

“Toward a Truthful Perspective: An Examination of Our Decision-Making Process” with Rebbetzin Debbie Greenblatt.

A thought-provoking look into what truly motivates a person in the choices they make. This is a text-based class centering on the English translation of Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler's work, “Strive for Truth”. One can literally be part of the class, as they push “Pause” to read the quoted selections at their own pace. Press “Play” to resume the class and continue on with the fascinating answers.

Page references from *Strive for Truth* are as follows: pp. 161-163, 163-165, p. 170, and pp. 176-177.

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The truth perspective

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This article and the six which follow it form a series with the general title "The Truth Perspective." The first article, which is basic, is in effect a critique of human reason, based on the teachings of our Sages supplemented by our own observation of human nature. Its conclusions regarding the fallibility of the intellect in matters of morality and fundamental belief are common to all schools of mussar, though the precise manner in which the conclusion is arrived at here is original with Rabbi Dessler. If one accepts the views put forward so persuasively here, one is led to question many convictions almost intuitively held in the modern world. Above all, one begins to question the origins and bias of one's own opinions. It is this readiness for self-criticism which is "the root of mussar".

The main article was first put into writing in 1940 and underwent several revisions, with additional material being added from time to time. The subsequent articles continue the train of thought in various directions. The first, "Know what to answer:" uses the conclusions reached in the main article as a platform from which to launch a devastating attack, not on *apikorsut* (heretical philosophy) as such, but on its

The roots of mussar

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claim to be taken seriously. The second, "A Torah of truth." provides new insights into the concepts of *emunat hachchamim* (faith in our Sage5) and *torah min hashamayim* (Torah from Heaven). The next three articles suggest ways out of the dilemma posed by the original article: If bias is so all-pervasive, how can one ever hope to arrive at the truth? The final article in this series, "The wisdom of the world." provides a far-ranging re-assessment of human goals and destiny against the background of modern technological society.

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If a scientist is going to carry out some very intricate and delicate experiments, and the gravest consequences attend on the slightest imprecision in his results, his first thought will be to ensure the accuracy of his instruments.

Every human being is such a scientist. He is engaged in the most fateful series of experiments there can possibly be-- the experiment of living. He is in constant need of accurate judgment to decide what to do and what not to do. He has to choose his life-path and avoid the traps set

162 | STRIVE FOR TRUTH: TRUTH PERSPECTIVE

for the unwary. But how is he to do all this unless he first checks his measuring-scales?

The mind on which we rely is itself an extremely delicate instrument which needs constant control for precision and accuracy. Without such controls how can we ever rely on the correctness of its conclusions?

□ INTEREST PROMPTS THOUGHT

When we begin investigating the mind's capacity for accuracy of judgment we come up against one basic fact. *There is no thinking without prior interest.* The mind of a person who is not interested in philately, for example, will simply not register the fine details of postage stamps which are so obvious to the ardent philatelist. Or consider a person idly turning the pages of a newspaper. Which details will enter his mind and remain fixed in his memory? Those which for some reason or other catch his interest. Those matters which altogether fail to arouse his interest do not attract his attention at all and never become the subject of thought.

What is the source of interest? Clearly it is the will. It is my will which promotes my interest, either positively or negatively. That is to say, I am interested primarily in what I want, or conversely in what I wish to avoid. There can be no interest except in relation to will.

It follows that any matter on which we exercise our judgment is a question proffered by the will to the intellect for decision.

Of course there is a category of "technical" problems' in which the basic question-- that concerning *ends--* has already been decided. What remains for decision is the question of the most appropriate *means* to achieve the ends. Here the will demands *only* the most efficient practical

solution and does not interfere with the intellect in its decision-making process. This class includes most of our day-to-day practical calculations and all purely technical questions- "how to do this" or "how to get from here to there." To solve problems of this kind poses no special difficulty; all that is needed is a sufficiently developed intellect.

The really difficult problems are those in which we are still in doubt about the basic questions: "Is this good for me or not?" "Is this where I *ought* to be going?" Their difficulty lies in the fact that our interest is involved. It is the interest that poses the question in the first place and the interest obviously already tends in one direction or the other. For example, one usually consults the *Shulhan Aruch* on the permissibility or otherwise of playing chess on Shabbat if one already wants to play chess. Or again, it is pretty obvious where the bias lies when a person is considering whether or not he is obliged by the *din* to make yet another attempt to pacify someone he has offended, and possibly suffer still more humiliation in the process.

We must now consider to what extent the human intellect is capable of arriving at true decisions in situations such as these. The Sages of the Torah are familiar with the depths of the human psyche. Let us see whether any words of theirs can provide us with an answer to our problem.

□ BLINDNESS OF INTELLECT

In the Talmud¹ we find the following observation:

Rava said: What is the reason for [the prohibition of] bribery? [Why is it forbidden to take a bribe even with the

sincere intention of declaring the innocent party innocent and the guilty party guilty?] ² Answer: Once [the judge] has taken a bribe from [one party], he becomes close to him in his mind; he becomes identified with him; and *no one can see anything to his own disadvantage*.

We see that the mere acceptance of a gift disqualifies a judge by inclining his interest to the side of one or the other of the parties. Even if he fully intends to judge correctly, the Torah tells us that he is no longer *capable* of coming to an unbiased decision; he can no longer see anything to the detriment of the person from whom he received the gift. His will blinds his intellect. We find this stated clearly in the Midrash: ³ “As soon as a judge has *given away his heart* for a bribe he becomes blind in judgment and is *no longer able* to judge the case truthfully.”

It is clear that a bias to one side must deflect the reasoning process from its true course. Reasoning and judgment are extremely delicate faculties. Bias can easily prevent one from bringing forward or giving due weight to an argument which conflicts with one's interest. We can understand this very well on the basis of our earlier discussion. We saw that it is interest that arouses thought. Interest is thus not likely to prompt the intellect to produce arguments which conflict with itself; on the contrary, it will do its best to suppress them.

But this is not all. Even when others present him with such an argument the biased person will refuse to accept it. This is how Maharal of Prague explains the verse “For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise and distorts the words of the righteous.” ⁴ He says:

“Blinds the eyes of the wise”-- this means that the correct argument will not occur to him.

“And distorts the words of the righteous” [that is, “the righteous words”: Rashi]-- this means that even if his attention is drawn to the correct view he will distort it.

Still more, we read in the *Meehilla*⁵ that such a person will eventually come to “hate the righteous words given at Sinai.” [His self-interest will engender a hatred for whatever stands in his way-- even the Torah itself.]

□ INFECTIOUS

There is something more here: something almost frightening in its implications. A person who, for the first time in his life, allows his intellect to become deflected by bribery will find himself getting blinder and blinder as time goes on. He has lost his “sense of truth.” Once the first “crooked argument” is lodged in his brain, all that comes after it--the entire structure of his views and opinions-- will be distorted accordingly. His blindness will continue to intensify until he dies in the same condition; as our Rabbis said: “Even a great sage who accepts a bribe will not depart from this world without blindness of heart.” ⁶

Furthermore, he does not corrupt himself alone: he aids the corruption of those who come after him. The sense of truth is something so delicate that the existence of many people who deviate from the truth will have a corrupting influence on decent people too. Without even noticing it they will tend to “correct” their views to accord with the intellectual systems of others who are already affected. Eventually the very concept of pure, unadulterated truth will disappear from society.

This is the meaning of the following saying of our Rabbis: ⁷

bad about himself.” How then can we ever hope to arrive at true decisions in matters which involve “seeing bad” about ourselves in the most literal sense of the words, such as admitting our own faults and accepting views which would oblige us to do things which are difficult for us and to refrain from activities which are attractive to us?

And if one deviation from the truth distorts a judge’s whole system of thought, what can we say about ourselves, who from our youth up have been used to making weak excuses for ourselves, minimizing the extent of our failings and exaggerating our good points?

Already in their days the Sages of the Mishna sensed that the infectious disease of “favoritism” had destroyed impartiality in judgment. What can we say, then, in whom “favoritism” to ourselves has become an ingrained habit over the generations?

The question must be faced: how can we ever rely on our intellect to give us true conclusions in any matter?

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There is no alternative. We must admit that the intellect is powerless to produce reliable results in any moral problem. An approach to truth can be made only insofar as the heart is cleansed of bias. And since bias is caused by character-faults, these must be eliminated and replaced by a strong and burning desire for truth and integrity.

□ DESTROYING BIAS

How can a person ever come to this state of perfection? Only by constant work on improving his character. This

is the only way: to destroy bias at its source. Many years of devoted and selfless labor are needed before one can hope to strengthen the yearning for truth to such an extent that one can free oneself from the bias of the *middot*.

[There is a wonderful parable in the Gemara¹² which illustrates this point. It might be called “The Parable of the Human Predicament.”

What is a human being like in this world? Like a man wandering in an impenetrable forest in the deepest darkness of the night. He is in danger from thorns and briars, ditches and pitfalls, from bandits and wild animals: and furthermore he does not know in which direction to go.

He happens on a torch which he can light. Now he is safe from the thorns and briars, ditches and pitfalls, but he is still in danger from the bandits and wild animals, and he still does not know in which direction to go.

The sun comes up. He is now safe from the bandits and wild animals too, but he still does not know in which direction to go.

When he reaches the crossroads and sees the signpost he is saved from them all.

The Gemara there explains that the torch stands for the practice of mitzvot, and the sun represents the study of the Torah.] What is meant by the crossroads? [There are three opinions in the Gemara. One says that it means a *talmid hacham* who has arrived at the day of his death. Only when filled with death does one find the ultimate clarity. Another considers that it stands for a *talmid hacham* who possesses the fear of sin.] Mar Zutra explains that it is the state reached by “a *talmid hacham* who finds that his learning accords with the halacha.” This means that he has imbibed the Torah at such depth that he arrives at the truth intuitively. He has worked on himself to such an

