

Rabbi Wein, Parshat Shoftim

The reading of this week deals with a basic human temptation and almost universal failing – corruption. Though the Torah speaks of actual physical and financial graft it certainly implies a broader message to not only to those in the judiciary but to others in positions of power. The Torah recognizes that human beings, by their very nature, have biases and prejudices. Some of these seem to be almost inborn while others are acquired because of life experiences, educational instruction and societal norms.

Students of human nature have long debated which traits are inborn, such as hatreds and prejudices, and which are learned and acquired in life. As you can imagine, there is no consensus on this issue and on many other questions regarding human behavior. It is obvious that the Torah recognizes the presence of prejudice and corruption, both willingly and unknowingly within all of us. Even the greatest of us, who possess Godly wisdom and holiness in behavior and speech, is also subject to being corrupted. Wisdom can be perverted, and speech can be twisted because of our innate susceptibility to corruption.

We are not provided with any magic method to avoid this problem. We only know that it exists and that it is universal and omnipresent. As such, perhaps simply being aware of its existence eventually leads human beings individually and human society generally to a willingness to deal with the matter and to correct it to the

extent that human beings are able.

We are all aware that that when it comes to physical health and mental well-being, the first act is to identify and be aware of the problem that is involved. The same thing is true in all human emotional and spiritual difficulties. People tend to believe that, somehow, they are immune to corruption if they do not actually take money offered to influence their opinions and judgments. However, that is a very simplistic view of corruption. Since people feel that they are balanced and fair in their opinions and viewpoints, this is exactly what leads to prejudices, intolerance of others and a closed mind when it comes to deciding on important issues and personal matters.

One of the reasons the Talmud insisted that at least three people be present to judge in a Jewish court of law is that when you have three people you will automatically hear different points of view and a fairer result will emerge. There are exceptional cases where even one judge – and that judge must be a true expert on the law and facts involved – will suffice, but the practice in Jewish courts throughout the ages has been to have more than one judge – at least three – involved in arriving at judicial decisions. The Torah demanded that we pursue justice and fairness at all costs. It does not guarantee that we will always be able to achieve that goal, but it does demand that we constantly pursue it.