



## PARSHAS KI SEITZEI – MR BERNHARD BERGMAN

Amongst the numerous mitzvos to be found in our Sedrah, is the prohibition against possessing false weights and measures (Devorim, ch 25, v13-16).

What is the concern? The false weights and measures are not discernibly inaccurate, yet their owner might be tempted to exploit their inaccuracy to his advantage. As Rashi explains, he would buy using the slightly heavier/bigger of the two, thereby getting a little bit more than the seller thinks he is selling. Conversely, the smaller weight or measure would be used when selling goods, thereby depriving the unsuspecting customer of a small quantity of that which he believed he had purchased. In fact, so subtle could be the dishonesty, that the two weights perfectly complement one another – one being slightly heavier and one being slightly lighter – so that when they are weighed together, they exactly match twice the standard weight that they each purport to represent (Sifsei Chachomim, Rashbam).

Ohr Hachaim expounds the phrase “... all who do this, all who act fraudulently” (v16) as extending the prohibition of cheating beyond the narrow confines of matters relating to weights and measures, to cheating in more general terms.

And just because everyone else is doing it, doesn't make it okay! It is the evil inclination enticing one astray, says the Chofetz Chaim (v14). He goes on to point out that ultimately, this shows a lack of faith in HKBH. The offender does not appreciate that Hashem determines a person's income for the subsequent year, on Rosh Hashonoh. Naturally, this is only through honest means! By being dishonest in business, a person does not increase his allocated portion of wealth; he simply changes the label – from “honestly acquired” to “dishonestly acquired”!

The Gemorrah (Bava Basra, 88a) discusses the frequency with which weights and measures must be cleaned, in order to avoid transgressing in matters relating to weights and measures. Various considerations influence the requisite cleaning frequency, including the occupation of their owner (wholesaler, storekeeper, householder) and the nature of the merchandise (moist or dry). One interesting requirement is for the storekeeper to clean his weights at regular intervals, thereby removing residue that may make the weights slightly heavier. Why? Surely this is in the customers' favour, as they would get more through this inaccuracy! True, but maybe the storekeeper will very occasionally use these same weights when purchasing, in which case he will be “stealing” from the seller (Artscroll, quoting the Yad Ramah). Evidently, shortchanging people in rare circumstances cannot be exonerated by one's more numerous showings of generosity.

As to the consequences of such dishonesty, Rashi, expounding these verses, says that one possessing such dishonest articles will have nothing; by contrast a person owning honest weights and measures will have much. The Chofetz Chaim notes that perpetrators of fraud will be exposed in the end, even if it may appear that they have been getting away with it. One only needs to note some of the multi-billion dollar fraudsters that have been flushed out by the current financial crisis, to appreciate his words.

The Gemorrah (ibid. 88b) relates the seriousness of the offence by observing that it is extremely difficult to do Teshuvoh. Full Teshuvoh would require the pennant to return the stolen property to all those he had short-changed, which is hardly likely to be possible as he will not know the identity of all his victims (Rashi).

To conclude, who better than the Chofetz Chaim to see the scrupulous observance of this precept in action? It once happened, in his younger days as a storekeeper, that upon examining his scales in his usual manner, he noticed that a not insignificant (in his view) amount of salt had remained in the container. One of his customers had been short-changed, inadvertently of course! After much effort, he was able to identify his customer as a non-Jewish woman coming from a particular village, but being unable to identify her individually, he delivered small packages of salt to all women of that village! (Artscroll – “The Chafetz Chaim”.)