted on services for which we do not care or are the result of corruption.

The Talmud says that someone who wants 100 "dollars" will want \$200 once he gets the \$100, \$300

once he gets the \$200, and so on. This may be human nature, but it is what makes corruption "natural." The rabbis have warned that the truly wealthy person is the one who is happy with his portion (Pirkei Avos 4:1), even though he may be far from being rich.

So central is the idea that it is the fundamental difference between Ya'akov Avinu and his twin brother and nemesis, Eisav HaRasha, "Eisav the Evil." In this week's parshah Ya'akov will avoid confrontation with his extremely corrupt and murderous sibling, but he won't be able to 34 years later in Parashas Vayishlach, when they will argue about the validity of this teaching:

Ya'akov looked up and saw Eisav coming with 400 men. He divided the children between Leah and Rachel, and the two maidservants. He put the maidservants and their children first, Leah and her children after them, and Rachel and Yosef last. He himself passed ahead of them and bowed to the ground seven times until he reached his brother. Eisav ran toward him and hugged him. He fell on his neck and kissed him; they wept. He looked up and he saw the women and the children, and said,

"Who are they to you?"

He answered him, "They are children with whom God has favored your servant." The maidservants approached with their children, and bowed down. Leah and her children also approached and bowed down. Then Yosef and Rachel approached, and bowed down. He asked,

"What is the meaning of the camp which I met?"

He answered [Eisav], "To gain favor in the eyes of my master."