Being Trustworthy...An Ultimate Responsibility

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By

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When we ultimately must come before the heavenly court and stand in judgment for our lives, what will we be asked? According to the Talmudic sage Rava (Shabbat 31a), a serious question will be: "did you conduct your business dealings faithfully?"

We will not be asked about the quantity of our estate, but about the quality of how we obtained it. Were we honest, trustworthy, fair? Did we earn a good reputation for uprightness, morality, compassion?

In our competetive world, we need to be reminded about this ultimate question and thereby keep our lives in proper context. We are not put on earth to amass fortunes; we are put on earth to be good people. When we engage in business transactions, we all want to succeed--and that's fine. But we must succeed without losing our righteousness and our morality in the process. To succeed through dishonesty, cruelty and greed is not to succeed at all. We will have to answer for ourselves in the heavenly court.

A recent survey found that the students most likely to cheat in school are those who attend business schools! They feel under tremendous pressure to compete, to win at any price; the stakes are very high. People whose goal in life is to amass millions and even billions of dollars sometimes are so focused on the quantity of their wealth, that they lose sight of the quality of their lives. If they attain wealth by cheating, by cutting corners, by exploiting others, by underpaying taxes etc., the very wealth that they attain will stand in testimony against them in the heavenly court.

The late Ezra Zilkha, a highly respected financial leader, once told me: "when you deal with honest, trustworthy people, their handshake or their word is enough. When you deal with dishonest, untrustworthy people, even a written contract will not protect you, since they will find lawyers to reinterpret and revise the terms." It's best only to deal with honest, trustworthy people. Others--even if pretending to act legally and morally--cannot be trusted to act in good faith. They will find ways of swindling you, and even be proud of how they outsmarted you.

They don't realize that one day they will have to answer before the Almighty for their unscrupulousness.

The Talmud (Baba Kama (30A) records the opinion of Rav Yehuda: One who wishes to be pious should fulfill the teachings of [the tractates dealing with] damages i.e. should conduct all business dealings honorably and fairly, avoiding causing damage to others and their property. Some people have a tendency to think that piety is measured by their careful observance of ritual laws, but that this punctiliousness need not apply to their conduct in financial matters. Rav Yehuda reminds us that this bifurcation is wrong. Piety is not equated solely with ritual conduct, but is equally--even moreso--contingent on proper financial conduct. Being a "religious" person means more than keeping Shabbat and kashruth; it means being honest, trustworthy, kind, and fair. It means being conscious of the fact that business and holiness are intertwined.

The Talmudic Sage, Rava, suggests that the Divine Court will one day ask each of us: did you conduct your business dealings faithfully? We must keep this question firmly in mind so that we will be able to answer that question without being ashamed.

Angel for Shabbat