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Bribery Sways The Mind and The Senses

Parashas Shoftim contains the Torah's commandment of "Do not take a bribe, for a bribe sways the eyes of the wise" - a judge in *Beis Din* may not take *shochad* (a bribe) from anyone.

The Torah explains the reason why a judge may not take a bribe: it "sways the eyes of the wise". A bribe doesn't allow a person to see something objectively as it is. It overpowers the rational intellect.

A bribe overpowers even the physical senses. It can even cause him to see the matter in an entirely different light, now that he has taken the bribe and he has become biased. When a person is bribed, he will hear the facts differently, and even his physical vision will show him something else; he doesn't even see accurately, now that he has become bribed\biased, in how he views the situation. A person might even be told what the facts are, yet he continues to see the facts differently and he hears what he wants to hear, because the bribe that he has taken is distorting the reality that he sees.

The Depth of Our Bechirah (Free Will)

It is a *halachah* of the Torah that a judge may not accept a bribe, but we are taught by the Sages that each person must view himself as his own judge. Thus, just as a judge in *Bein Din* must avoid a bribe - so must we avoid bribery in our souls.

How can a person be his own judge? Every person has situations where he must judge and decide what the correct course of action is. Not only must we "judge" others favorably, but we must always see two options in front of us, what truth is and what falsity is, and decide between them. That is a judge's purpose: to see both sides, to see which of them is true and which is false, and decide upon the truth.

On a personal level, man must know how to decide between good and evil, when he uses his power of *bechirah*, free will. Our *bechirah* is enabled by the fact that we are each our own judge. If a person chooses something simply because he wants it, this is not called making a proper judgment. But if a person has chosen to do something because he has decided between true and false - as the Rambam describes our *bechirah* - this is what it means to be our own judge.

Sometimes we are faced with total falsity, and sometimes we must discern subtle falsities that are contained even in truth. There are levels and levels to truth and falsity. Our avodah of *bechirah* is to see what truth is, where the falsity is, and to decide upon truth.

This is how a person makes himself into his own judge. It means to pit truth against falsity and decide between them. There is a lot that we have to decide, and this is where a large part of our *avodah* on this word is.

Bribery In Our Soul

Being that are each on our judge, we must make sure not take any “bribery” in our own soul, for bribery sways our sense of rational judgment. A judge must not listen to any offers of money, but how do we refuse a bribe in our soul? Are there any ‘bribes’ that we offer to ourselves?

The power of bribery (*shochad*) that can sway our soul is essentially identified as our very own *ratzon* (will). When a person is a judge over himself, he chooses between truth and falsity, but when he has certain desires for something, these very desires will sway his way of thinking and it will be like bribery to him. In the soul, bribery is in the form of *ratzon*. When a person already has a desire for Option A over Option B before he has viewed the situation objectively, he is already deciding to choose A.

A judge must view all of the litigants as equal. He must not differentiate between the wealthy and the poor, for example. So too, when one is being his own judge as he decides between one of two options, he must see the two sides as equal options. Otherwise, he cannot judge.

If he sees the options as equal, he can decide between them and reach the truth. His heart can show him what he truth is, what falsity is, and to decide upon the truth. His true power of *bechirah* will be accessed, and he is enabled to choose truth. But when one is already inclined to choose one of the options, he is already biased before he has started to judge, and he cannot see the two options are equal. As long as there is a *ratzon* already for one of the options, he cannot decide properly. His *ratzon* has bribed him, and it sways his mind.

The Yetzer Hora and How It Affects Our Decisions

Most of the time, when a person chooses and decides something, it is stemming from some form of inner bribery. This is because “*the inclination of the heart of man is evil from his youth*”, and the innermost will in the soul, which is the desire to do Hashem’s will, is often concealed by the *yetzer hora*. Although there is always a deeply rooted desire in each soul to want to do Hashem’s will, it initially remains deep in the subconscious, and it is mostly the *yetzer hora* which is at the forefront of one’s conscious desire.

We are taught that the *yetzer hora* has two forms^[1]: One kind of *yetzer hora* is an external kind of *yetzer hora*, where we are convinced to do evil even when we want good. A more inner kind of *yetzer hora* is the kind that is buried in our own heart. Chazal refer to this kind of *yetzer hora* as “*Tzefuni*”, “hidden one”, for it hides in the heart of man.^[2] It convinces a person that he essentially *is* the evil desire that he wants.

The *Nefesh HaChaim* explains that before the sin of Adam, the *yetzer hora* was heard as an outer voice, and after the sin, the *yetzer hora* entered man himself and ever since then, the person thinks that he is his *yetzer hora*; he identifies himself as the evil desires he is tempted with, and he comes to think of himself as evil. This is the power of the *yetzer hora* that resides in our heart, ever since the first sin of mankind. This is the *orlas halev* (the foreskin of the heart) that became embedded into our heart.

Because of this, a person’s initial self-perception is that he thinks of his *yetzer hora* as being *himself*. A child often identifies with his *yetzer hora*, and much less with his *yetzer tov*. After becoming 13 years of age, he can identify with his *yetzer tov*, but he has still formed his initial self-perception

through his *yetzer hora*. Before he has even entered the age where he has *bechirah*, he is already used to the *yetzer hora*'s pull, so his *ratzon* is already swaying his options and he cannot decide accurately between truth and falsity.

That being the case, his *bechirah* is not choosing between two equal options he sees in front of him. Rather, he has developed a desire for evil and for falsity, and he is not that interested in what the truth is. He might know intellectually what the will of Hashem is and that he has been given *bechirah* to choose right over wrong, and sometimes he does want to choose Hashem's will. But it is very difficult for a person to remove the "bribery" that is already present in his heart for so long.

That is why most decisions of people are not stemming from true *bechirah*. They have already been swayed by bribery, so they cannot decide accurately. Most of the choosing in this world between good and evil are therefore not real "choices"; they are all biased, because the person has usually been bribed to follow a certain personal desire that he has.

This is one of the most fundamental concepts about our soul and about our inner task on this world.

When a person becomes older and more mature and he gains *daas*, it seems to him that he wants truth, at least intellectually. But the person usually is not aware that his heart deep down wants the opposite of the truths his mind knows about. The heart is usually concealed from the person's awareness, so a person remains unaware of his subconscious desires that may be swaying him all along and influencing how he sees things.

Even if he is sitting in solitude and he is trying to decide what the right thing is and what the will of Hashem is, and it might feel like a real decision of choosing to following the truth, the person still has no idea that deep in his subconscious, he is leaning towards choosing an option that is based on a personal desire he has, based entirely on a 'bribe'. He thinks he is deciding correctly, but he is probably leaning towards his decision because of some desire that is subconsciously affecting him and guiding him. His *bechirah* is all stemming from bribery.

How Do We Know If Our Decisions Are Correct?

This creates a great difficulty in our *avodah*. It is clear that a judge has to make sure he doesn't take monetary bribe, but how do we avoid taking a bribe in our own soul? How can we know that we are not being mentally bribed somehow to choose a certain way and that our decision is really stemming from *yiras shomayim*?

In the beginning of our way, it is not possible for us to have total *bechirah* that is unaffected by any 'bribes', because we have already been living so long with our desires. If so, there is no way for us initially to avoid choices that are not affected by inner bribery. So what should we do? Should we never use our *bechirah* that Hashem gave us, just because it is already biased?

We have no choice and we must try our best to decide between right and wrong and to act upon what we feel is right. When we do our best, Hashem will not hold us accountable if we are still affected by bribery afterwards; at that point, it is not our fault, because we have done all that we can to remove ourselves from the inner bribery, and we have done the *avodah* that Hashem wants from us.

But even so, we must still try to purify ourselves of improper desires and ulterior motivations, and only after that is it not our fault if there is still bribery in us. If we have never tried purifying ourselves, we are at fault for letting the bribery remain in us.

We are taught by our Sages that we must view ourselves as a judge on ourselves, so we must use our judgment as best as we can. The Gemara says that "A judge sees what his eyes see". We have no

choice but to rely on our judgment. However, that is only true if we have done all that we can to avoid bribery. If we have done all that we can to distance ourselves from bribery, it is not at fault if we remain affected by bribery. But if we can avoid bribery, and we didn't, of this, the Alter of Kelm said: "A judge can only see what his eyes see - but he is still blamed for seeing it that way."

Purifying The Heart

The *avodah* of man on this world is to try as best as he can to purify his heart from any self-serving desires and motivations, and along with this, a person must also *daven* to Hashem regularly for this: to merit a pure heart.

Slowly, a person's heart will become more and more purified, as he gets used to this. If a person is regularly purifying himself like this, bribery will less affect him. Any bribery that he has not uprooted from his heart after that point is not his fault, and Hashem does not ask more for the person.

But if a person doesn't regularly work to purify his heart from ulterior motivations and from self-serving desires, even if he attempts to do Hashem's will and he tries to keep *Halacha* well, his heart will remain with its ulterior motivations that continue to influence his choices. Although it seems to him that he is always choosing between truth and falsity, he really isn't able to choose. He might be shown in Heaven one day that he never even had one true *bechirah*. Even when he chose good, it was also due to bribery - perhaps because it was more comfortable for him at that time to choose right over wrong.

Always Suspecting Ourselves Of Ulterior Motivations

When one realizes this concept and he is feeling it, he realizes the depth of the *yetzer hora*, of power of evil that resides in man. It can shake him to the core. He will want to run away from all the evil, but where can he run to? There is nowhere to run away to, because the evil is still with him wherever he turns and it can still sway him.

But at least one can know that he can keep purifying his heart more and more. The more one purifies his heart, the more he is cleansed from bribery, until he is totally clean from it.

On a deeper note, it is explained that we are never free from ulterior motivations in the heart, and for this reason, our *Gedolim* always greatly suspected themselves of ulterior motivations. Even our holy Avos suspected themselves of ulterior motivations, although we cannot comprehend this; our Sages revealed it to us and that is how we know this. Rav Dessler describes it as *tzeil haguf*, "body-shadow", that even the greatest *tzaddikim* are somewhat affected by the body, and that is why a *tzaddik* is never perfect.

We have no comprehension of our *tzaddikim*, so we cannot try to understand how they saw imperfections in themselves, but what we learn from this is how we deal with ourselves; even the *tzaddikim* of recent generations are far from our comprehension. The point is that there is this concept of suspecting yourself of ulterior motivations.

This week I met someone who is opening a *Kolel*. I asked him, "What motivated you to open a *Kolel*?" He told me, "It is 100% *l'sheim shomayim* (for the sake of Heaven)." Anyone can know that not one of our *Gedolim* ever believed that he did something entirely *l'sheim shomayim*. If only we could even come close.

Basic Self-Awareness

Suspecting yourself of ulterior motivations can enable a person to have a true feeling of *shiflus*

(lowliness\humility) towards himself.

Reb Chatzkel zt"l suspected that maybe all of his talks about *emunah* are because his first impression of Reb Yeruchem Levovitz was a talk about *emunah* that excited him. The Gedolim suspected themselves like this, but the average person cannot be on this level; he would become too aggravated with this kind of constant self-probing.

But we can at least realize that there is often falsity in our motivations, and we can at least notice it when it's glaring. Even when we choose good, we should suspect that maybe because it's self-serving and for the sake of our own ego.

Feeling Dependent on Hashem

The Ramban says to learn Torah and then one's mind is more purified, and then one can reach the point of *hishtavus* (equality), where he sees two equal options in front of him and then he can decide properly. But one should not think that he has reached *hishtavus* when he tries it. Rather, on his own level that he is currently at, he can reach a point of clarity where he can decide accurately. No one totally reaches *hishtavus*, because there is always a *yetzer hora* in the heart, and no one is like Dovid HaMelech who emptied the *yetzer hora* from his heart.

For this reason, one must always feel dependent on Hashem, in order to arrive at any truth. This is how one can come to realize how much he needs Hashem. We are totally dependent on Him – even for the smallest decision. This is because there is no way of knowing on our own if we are choosing correctly.

This can bring a person to feel a great *shiflus*, causing a person to feel totally dependent on Hashem. But if a person does not handle this *shiflus* correctly, he will become broken and sad, which is negative *shiflus*. One who can accept it properly will have both healthy *shiflus* towards himself, as well as a feeling of utter dependence on Hashem.

One must try to get to truth as much as he can, but he must also realize that he is always far from reaching the truth on his own. Then he will begin to feel how much he needs Hashem for everything. Instead of feeling weak at realizing how far he is from truth, he will be inspired even more to daven to Hashem and to feel dependent on Hashem.

In Conclusion

The *avodah* of a person not to take a bribe is thus a matter that envelopes all of our life, affecting almost all people. The more a person realizes the concept of it, he feels *shiflus* from it, but even more so, it causes him to feel even more dependent on Hashem and to attach himself to Him.

[1] as explained in sefer Nefesh HaChaim

[2] Sukkah 52a