

COMBATING CORRUPTION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The first verses of the parsha address one of the great weaknesses of human life - personally, socially and governmentally - the weakness of corruption. Corruption comes in many forms and modes. The outright bribery of officials and judges is certainly understood to be a most heinous form of corruption for it undermines the very basis of a lawful society. There are enough examples of this type of corruption in our past and current national life to prove to us how damaging and destructive this immoral policy can be.

But the Torah speaks not only of the blatant corruption of open bribery and trading judicial and governmental favors for money, but also of a more subtle and perhaps even more insidious type of corruption that apparently falls short of the legal definition of bribery. This type of corruption leaps upon us almost unawares and is hard to define or even recognize. Chance remarks, a courtesy extended, a past favor given innocently, all remain as potential points of corruption.

The Talmud relates to us that the great amora, Mar Shmuel disqualified himself from judging a case that was brought before him because one of the litigants had earlier in the day allowed Mar Shmuel to pass before him on a narrow footbridge. Now Mar Shmuel as the chief judge and head of the yeshiva in Nehardea in third-century Babylonia is certainly entitled, as a matter of respect to Torah scholars, to pass first on the narrow footbridge. Yet, Mar Shmuel felt that even that small measure of respect, inconsequential as it may appear on the surface, could be enough to influence his decision and corrupt his judgment.

But an even more subtle shade of corruption exists and is exposed in Jewish thought. This is the corruption of self-interest. It clouds our minds, imposes upon us a narrowness of vision and leads inevitably to damage in the long run. The great men of Mussar and of Chasidut both speak of a person who is a meshuchad - who is corrupted by selfishness, self-interest and an inability to see the consequences of his behavior and actions.

This corruption stems from prejudice, ignorance and the inability to control one's desires. "Since I want to do it, it must be justified and correct" is the mantra that creates such an insidious form of self-corruption. The Torah therefore sets standards as to behavior and actions. Following and adhering to those standards minimizes our penchant for self-corruption. It does not however remove it completely from our lives.

Only continual self-analysis of one's behavior and motives can effectively combat self-corruption in

its minutest form. One can therefore never rely upon one's previous acts of piety or goodness to be a guarantee against self-corruption. Every day is a new battle and every choice in life is a new challenge to our innate integrity and holiness of purpose. Corruption blinds the wise and skews the righteous. Recognizing its omnipresent dangers and being aware of its challenges is the beginning of our battle against self-corruption and its delusions.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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