

The Pervasiveness of Bribery

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By Dennis Prager

LOS ANGELES, Calif.—At various times, I have discussed the terrible consequences of societal corruption in discussing the central importance of the Eighth Commandment—"Do not steal."

Notice a form of stealing mentioned in the Torah.

Exodus 23:8—"Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear-sighted and upset the pleas of those who are in the right."

Bribery is the single most common form of corruption in society. It involves giving a person money in order to receive a favor in return. Obviously, giving people money for some goods or services is how all economies function.

- But a bribe is giving someone money, goods, or services dishonestly to gain an unfair advantage over others.

- It is a bribe when a judge is given money to provide the bribe-giver with a verdict in his favor. That bribe has subverted justice. If enough judges are bribed, a society has no justice, and cannot function.

- When a policeman is given a bribe to look away, it is for the payer to get away with a criminal act or for the policeman to extort money from the innocent. When enough police take bribes, a society is overrun by criminality.

- When enough government officials take bribes, the wheels of government grind to a halt (except for those who can muster the funds to pay the bribes), and the society ceases to function.

All of these types of bribes fall under the category of corruption. Corruption is the primary reason societies fail to thrive; societies in which corruption is held in check prosper economically, socially and morally.

Nothing explains the success or failure of countries more than does the presence or absence of corruption.

For example, the failure at this time of most African and Latin American countries, and Russia, to lift themselves from poverty is due overwhelmingly to corruption. Both Africa and Latin America have an abundance of both natural resources and human talent.

But neither can overcome the corruption that permeates those societies. I have learned of this firsthand in visits to 20 countries in Africa and almost as many in Latin America.

In Angola, for example, I saw rows of unfinished modern apartment buildings—unfinished because government officials were not offered sufficient bribes to allow completion of those buildings. (I saw this problem on a far larger scale in China.)

In the West African country of Togo, the car I was in was stopped at a police blockade, a policeman walked over to the driver, took money, and only then allowed the car to proceed. The driver explained that this is routine. The same practice is common in Mexico and other Latin American countries.

African economists have argued that corruption—not Western colonialism, not lack of Western aid—is why Africa hasn't escaped poverty. These economists have begged Western countries to stop giving monetary aid to corrupt African countries because nearly all the money goes to corrupt government officials and thereby further increases their corrupt power.

Meanwhile, in Europe, North America, Japan, Singapore and a handful of other countries, corruption is far more likely to be prosecuted and therefore far less prevalent. That is a major reason for their continuing prosperity.

To most people, corruption sounds bad, but most people do not recognize how devastating it actually is. The Torah does. The words translated here as "upset the pleas of those who are in the right" literally mean will "confuse the words of the righteous."

The Hebrew word for "the righteous" is *tzaddik*, a term generally considered a high appellation (only Noah is so described in the Torah). The use of this term here suggests even the most morally upright person is not free from the temptation of bribery.