

Singer-Jordan Edition
Ki Seitzei

Perceptions • Elul 11, 5784 • September 14, 2024 • Issue #2063

The last *halachah* in the *parsha* right before the one to eradicate the memory of Amalek is to always have legal weights. Why the juxtaposition? To warn us that cheating in business leads to attacks from Amalek.

The *Gemora* discusses the topic in more detail making, what it often likes to do, a counterintuitive statement. It does this to make us appreciate the gravity of a sin we might otherwise take for granted. It says: Rav Levi said: The punishment for *middos* [dishonest] measures, is more severe than the punishment for *arayos*—illicit relations (*Bava Basra* 88b).

Unless a person already knows better, they would assume that as bad as cheating someone in business is, adultery is worse. And they would be right, because a person does not get the death penalty for faulty weights, but they do for most illicit sexual encounters. So what did Rav Levi mean with his statement?

On the other hand, the *Gemora* does say elsewhere that one of the six questions a person is asked on their day of judgment is, “Did you deal faithfully in business?” (*Shabbos* 31a). Again, as important a thing it is to be honest in business, aren’t there other more pressing things to ask a person about on the most important day of their life?

The answer given is, while adultery is a terrible sin against God and man, it is one that impacts only a few people. Dishonest weights, or any other form of cheating in business, have a greater impact because it affects so many people. Many of those people you may never meet again which makes it impossible to right the wrongs and therefore, do *teshuvah*.

Another thing. There is a reason why illicit relationships such as adultery as commonplace as they may be in society, are still not as common as cheating others in business. Most of the phishing mail I get is some kind of scam to weasel money out of naive recipients. The rest is either an honest but unwanted advertisement, or a plea for *tzedakah*.

Part of the reason for this is that it takes less spiritual corruption to cheat in business than it does to let passion push a person to the point of permanently damaging one's family and another's as well. We all feel the pull of money at some point and can be tempted to cheat financially a little, like on a tax return. But we're far less forgiving when it comes to sexual recklessness.

But here is the deeper point of the Torah in this week's *parsha* and the *Gemora* explaining it, understood from a different part of the *Gemora*:

A silver goblet was stolen from the host of Mar Zutra *Chasida*. Mar Zutra saw a certain student who washed his hands and dried them on the cloak of another. Mar Zutra said: "This is the one who does not care about the property of another. He bound that student, and the student then confessed that he stole the goblet." (*Bava Metzia* 24a)

One might think there is a big difference between using someone else's clothing to dry their hands, and actually stealing from another person. Mar Zutra said that the difference is not that large. Once a person starts to care less about the property of another, they have put themselves on a path to stealing in the future. This is why the rabbis placed *Pirkei Avos*, which teaches ethical values, in *Seder Nezikin*, the section of *Mishnah* that deals with damages to others and their property.

The same logic applies here as well. Spiritual desensitization is a dangerously slippery slope that can take a person places they once never imagined going. And when it leads to a lessening of one's sense of social justice, it can blur the line between right and wrong so much that a person can find their desire and passions too overwhelming to keep at bay. This has often caused people to cross moral red lines they cannot return from.

In this respect, the end of the *parsha* is very much connected to the beginning of it. It starts off talking about the soldier who overwhelmed with illicit passion, decided to marry a captive woman. The process by which he is "allowed" to take her is designed to help him regain his senses and avoid disaster. However, the question remains: How did a Jewish soldier who lives by Torah and regularly performs *mitzvos* get to such a low spiritual point in the first place?

In other words, the problem wasn't that he had to go to war or that he was made more emotionally vulnerable because of it. The soldier's problem began before any of that, the war only acting as a means to reveal his pre-existing spiritual vulnerability. And just like paying attention to small *physical* symptoms can save a person from larger health issues, taking note of "smaller" spiritual deficiencies can save a person from future spiritual disasters.