

THE MEASURE OF A PERSON IS HIS SENSE OF GRATITUDE

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shoftim

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The Torah admonishes the judge not to show favoritism, not to corrupt justice, and not to take bribes "for bribes will blind the eyes of the wise and will pervert the words of the righteous" [Devorim 16:19]. No person is immune from the temptations of a bribe. Bribes attack a person's ability to judge fairly. Even if a person is righteous, even if he is extremely wise - he is not above falling prey to the power of a bribe.

The Gemara in Kesuvos [105b] states: "It goes without saying that monetary bribes are forbidden, but the Torah is coming to teach us that even 'verbal bribes' are forbidden." Flattery, kind words, and so forth can all affect a person's judgment. The Gemara lists several incidents demonstrating how particular Amoraim of the Talmud acted regarding rejecting bribes.

Shmuel was having difficulty crossing a rickety bridge. A certain person stuck out his hand and helped him cross the bridge. Shmuel asked what brought him to the bridge right then. The person told Shmuel that he had a case to be heard in Shmuel's court for adjudication. Shmuel disqualified himself from being a judge in the case since he had just received a favor from this person.

Similarly, Ameimar was sitting in court and a feather flew on top of his head. A fellow came over and removed the feather. When he told Ameimar that he was there to have his case heard, Ameimar disqualified himself from hearing the case.

A third related incident involved Mar Ukva. Someone spat in front of Mar Ukva and another person came along and covered up the saliva. Mar Ukva disqualified himself from hearing the case of the person who did him the favor of covering up the saliva.

A final case involved Rav Shmuel b'Reb Yossi and his sharecropper. The sharecropper who normally delivered produce to Rav Shmuel b'Reb Yossi every Friday showed up early one week and

delivered the produce on Thursday because he had to be in town that day for a Din Torah. Rav Shmuel b'Reb Yossi disqualified himself from hearing the case, lest he be "bribed" by the favor of the early delivery that week.

Rav Pam, zt"l, asked a question about this narration: Are we to infer that these Amoraim were so fickle that the slightest favor could influence them? What's the big deal about any of these matters? Did these Amoraim have such little backbone that they could be swayed by trivial and incidental matters? Rav Pam said that the lesson of this Gemara is not so much about judicial integrity or the corrosive nature of bribes. The major lesson that this passage of Talmud teaches is the concept of Hakaras HaTov [gratitude]. This Gemara teaches us how indebted each of these Amoraim felt to anyone who did them even the slightest favor.

Such matters would be insignificant to us. As a result of our insensitivity to the proper attribute of Hakaras HaTov, such favors do not even register on our radar screens as necessitating any gratitude on our part. We do not even consider them favors. But people who are highly sensitive to the attribute of showing gratitude do consider these kindnesses to be favors, worthy in fact of favors in return.

Rav Pam explains that many of the problems in our society indeed stem from the lack of appreciation of one's obligation for Hakaras HaTov. Husbands take the kindnesses that wives do for them for granted and wives take for granted the things that husbands do for them. Everybody has expectations of the other party in a marriage because "that's their job!" "Why should they get 'Extra credit' for merely doing their job?" If each spouse would see the things done for them as a favor which needs to be recognized, marriages would be far happier and far more stable. The same is true in employer-employee relationships and in virtually all other relationships as well!

Rav Pam notes: If parents and alumni would have the proper sense of Hakaras HaTov to the institutions that educated themselves and their children, Yeshivos and Beis Yaakovs and Day Schools would not be in the sorry state of financial distress in which they find themselves today. All too often, the attitude is "I paid my tuition. I did my job. You did your job. Do not bother me anymore!" If they had a feeling for the proper sense of gratitude to these teachers and institutions, their ongoing gifts would be far more generous!

Rav Kook, when yet a Rav in Europe, before moving to Eretz Yisrael spent time in the summers on the Baltic seacoast in Latvia, as was the custom of many European Rabbonim. There was a hall there where they made minyanim. Rav Reuvain Bengas happened to be there one evening and had Yahrtzeit. There were only nine people in the hall, so one of the people in the hall went outside looking for a tenth Jew for the minyan for Rav Reuvain's Yahrtzeit. Meanwhile, outside there was a certain fellow also trying to form a minyan and he had an exact minyan. The person from the hall did not realize this and pulled one person from the outside group into the hall for the inside minyan.

Although this was all unintentional, the person who organized the minyan outside stormed into the

hall and started yelling at Rav Bengas and heaping insults upon him. Rav Kook, well-known for his great Ahavas Yisrael for every Jew, nevertheless went to the person who was berating Rav Bengas and slapped him across his face for embarrassing a Talmid Chochom.

The slapped person got so furious at Rav Kook that he decided to take him to the secular court for assaulting him. A whole commotion developed. A number of people asked Rav Kook to just apologize so that the matter would not go any further. Rav Kook refused. He said if this was just for my honor I could apologize, but this involves the honor of Rav Bengas who was shamed. I am not sorry I slapped him. I had to stand up for the honor of a Talmid Chochom. Let this person take me to court!

A few days passed, however, and the fellow had a change of heart. He came into Rav Kook and apologized and told him he was not going to take him to court. Seemingly that was the end of the story.

Years later, Rav Kook came to America and he was approached by the person who he had slapped years earlier in the Latvian seacoast town. He told Rav Kook "I cannot thank the Rabbi enough. I owe you a great debt of gratitude." He then took out a gold watch and gave it to Rav Kook. He explained that after Rav Kook slapped him, his life became miserable in Europe. As a result of that tumultuous incident, he became notoriously known as the Jew who yelled at Rav Benges and the Jew who was slapped by Rav Kook. He had no choice but to leave Europe and go to America where no one knew him. In America, he became a millionaire! He felt his good fortune was all the result of the slap of Rav Kook and wanted to show Hakaras HaTov to him.

Sometimes we should feel gratitude even for a slap in the face! Likewise the Amoraim felt a super sensitivity for gratitude even for trivial matters. The same is true of righteous Jews in every generation. The Chofetz Chaim was a Kohen and could not attend funerals. A woman died who had once donated a window to his Yeshiva in Radin. (This was a simple window - not a fancy stained glass window.) Even though the Chofetz Chaim could not enter the cemetery and despite his old age, he walked a long distance behind the casket to the cemetery to accompany the body to burial, as Hakaras HaTov for the donation of the window.

If only we would recognized the obligation to recognize favors - however small - the world would be a far better place!

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