

Honest Competition

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The Parsha of Kedoshim is full of mitzvot, primarily those governing interpersonal relationships. For example, it mentions the famous and oft-cited principle: "Love your fellow as yourself". However, it contains more than just general statements. One can find very specific commands which establish and regulate business practices, social interactions, and neighborly relations.

One of those commandments appears in the following verse: "Do not curse a deaf man, and before a blind man, do not place a stumbling block; thus you shall fear your God, I am the Lord".

One can understand this verse as literally talking about the proper way to treat the blind or deaf. However, our Sages took this verse further and expanded it to include a host of other realms, including business. One can 'trip' another person in many ways, not just physically.

One can cause another to stumble with his behavior, money, bad advice, bribery, and more. Rashi, in explaining the above cited verse, writes: "Do not place a stumbling block... do not give him unsound advice, do not tell him to sell his field to you or to sell you his donkey when your intention is to take advantage of him".

Practically speaking, our Sages limit competition with their interpretation of this verse. Even when it comes to large profits or personal ramifications, one must remain honest and not mislead the person one is dealing with. Maximizing my profits at the expense of someone else by means of dishonest advice is akin to placing a stumbling block before a blind man. The Torah clearly indicates that the ends do not justify the means and that ethics is more important than profits. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing that the Torah does not ignore the drive to make money or deny the concept of a "free market". Rather, it sets up "red lines" and boundaries that must not be crossed.

In the competitive world we experience today, rules like those that the Torah propounds might seem unrealistic. However, if one internalizes the principle mentioned earlier "Love your fellow as yourself", and its corollary in the words of Hillel the Elder "That which is hateful to you, do not do to your friend" (that's the common translation, although a more literal translation should be "whatever depends on you that is hateful to your friend, don't do it"), he will understand that these rules can also protect him. Just as we would not want a competitor to mislead us, we should not mislead our competitors.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that this Parsha is called 'Kedoshim', meaning 'Holy people' or 'saints'. The idea of holiness is usually considered relevant only to the relationship between man and God, and only priests or God's other servants deserve to be described as 'holy'. The Torah teaches us otherwise; one becomes holy through his relationship with God, but primarily through his relationship with his fellow man.

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