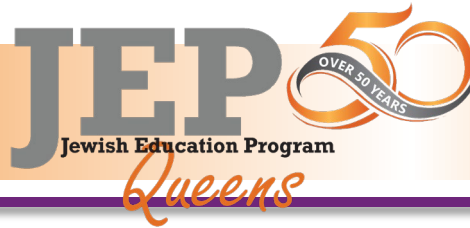


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GIVE BACK THE EXTRA CHANGE!

by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

PARSHAS BEHAR

Many years ago, I read a story by Rabbi Hanoch Teller: Vladimer was a non-Jewish postmaster in a town in Europe. He made all his calculations in his head, never making a mistake. Once, he made a mistake and gave a Jewish customer too much change. The customer did not realize the mistake until he arrived home. He asked a halachic question from his rav, Rav Yaakov Kaminetsky zt"l, who told him to return the money. He tried to return the money, but Vladimer did not believe him since Vladimer never made a monetary mistake. The Jew insisted. Finally, Vladimer acknowledged his mistake and took the money. Vladimer thought to himself that the Jew returned the money only because he was afraid that he would be caught and that all the Jews in the town would be punished because of that. From that time on, Vladimer tested his Jewish customers by giving them extra change. Each and every time, the Jews returned the extra money. Vladimer was very impressed by the honesty shown by the Jews. Sometime after, the Nazis entered the town. There was only one non-Jew in the town who tried to save Jews. It was none other than Vladimer.

The **Talmud** (Bava Basra 89B) discusses different laws regarding honesty in business: A person was not permitted to prepare measuring weights of tin, lead, or of any other type of metal because they deteriorate over time. As a result, the buyer would pay for more merchandise than he would receive. A leveler was used to remove the excess from the mouth of a vessel. A leveler was not permitted to be made from a gourd because it is a light material and does not level effectively. That would cause a loss for the seller. It was also forbidden to make a leveler of metal because it weighs down and removes too much of the merchandise. That would cause a loss for the buyer. And, conversely, one may not level little by little, i.e., with several slow movements, since this would be bad for the buyer and good for the seller.

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai wanted to give a shiur discussing the laws of honesty and deceitfulness in business, using some of the specific examples that the Talmud discusses. However, he had a dilemma. If he would give the shiur, then dishonest people may learn new methods of cheating unsuspecting buyers. On the other hand, if he would not give the shiur, then

*"If you sell anything to your neighbor, or purchase [something] from your neighbor, do not cheat one another."
(Vayikra 25:14)*

dishonest people may say, "Torah scholars are not well versed in our handiwork." Perhaps the dishonest people would think that wise men are naïve and unaware of the different methods of cheating.

The **Maharsha** explains that, on the one hand, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai felt that it was important that dishonest people realize that talmidei chachamim, Torah scholars, know all the tricks of how to cheat others yet refrain from doing so. Upon hearing this, many dishonest people would repent. Why? They rationalize their dishonesty by telling themselves that everyone else would also cheat if they knew how. When they learn that many people have the knowledge on how to be dishonest, yet do not do so because they value honesty, then many would repent. **The example set by an honest Jew can be a powerful influence to impress others about the Torah way of life.** Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai knew that even professional thieves can be brought to repentance by seeing a Jew act with honesty. That is the power of making a *kiddush Hashem*. That is the positive influence you can have on others by doing the right thing. On the other hand, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai

was afraid that his shiur would teach some of the dishonest people new methods of cheating. Because of this quandary, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was not going to give the shiur. The **Talmud** then quotes Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak who says that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai finally decided to give the shiur on the basis of the pasuk, *“Whoever is wise, let him understand these things, whoever is prudent let him know them; for the ways of Hashem are righteous, tzadikim will walk in them: and sinners will stumble in them.”* (Hoshea 14:10). The **Maharsha** explains that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai derived from this pasuk another benefit of giving the shiur. Righteous people who would hear the shiur would become more sensitive to and would avoid deceiving others in ways in which they may have been doing so unintentionally. This additional benefit convinced Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai to give the shiur.

Rabbi Henach Leibowitz zt”l had a question on this. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai was not going to give the shiur because of the deadlock between the

consideration of encouraging outright thievery versus making a *kiddush Hashem*. Why would the benefit learned from the pasuk, make a difference in tipping the scales in favor of giving the shiur? Wasn’t this potential benefit very unlikely? After all, *tzadikim*, righteous people are honest. They review their actions to make sure that they act properly. The odds were minimal that they would cheat others, even unintentionally.

Rabbi Leibowitz zt”l answered that apparently, even though the chance of affecting a benefit to the righteous was minimal, it was still worth giving the shiur for their benefit. This teaches us how terrible it is to deceive others, even when done unintentionally. There is no such thing as a small deception, or a tiny lie! **Hashem wants us to be totally, 100% truthful!** Any slight deviation is not considered truthful (However, there are some, limited exceptions where the Torah does permit one)!

Acting with *emes*, with Truth, is one of the obligations of Judaism. The example set by a Jew acting with honesty, can be a very powerful influence to attract others to a Torah way of life!

(Dvar Torah based on the shiurim of HaRav Henach Leibowitz zt”l as recorded in The Pinnacle of Creation by Rabbi Aryeh Striks and Rabbi Shimon Zehnwirth, as well as Chidushei Halev by Rabbi Binyamin Luban).