

Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

The Missionary Tried to Bribe Me



A Jewish family asked me to meet in their home to dialogue with a Christian missionary who was discussing religion with them. I accepted the invitation because I felt it was important to provide everyone with a second point of view.

I listened respectfully to the familiar and classic arguments the missionary presented. When it was my turn to respond, I provided a thoughtful refutation to his claims and also pointed out the spiritual beauty of Judaism and the miraculous

survival of the Jewish people. The family accepted the validity of my arguments.

However, it was obvious that the missionary was annoyed with my response as well as with my unwillingness to accept his point of view. Then, in a moment of frustration, the missionary exclaimed, "Just accept Jesus into your heart, because then you will see the truth and get into heaven."

At that moment I jokingly recalled a sign that read, "My mind is made up, so don't confuse me with facts." I then rejected the missionary's proposition and pointed out that when you accept something blindly, the proof-text becomes meaningless.

Furthermore, I pointed out that his offer of the reward of "getting into heaven" amounted to a "spiritual bribe" that could blind anyone's ability to make an honest and informed decision.

This lesson is highlighted in this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim* (Deuteronomy 16:18–21:9). The Torah instructs us to "*appoint judges and law enforcement officers in every city ... and pursue justice.*" Additionally, the Torah forbids us from taking bribes, as it says, "*You may not accept a bribe, because a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise*" (Deuteronomy 16:19).

The Torah's approach to law and justice is so fundamental that it served as an example to secular legal systems on which democratic societies depend.

Our sages elaborate that a bribe can take many forms. Generally speaking, we think of bribes as monetary gifts, like a one-hundred-dollar bill. However, the Torah goes even further.

Bribes can be very subtle. The Talmud (Ketubot 105b) provides several examples of judges who disqualified themselves due to what they considered a conflict of interest. For instance, Rabbi Yishmael excused himself from judging a litigant who happened to be his property tenant, because this relationship might influence his judgment.

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Justice and decision-making must be unprejudiced and objective. For example, we are instructed not to favor the poor over the rich or the other way around, as it says, *“Do not twist justice in legal matters by favoring the poor or by being partial to the rich and powerful”* (Leviticus 19:15).

The wisdom of being objective should be applied to all forms of decision-making, including judicial and spiritual.

In his classic work, *Battle for the Mind*, Dr. William Sargant describes the psychology of conversion and brainwashing and the effect that promises of spiritual rewards can play in manipulating decisions.

Dr. Sargant provides the example of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. To influence someone to convert to Christianity, Wesley used a manipulative technique that consisted of using the fear of hell and the devil to induce trauma and then offering salvation as the “only” escape route.

Thousands of years before Sargant, our sages warned, *“Do not be like a servant who serves his master on the condition of receiving a reward; rather, be like servants who serve their master without the condition of receiving a reward”* (Ethics of Our Fathers 1:3).

Promises of reward and punishment can corrupt the pursuit of spiritual truths.

Although reward and punishment is fundamental to Jewish belief, our sages understood that promises of reward and punishment can potentially corrupt the altruistic pursuit of spiritual truths.

This is exactly why the Torah encourages us to emulate judges when we make personal decisions and not allow any form of bribe to cloud our decision-making process.

The real reward for serving God is the opportunity to be connected to the Almighty through God’s commandments [מצוות–*mitzvot*]. This point is evident from the fact that the root of the word mitzvah also means “connection” [צוותא–*tzavta*].

Our sages stated it this way, *“The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah”* (Ethics of Our Fathers 4:2). Selflessly doing a mitzvah, in and of itself, fulfills our purpose in life, transforms the world into a better place, and connects us with the Almighty.

May this Shabbat enrich us to serve God with a pure heart without bribes and thereby be connected to the infinite God by cherishing and performing His commandments.

Shabbat Shalom,

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