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THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF COMPETITION AND REWARDS IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS *

Part 1

The proliferation of contests and the intensification of competition

In recent years the level of competitiveness and the use of contests and rewards to induce this competitiveness in our schools have increased dramatically. Every self-respecting school promotes a host of contests and competitive programs (e.g. *middos* contest, *mishnayos baal peh*) often highlighting the thrill of being the best and the great prizes one can win more than the value of the task itself. While the benefits of these programs are fairly obvious, there are often unintended negative consequences that some people may be unaware of.

The underlying attitude shared by many teachers and parents in promoting competition and contests is that anything that gets a child to behave in a desirable manner (coming to *davening* on time, learning well, etc.) will help him develop good habits and cannot possibly have a downside. This view seems to be supported by the statement of *chazal* that *metoch shelo leshmo bo leshmo* (one who develops the habit of doing a positive act for extrinsic reasons will eventually come to do it with intrinsic motivation). Often quoted too are the words of the *Chinuch* (*Mitzvah* 16) that *achrei hapeulos nimshuchim halevovos* (a person's heart follows his actions). These *divrei chazal* would indeed seem to justify an emphasis on superficial positive behaviors without any need to concern ourselves with the internalization of the values associated with these behaviors. We can just sit back and let nature take its course, as the positive behaviors are magically internalized.

Contests are, therefore, seen as an important and even indispensable educational tool since they induce competitiveness which, in turn, can be effective in promoting desirable behaviors. It is rare for a parent or teacher to even consider the possibility of contests and competition having negative consequences (perhaps with the exception of the concern that weaker students who never win may just give up trying).

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help the misbehaving student and to prevent further misbehavior. The bottom line, says Rav Moshe, is that the child will learn that it is acceptable (or even commendable) to speak *loshon horah*.

In a discussion I was *zoche* to have with Hagoan Rav Michal Yehuda Lefkowitz *shlit"á* in Bnei Brak on the 20th of Sivan 5767, I related to him the incident mentioned above, where a parent *ö*convinced^ö his *ö*at-risk^ö son to learn every day by making it a condition for being permitted to take driver^ös education courses. When I told him that many teachers consider this a wise move, he responded that; *ö*Anyone who thinks this doesn^öt understand *chinuch*.^ö

An *ö*at-risk^ö youngster recently shared with me an incident that highlights this pervasive attitude of using any means to promote proper external behavior in the mistaken belief that the values usually associated with that behavior will automatically become internalized:

“Sammy” is a 19 year old Yeshiva dropout who is very interested in music. He recently visited a Yeshiva that caters to “at risk” bochurim. When the head of this Yeshiva heard about his interest in music, he told this bochur that he has connections with people in the music industry and he can introduce the bochur to some of them. The bochur was very excited with this. But then the Rebbi introduced a condition – I’ll only do this if you agree to come to the Yeshiva to learn an hour a day. This condition flooded the bochur with memories of the unrelenting pressure his parents put on him to learn – the pressure which drove him away from yiddishkeit. He was very hurt by what he described as the Rebbi’s attempt at “manipulation and blackmail.”

Chazal’s attitude toward competition

It is clear from *chazal* that rewards play a role in the *chinuch* of young children. The *gemara* in *Taanis* (24a), for example, relates approvingly of a *melamed* who used fish to encourage unmotivated students to learn. There are also the well-known comments of the Rambam in his introduction to *Perek Cheilek* where he speaks of various incentives that students require as they mature, with little children getting treats and older ones getting clothing and even older ones being motivated by honor.

However, when *chazal* sanction the use of prizes they don^öt seem to be speaking of prizes within a competitive framework. Rather, they are referring to *ö*prizes^ö used to encourage individual *talmidim*.⁴

Competition has a significant aversive component,⁵ albeit usually not at the same level as threats of withholding privileges or punishments. It is often assumed that competition is only problematic for weaker students whose self-esteem (and eventually also their motivation and

⁴ דרכי החיים (' , " ,) :

⁵ See *ö*Inspiring or Destructive? Competition in the Yeshivos and Day Schools^ö by Rabbi Mordechai Nissel, *The Jewish Observer*, May 2007, pp. 18-27.

The impact of competitiveness on *chanoch lena'ar al pi darko*

It should be obvious that the unhealthy *kinas sofrim* promoted by the prevalent spirit of competitiveness is a direct contradiction to the idea of individualized *chinuch* as promoted by the oft-quoted *posuk, chanoch lena'ar al pi darko (Mishlei, 22:6)*. Inherent in the competitive enterprise is the belief that everyone included in the competition is capable of achieving the same goal. After all, we wouldn't hold a sports competition that included 10 year olds together with 20 year olds. This leads to frustration when some of the students find themselves incapable of the same level of achievement as some of the other students. It can also lead to a situation where a *Rebbi* can't suggest to his *talmid* to do something slightly different than the others without the *talmid* feeling insulted.¹⁷

Part 2

Non-competitive prizes and incentives

In part 1 we discussed the harm that could be caused by competitive contests and by competition in general. What about prizes or incentives which are not competitive? Such prizes would seem to have the benefit of being an incentive for students to achieve more without the downside of competition.

While Rav Michal Yehuda Lefkowitz and other *gedolim* urge us to eliminate induced competitiveness they do not suggest the total elimination of non-competitive rewards.¹⁸ In fact, rewards may be necessary when we ask students to perform tasks that have no initial intrinsic interest. Rewards probably became part of the educational system for the purpose of motivating children to do tasks that were not initially inherently interesting. The goal was to move away from the use of extrinsic rewards as quickly as possible by promoting the inherent value of and interest in the task. It is for this reason that the most effective *rebbeim* put in so much effort to develop in their *talmidim* a *geshmak* in learning. However, when teachers saw how effectively rewards induce short-term performance they became deluded as to the long-term value of this type of motivation. Over the years this has become the primary method of promoting educational accomplishments even for tasks that are inherently interesting or could become interesting over time. The need to promote internal, intrinsic motivation seems to have been forgotten.

" . " . לחפץ חיים ' "

¹⁷ A well-known Rosh Yeshiva once asked me to suggest to a *talmid* that he take a certain course. When I replied that the student would be much more likely to accept this idea if it came from his rosh yeshiva, he responded that he couldn't make this suggestion without the *talmid* being deeply insulted. The *talmid* would feel that his rosh yeshiva considers him less than the others. I believe that the highly competitive environment found in some yeshivos can play a significant role in creating this type of problem.

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Many teachers assert that they see no problem with someone learning or doing *mitzvos* for the sake of a reward. After all doesn't the *gemara* say that a person should begin learning *shelo leshmo* (for extrinsic motivations) and that eventually he will come to learn *leshmo* (with intrinsic motivation)?¹⁹ So why should we even concern ourselves with this issue?

Metoch shelo leshmo bo leshmo

However, this is not such a simple matter. In fact, every time the *gemora* declares that *metoch shelo leshmo bo leshmo*, *Tosfos* comment that this principle has to be qualified because the *gemora* says elsewhere that learning *shelo leshmo* will become poisonous to the person and that it would be better if the person who learns *shelo leshmo* was never born!²⁰ *Tosfos*, therefore, distinguish between different types of *lo leshmos*, some that indeed lead to *leshmo*, and others that are poisonous. *Tosfos* in different places give somewhat different examples of the different types of *lo leshmo*, but one of the distinguishing factors seems to be that the benign form of *lo leshmo* involves benefits a person is seeking for himself (e.g., to be honored) and the toxic form is where he is primarily seeking to feel superior over others (*lehisyaer*) or even to provoke ("shtoch") others (*lekanter*)²¹

This is very different than the common perception that all forms of *shelo leshmo* are benign and will automatically become *leshmo*. Rav Dessler emphasizes in many places in his *Michtav MeEliyahu* the inherent dangers of *lo leshomo* and the limited situations where we can expect a *lo leshmo* to become *leshmo*. *Lo leshmo* itself is dangerous, says Rav Dessler,²² and he decries the common misconception that all forms of *lo leshmo* automatically transform into *leshmo*. The truth is, says Rav Dessler, that there has to be an element of *leshmo* (at the very least, a strong desire to learn *leshmo*) that already exists in the person's motivation, and it is this kernel of *leshmo* that then develops into a more substantial form of *leshmo*.²³

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בנין שלמה
 רד"ע
 לקט שיחות מוסר מהרב יצחק אייזיק שר,
 מכתמ"א ח"א עמ' 135
 מכתמ"א, ח"א, עמ' 24 – אמר... רש"ז
 רבי אברהם אחי הגר"א
 לקט שיחות מוסר מרבי יצחק אייזיק שר,

Rav Dessler, however, emphasizes the danger of the person remaining with these external motivations, never reaching the level of *leshmo*. The ultimate goal of these *tools*, says Rav Dessler, is for them to become obsolete.²⁹

Are prizes meant to be incentives or positive associations?

The Lakewood *mashgiach*, Rav Matisyohu Salomon *shlita*, has provided us with an incredible insight into *chazal's* true intentions in sanctioning the use of *lo leshmo*. The function of prizes is typically understood to be an incentive, i.e., to motivate students to do things they otherwise would not necessarily be motivated to do, or that they would only do half-heartedly. The prize giver hopes that the prize will motivate the reluctant students to enthusiastically participate in the task. (The underlying assumption is that as the behavior becomes habituated the extrinsic motivation will automatically transform into an intrinsic motivation, a very dubious assumption, at best, as discussed above).

The *mashgiach* cites a Zohar that relates the following incident:³⁰

A student approached Rav Yochanan and requested to become his talmid with the condition that he becomes wealthy. Rav Yochanan agreed and he told his other talmidim to call this new student "Reb Yossi the rich man." The student indeed learned Torah and was successful. However, he complained that he only has the reputation of a rich man but not the money! Soon after, a man who inherited a fortune gave it to Rav Yochanan who in turn gave it all to his student - whom he now called Reb Yossi Ben Pazi (paz = gold). Now Reb Yossi learned with simcha. As he delved into the depths of the Torah and experienced the delight of learning Torah he began to bemoan his obsession with riches; "I should learn for the glory of Hashem and not for riches!" He returned all the money to Rav Yochanan to distribute to poor people. ... And this is what chazal meant, concludes the Zohar, when they said a person should dedicate himself to learning Torah and mitzvos shelo leshmo because via the shelo leshmo he will come to do it leshmo.

The *mashgiach* calls our attention to the fact that when Reb Yossi was being called a rich man he was merely successful in his learning but he wasn't yet learning in a state of *simcha*. It was only after he actually achieved his dream of being rich that he started learning *besimcha* and this *simcha* allowed him to delve into the depths of Torah and experience its delights and to come to the realization that he should learn for the glory of *Hashem*! The *mashgiach* concludes that the main purpose of *lo leshmo* in learning Torah is to create an association between learning and a *simcha shel mitzvah*. This will allow the person to delve into the depths of Torah and recognize its truth, which will, in turn, bring him to learn *leshmo*.

²⁹ מכתב מאליהו, " , ' 170 - שער הגמול לרמב"ן (' , ') ... אע"פ שאינו מחטיא אותם אלא מוליכן בדרך ישרה, [' , '] במתנת חיים, ' - ' ' , צרור המור (' :) .

In *va'adim* that the *masgiach* gave on this topic he emphasized a few points:³¹

- One sees the importance of learning Torah *besimcha* because that is the only way to come to learning *leshmo*.
- The purpose of *lo leshmo* is **not** to serve as an incentive or as a motivator, rather it is to create an association between learning and *simcha*.
- Reb Yossig's *lo leshmo* was actualizing his dream of being wealthy rather than a competitive desire to be better than others. That type of *lo leshmo* doesn't lead to happiness and so it doesn't lead to *leshmo* [it is what *Tosfos* refer to as *ōal menas lekanterō*, which *Tosfos* say is the type of *lo leshmo* that leads to destruction].
- Since the purpose of the prize is to associate learning with *simcha* it is important to give the prize as soon as possible since the learning that takes place before the prize is given doesn't lead to *leshmo*. This recommendation is in sharp contrast to the usual approach which sees prizes as incentives and, therefore, an attempt is made to "squeeze out" as much performance as possible out of the students before giving the prize (to get the most bang for the buck, so to speak).³²

What are we selling?

Even when it is necessary to use prizes as incentives, why do we need to emphasize and highlight the *shelo leshmo* aspect of the child's motivation?

Rav Yechiel Yacobson, the noted Israeli *mechanech*, relates the following incident:

A friend of his who runs a large chevras Tehilim was bragging about the size of his yearly budget for prizes. Rav Yacobson challenged his friend's sense of accomplishment, saying that the children were motivated solely by the prizes and snacks. His friend disputed this assumption and suggested that they ask the children why they come to chevras Tehilim. Rav Yacobson responded, "If you don't realize that the children will respond with what they think you want to hear, rather than with what they really feel, you should not be in this line of work." Instead Rav Yacobson suggested telling the children that their madrich is trying to convince a child in the neighborhood to attend but the child is reluctant to do so. The madrich should ask the children to write an anonymous letter to this boy explaining to him why it is a good idea to participate. The friend followed up on this suggestion and was shocked to discover that almost every one of this very large number of children in a number of Tehilim groups emphasized in their letters the prizes and snacks as the reason to attend. Hardly anyone mentioned an intrinsic value to the activity. Rav Yacobson then suggested trying the same experiment in the girls' Tehilim groups, predicting that the vast majority of the girls would give rucknious-like reasons to participate and indeed this was the case.

³² An article was written a while back in a *chareidi* publication based on this *va'ad* of the *mashgiach*. I believe that the author of the article missed this crucial point that prizes are **not** meant to be incentives.

Rav Yacobson offered to show his perplexed friend the explanation for the difference between these two groups. He took his friend to one of the boys' groups and they observed the madrich placing a large box of snack on his desk and waving a new type of snack in front of the children, exclaiming, "Isn't it worth it to come to chevras Tehilim? Look at the new snack we have today!" The madrich was **promoting** lo leshmo.

Next, Rav Yacobson went with his friend to observe the girls' group. The madricha did not get anywhere near the snacks and did not mention a word about it. Instead, she emphasized the spiritual value of their activities and the Chesed they were doing for Klal Yisroel by their participation. Almost incidentally, as the girls left the group at the end, one of the girls handed out a bag of snack to each participant.

It may, in fact, be that some of the girls were primarily motivated by the snack, but at least the *madricha* was promoting the spiritual value of saying *Tehilim* and not the snack. It should be obvious that the girls are much more likely to develop a *leshmo* motivation for saying *Tehilim* than the boys.

Here are two examples of **promoting** "lo leshmo": A *frum* youth organization published a full page advertisement in the *frum* media promoting their Shavuot learning program. The banner read: "This year learning on Shavuot can have even **more** meaning." Because participants will have a chance to win one of ten bikes!! Note that it didn't say that the learning will be more exciting, rather it claims that a chance at winning a bike makes the learning more meaningful!! Likewise, a yeshiva of *bais medrash* age *bochurim* reported in their newsletter on a *se'udas siyum*. After enthusiastically reporting on the large number of *bochurim* who were *mesayeim* entire *masechtos*, the reader is informed that "a highlight of the event was the distribution of the cash incentive awards" It seems incongruous to me that a highlight of a *se'udas siyum* for *bais medrash bochurim* would be the distribution of the cash incentive awards!!

Research on the impact of prizes and rewards on intrinsic motivation

There is a great deal of scientific evidence documenting the detrimental impact of (even non-competitive) rewards and prizes on the development of intrinsic motivation. The issue is undoubtedly complex with many different variables interacting to determine when and to what degree rewards undermine the development of intrinsic motivation. None the less, I feel that it is worth highlighting some of the research findings if only to counteract the widespread belief that rewards are always helpful and never harmful.

- Rewards are effective in promoting desired behavior. However, when the rewards are terminated the behavior returns to its pre-reward level (Deci, et al., 1999).
- Performing for rewards often makes people feel that they are being controlled. This undermines feelings of autonomy which in turn undermines intrinsic motivation. Therefore, offering rewards for performing a pleasant activity actually decreases the intrinsic attractiveness of that activity. In one experiment, students worked individually on an interesting puzzle for an hour. The next day one half of them were paid \$1 for each piece of the puzzle they completed and the other half were not paid. During the third

session neither group was paid. During a free break, the unrewarded group showed a stronger tendency to work on the puzzle than the rewarded group (Deci, et al., 1999).

- According to Leon Festinger's theory of "cognitive dissonance" (see Aronson, 1999), people like to believe that they are logical and do sensible things. If they do something for which they do not receive a tangible reward, they assume that they are intrinsically motivated and so they focus on the inherent value of the task. If they do receive a reward or prize, they are more likely to assume that they are being motivated by the extrinsic reward and thus, they are less likely to develop intrinsic motivation.
- According to some studies, rewards can enhance intrinsic motivation when given for activities that have little or no **initial** intrinsic interest (Lepper et al., 1999).
- Giving rewards unexpectedly and not as a promised incentive, can be an effective means of conveying appreciation for a task well done, and is less likely to undermine intrinsic motivation. The same is true if one avoids the use of an authoritarian style and pressuring expressions. Emphasizing the interesting or challenging aspects of the task, acknowledging the good performance without giving rewards and providing choices of how to do the task are all methods of encouraging behavior without undermining intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 1999).
- There are, of course, various levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Students who do homework because they appreciate its value for their chosen career and those who do so because they are trying to gain their parents' approval can both be considered extrinsically motivated but the former certainly contains a more potent feeling of choice and are thus likely to develop a more stable and long-lasting intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000).
- Children who measure personal success by comparing themselves to others [an attitude clearly promoted by competition], rather than by focusing on individual accomplishments, may not be well equipped to deal with later situations in which others show superior performance (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).
- An example of unintended consequences of incentives is found in a study conducted in a chain of day care centers in Haifa, introduced to deal with the problem of parents coming late to pick up their children. It was announced that any parent arriving more than 10 minutes late would have to pay \$3.00 per child for each incident. After the fine was enacted, the late pick ups more than doubled! Why did this incentive backfire? First of all, the fine was too low. It was actually a cheap price for baby sitting. A higher fine would have likely worked, but at the cost of provoking plenty of ill will among the parents toward the school. Another problem was substituting an economic incentive for the moral incentive of feeling guilty. For a few dollars the parents could assuage their guilt. Furthermore, the small size of the fine sent a signal to the parents that late pick ups were not such a big problem (Gneezy & Rustichini, 2000).
- Even praise, which is universally assumed to have only a positive impact, has been shown in a number of studies to sometimes be ineffective and at times even harmful. When children continue to exhibit praised behavior in order to sustain the attention and approval of the parent or teacher, the motivation is purely extrinsic and is likely to dissipate as soon as the parent or teacher is no longer present to provide approval. As one researcher noted "the most notable aspect of a positive judgment is not that it is positive but that it is a judgment" (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

- Similar to the impact of prizes, praise often produces an "overjustification" effect leading children to believe that their efforts were motivated by the desire for adult approval rather than for the enjoyment and value of the activity itself. In addition, if praise indicates to children that they are valued because they have met with such a high standard, they are likely to fear that they would be considered worthless if they fail to meet that standard (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).
- Praise has to be sincere to be effective. The perceived sincerity is usually dependant on the quality of the relationship. If it is not a positive one the praise is likely to be experienced as manipulative and controlling. Likewise, if the main point of the praise is the fact that the child was obedient, then that will likely be experienced as controlling. Global judgments ("you are an angel") can lead to self-criticism and even attempts to self-sabotage future performance. Following failure, children who have been praised for their ability, showed less enjoyment, persistence, and performance compared to children who were praised for effort (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).³³

Summary

The widespread and indiscriminate use of competition and rewards often has the unintended negative consequence of reducing one's intrinsic motivation. I have documented the critical comments of many *gedolim* regarding the educational use of competition and prizes and summarized some of the research findings in this regard.

It is clear that rewards are often necessary to motivate children when dealing with tasks that are initially uninteresting. However, if we are cognizant of the likely negative consequences of the indiscriminate use of extrinsic rewards, then we would use the minimum amount necessary and emphasize the inherent value of the tasks we present to our children. We would use more praise and less tangible rewards, more *seforim* and less cameras, etc. We would seek other means to inspire and motivate children. Developing a warm and respectful relationship with students and setting an inspiring example has been proven to be the most effective means to promote the internalization of values.³⁴ We would strive to shift as quickly as possible from *lo leshmo* to *leshmo*.

Even when using verbal praise, teachers and parents need to be cautious that the child doesn't continue to perform just to gain approval. Rather we need to stress the inherent value of the accomplishment. It is for this reason that I have often suggested that when a child tells a parent or teacher, "You should be proud of me because I did" he should be told, "You should be proud of yourself!"

³³ After I finished this article, I was introduced to Alfie Kohn's thought provoking book "Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes" (1999) which summarizes a great deal of research on the impact of rewards and prizes on motivation. I strongly recommend reading his book.

³⁴ Ryan and Deci (2000) found in their research that parents who were more autonomy-supportive promoted greater religious identification, as opposed to introjection, in their offspring and that teens who have been exposed to cold, controlling maternal care were more likely to develop materialistic orientation,

Most of all, we would not be lulled by the false hope that the *lo leshmo* will magically transform itself to *leshmo* without any attention or effort on our part.

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