

And you shall not steal. (5:17)

We live in a day and age during which the idea of theft has lost much of its aura of malevolence. Stealing used to be an anathema. Regrettably, people have discovered loopholes whereby what used to be evil no longer carries such a negative stigma. *Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl*, relates the story of a distinguished student of the *Arizal*, a wealthy businessman who owned two factories in Tzfas. In one factory, he employed only men; in the other factory, only women. One day, the student visited his revered *Rebbe*. When he entered the room, the *Rebbe* said, "I see on your forehead a speck of *gezel*, theft." Apparently, the holy *Ari* was able to see what the average man could not. He looked at his student and saw a taint of misappropriated funds. The student immediately replied, "*Rebbe*, I have never taken anything from anyone. How could I be suspected of theft?" The *Ari* told him to introspect, because it was definitely there – someplace.

The next day, the student entered his two factories. He placed a bag of silver in front of all of his workers and declared, "Anyone who has any monetary claim against me, please come forward and take what is your due. Even if you remotely think that I owe you money – take it please! If anyone feels that he or she has sustained a monetary loss because of me – come forward and take your money!"

No one came forward. The silence was palpable. Finally, a middle-aged widow slowly came forward and took three pennies. She felt that this sum of money, although a mere pittance, was owed to her. Until now, she had never felt like complaining over such a paltry sum, but the owner of the factory was literally "begging" someone to come forward and relieve him of his money. Until now she had been embarrassed to complain. But, now, the situation had changed.

The *Ari's* student was overjoyed to return to his *Rebbe* with a clean slate. Indeed, the *Ari* no longer noticed the telltale sign on his student's forehead. Apparently, the issue had been resolved. We now have an idea of the perspective in which a *tzaddik*, righteous person, views thievery. A mere three pennies, which a woman felt in her heart rightfully belonged to her, comprised a breach in the transgression of *Lo signov*, "Do not steal." It is not how much. The mere fact that another person feels degraded is sufficient cause for the act of theft to leave a spiritual blemish on a person's forehead. Can we imagine what **our** foreheads must look like?

Rav Sholom takes a strong position concerning *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven. He feels that unless one purges himself of his obsession for acquiring material wealth, he cannot possibly achieve an acceptable level of *yiraas Shomayim*. The two simply do not mesh together. Only one who is not consumed by a passion for amassing wealth has the ability to achieve true *yiraas Shomayim*.

The *Maggid* quotes a Torah thought he had heard from a distinguished Torah scholar concerning the *pasuk* in *Tehillim* 19:10, *Yiraas Hashem teharah, omedess la'ad*, "The fear of Hashem is pure, enduring forever." The *Mechilta* comments, "How does one guarantee that his *yiraas*

Shomayim will endure? If his *yiraas Shomayim* transcends the material, if it eschews monetary gain, he is guaranteed of a lasting relationship with the Almighty.” One may feel at certain times that his life is going in the right direction. He is learning, *davening*, performing acts of *chesed* – all of the good things. Thus, he certainly feels that he would be labeled a *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing Jew. Rav Sholom claims that this is not always the case. One may appear to be G-d-fearing, but, for all intents and purposes, it is a *yiraas Shomayim* that is tainted by gold and silver. When he is up against the wall, when the challenge becomes too much to bear, he immediately exchanges his *yiraas Shomayim* for a little gold and silver.

How sadly true this is. How often do we hear of a devout person falling prey to a challenge involving money? What about the *yarei Shomayim* boss/owner/manager, anyone in a leadership position, putting their *yiraas Shomayim* into their back pocket to save a few dollars? The *Ari*’s student was spiritually blemished due to three pennies of which he was unaware, but a poor widow was. We play with people’s lives – hiring, firing at will, disregarding the emotions of the worker, the financial loss – as long as **our** bottom line appears healthy. *Lo Signov!*