

If you sell anything to your neighbor, or buy anything from your neighbor, you should not defraud one another. (25:14)

The *Talmud Bava Basra* 87b details a number of fraudulent practices which were employed by less-than-honest businessmen who would cheat their customers. Rabbi Yochanan *ben* Zakai hesitated publicizing these practices, explaining that he was confronted with a moral dilemma. If he would lecture, it was quite possible that some of the listeners who were themselves dishonest might learn new methods for defrauding others. On the other hand, if he did not lecture, the cheaters would posit that the scholars were naïve to the ways of the world and unaware of the various ploys for cheating others. One wonders why it was Rabbi Yochanan *ben* Zakai's responsibility to inform the wise cheaters that the sages were just as aware of their methods of depravity as they were. Who really cares what dishonest people think of us?

In his commentary to the *Talmud*, the **Maharsha** explains that it was important for Rabbi Yochanan *ben* Zakai to relay the message to the cheaters: Yes, we are aware of all of the *shtick*, the deceit, the lies that can be employed to defraud the unsuspecting, but we would never do it, due to our ethical character. This approach might target some of the cheaters who, as a result of this information, might consider repenting their ways and putting an end to their sordid behavior. No longer could they rationalize their unethical behavior, saying, "We are only doing what everybody else is doing. We are no different than the rest."

When the dishonest dealers realize that, indeed, many people are aware of the numerous ways to take advantage of unknowing and trusting souls – yet, because they value and appreciate the gift of honesty, they will not resort to stealing from others – it will change their attitudes. Many swindlers will change their ways and look for honest work and honest ways in which to earn a living.

This, explains **Horav A. Henach Leibowitz, zl**, is the power of a *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctification of Hashem's Name. The force of absolute truth emanating from such an experience can even impact the most deceitful sinner into altering his fraudulent lifestyle. Merely becoming aware of the honest behavior of righteous people can do a world of good and quite possibly change a life.

As always, there is another side to consider. Negative publicity can destroy one's perspective on Judaism. Someone who is riding the fence, not sure if the Orthodox way of life is his cup of tea, will certainly swing to the left when he hears of an impropriety committed by a member of the Orthodox community. This is especially true if the infraction represents a breach of the individual's own personal moral code.

The *Rosh Yeshiva* extends this idea further, presenting the notion that there is no such thing as an insignificant theft, a white lie, a tiny lie. Hashem's seal is *emes*, truth. Truth is an absolute. There is no grey area. A statement that deviates one iota from the truth is completely false. A penny taken

through deceitful method is an act of theft – regardless of its minute value.

Rav Henach relates a famous story concerning **Horav Aharon Kotler, zl**, founder and *Rosh Yeshivah* of *Beth Medrash Govohah*. He was presented with an artist's rendering of the proposed new structure for the *yeshivah* building. This drawing was to serve as the backdrop for fundraising purposes and publicity about the *yeshivah*. The artist had visualized how the edifice, once completed, would appear. It truly was an impressive picture. *Rav Aharon* studied the picture and found a flaw. He pointed out that there was one extra tree in a place where it did not – nor could ever – exist. Defending the drawing were those who commissioned the artwork. They noted that everything else was true to its image. The *yeshivah* building was accurate; the surroundings were on target. One tree was out of place – *Nu!* It had no bearing on the building itself, and, after all, the artist had worked so hard to prepare a flawless graphic. The *Rosh Yeshivah* was adamant. "It is not the *emes!*" The drawing was laid to rest. Torah can only be established on a foundation of pure *emes*. Honesty and integrity may never be compromised – regardless of one's lofty goals.