

Honest In Business?

By Rabbi David Wolpe

In this age of deception and fraud, it is worthwhile to remember the unequivocal voice of the Jewish tradition. As Maimonides rules: "It is forbidden to mislead people in business or to deceive them. This is equally true whether it involves Gentiles or Jews. Thus when one knows that there is a defect in one's merchandise, one must so inform the purchaser. And it is even forbidden to deceive people in words only." (M.T. Hil. Mekhira 18)

Any reader of Jewish texts could multiply such quotations. As the Israeli banker and scholar Meir Tamari points out, the Torah has 24 regulations about kashrut and over 100 about economic justice. Yet many Jews are far more careful what they put in their mouths than what they put on their tax returns or account books.

According to the Talmud, our honesty in business will be the first thing we are asked when coming before the Throne of Judgment. In other words, were you honest when it was easiest and most seductive to cheat? "If one is honest in business, and earns the esteem of others, it is as if one has fulfilled the whole Torah." (Mechilta, Vayassa) Religion may begin at home, but it should never end there.