The eighth commandment has to do with exercising justice, especially when it comes to dealing in weights and measures. “Give full measure when you measure, and weigh with accurate scales: that is better and fairer in the end” (al-Isra’, 17:35). This ayah is really telling us to give people their rights, and not to swindle or deceive them in any way. Cheating people while dealing in merchandise is an age old tradition, which is universal in practice. While doing business, there are numerous ways to dupe people. Novel methods of fooling people keep coming up; perhaps because quite often, man is compelled to get something for nothing. This is not only true of a merchant or a trader, but applies to people of other professions as well; such as a doctor, an engineer, a technician, and so on.

There are always ways to cheat. Only those who are really God conscious refrain from cheating others. Let us take the example of merchants who sell produce. In olden times, they sold their produce including grains, fruits, and vegetables on carriages or in the market place. They had with them scales and weights of metal for weighing the merchandise. The dishonest among them used to manipulate the weights to make them lighter than the actual standard weights; and people would never know. These days it is usual to find food items packed in over-sized containers that give the impression of a larger amount of content than there actually is. The net weight of the item purchased is often written in very fine print. A professional who works for less number of hours than he is actually supposed to, is also engaged in deceiving his employer.

There are numerous methods of cheating, such as fraud, lying, bribery, embezzlement, misappropriation, tax-evasion, and manipulation of facts that are practiced today, sometimes even by Muslims. This is a sad state of affairs considering the fact that Muslims supposedly are the ambassadors of Islam, here in this country. Some get away with it, and others don’t. But even those who get away with it here in this world should not think that they will get away with it on the Day of Judgment. “On that Day, people will come forward in separate groups to be shown their deeds: whoever has done an atom’s-weight of good will see it, and whoever has done an atom’s-weight of evil will see that” (al-Zalzalah, 99:6-8).

The Qur’an specifically mentions the story of the people of Shu’aib (AS) who were engaged in malpractices while conducting business that gave way to mischief and corruption in their society. Shu’aib (AS) forbade them from cheating others. “To the people of Madyan We sent their brother, Shu’aib. He said, ‘My people, serve God: you have no god other than Him. A clear sign has come to you from your Lord. Give full measure and weight and do not undervalue people’s goods; do not cause corruption in the land after it has been set in order: this is better for you, if you are believers” (al-A’raf, 7:85).

Elsewhere in the Qur’an the dialogue between Shu’aib (AS) and his people is mentioned, wherein he urges his people to worship God alone, and warns them to stop from their dishonest and fraudulent practices, and
they in turn justify their shirk and their deceitful practices. “And to Madyan, We sent their brother Shu‘aib. He said, ‘My people! Worship God. You have no god other than Him. Neither give short measure nor short weight. I see you are prospering, but I fear you will have torment on an overwhelming Day. My people, in fairness, give full measure and weight. Do not withhold from people things that are rightly theirs, and do not spread corruption in the land. What God leaves with you (as lawful profit) is better for you, if you are believers. I am not a keeper and watcher over you.’” They said, ‘Shu‘aib, does your prayer tell you that we should abandon what our forefathers worshipped and refrain from doing whatever we please with our own property? Indeed you are a tolerant and sensible man’” (Hud, 11:84-87).

Instead of paying heed to the prophetic admonition, the people of Shu‘aib (AS) considered him to be unnecessarily intruding in their affairs. The disease of cheating is like cancer and spreads all around. Because of weak faith and lack of trust in God, people have a tendency to follow evil until evil becomes the norm. As a consequence of this, an unnatural situation comes into existence whereby evil (munkar) is treated as good (ma‘ruf) and good is treated as evil. This is what happened in the surrounding regions of Madyan known as al-Aikah. The people of al-Aikah began to conduct themselves in the same way as the people of Madyan. Allah sent to them many messengers but to no avail. Finally, Allah (SWT) sent Shu‘aib (AS) to them. He was their neighbor, but they denied him as they had denied the messengers sent to them earlier. “The Companions of the Thicket (Ashab al-Aikah) denied the Messengers. Shu‘aib said to them, ‘Will you not be mindful of God? I am a faithful messenger to you: be mindful of God and obey me. I ask no reward of you, for my only reward is with the Lord of the Worlds. Give full measure: do not sell others short.’” (al-Shu‘ara, 26:176-181).

We Muslims are the last nation (ummah) raised for humanity. It is our responsibility, wherever we are, to become the ‘Shu‘aib’ of our time, and start admonishing people to refrain from cheating others and from indulging in other vices. Qais bin Abi Gharazah (RA) said: “At the time of the Messenger of Allah (SAW), we used to be called Samaasir (brokers). The Messenger of Allah (SAW) came to us when we were selling and called us by a name that was better than that. He said, ‘O Tujjar (merchants), this selling involves lies and (false) oaths, so mix some charity with it.’” The Prophet (SAW) is telling us in this hadith to offset bad deeds with good deeds. When people sell things, they often resort to lying about their merchandise in order to make a sale. To counteract the consequences of these unlawful (haram) deeds, the Prophet (SAW) told traders in particular to give much charity (sadaqah). As an eraser rubs out stray pencil marks, good deeds erase bad deeds.

Islam, which condemns every kind of injustice and exploitation in human relations, wants its followers to conduct business in a sublime spirit of justice tempered with human kindness. The conduct of the seller in a transaction should be characterized not only by justice, but also by magnanimity. We see this characteristic in Yusuf (AS), as spelled out in Surat Yusuf. “Then, having supplied their needs, he said to them, ‘Bring me your brother, your father’s youngest son. Do you not see that I dispense full measure and am the most hospitable of hosts?’”(Yusuf, 12:59). The Prophet (SAW) said, "Allah will forgive the sins of a Muslim who absolves a fellow-Muslim from a sale-contract not liked by the latter."

Allah (SWT) has dedicated an entire Surah that warns defrauders to mend their ways, or else while facing their Lord on the Day of Judgment, they will be condemned as wicked, and all their misdeeds would be registered in a written record. “Woe to the defrauders, who demand of other people full measure for themselves, but give less than they should when it is they who weigh or measure for others! Do such people not realize that they will be raised up on a mighty Day; a Day when everyone will stand before the Lord of the Worlds? No indeed! The list of the wicked is in Sijjin. what will explain to you what Sijjin is? It is a written record.” (al-Mutaffifin, 83:1-9).

Trade is neither denied nor disliked in Allah’s deen. However, traders should tread this field cautiously, for it involves many things that may lead one into Hellfire. That is why the Prophet (SAW) was reported to have said, "Traders will be raised up as wicked people on the Day of Judgment, except those who fear Almighty Allah, do good, and are truthful!" Hence, fear of Almighty Allah, good deeds, and truthfulness save traders from Hellfire on the Day of Judgment. The Prophet (SAW) is also reported to have said, "The sellers lie..."
and take false oaths (to sell their goods) and thus they become sinful." He (SAW) also said, "Traders make Allah an item of their goods as they sell by His oath and purchase thereby."

The above prophetic traditions indicate that traders who swear falsely by the name of Allah (SWT) to promote their goods are gravely sinful; Allah (SWT) will neither look at them nor bestow mercy upon them on the Day of Judgment. Almighty Allah’s name must be highly sanctified. “And do not make God the subject of your casual oaths. Be pious and righteous and reconcile among the people; and God is Listener, Knower” (al-Baqarah, 2:224).

The Qur’an enunciates the fundamental principles of commerce as follows: to give just measure and weight; not to withhold from people the things that are their due; not to commit evil on the earth with the intent of doing mischief; and to be content with the profit that is left with us by God after we have paid other people their due.

We understand from the foregoing ayaat and Prophetic traditions that commerce can flourish under conditions of peace and security. The people are, therefore, warned not to disturb the peace of the land so that there is a free, fair, and untrammeled trade between different parts of the world. In commercial relations we are expected to be absolutely just and honest, liberally giving other people their due. We are not to be guilty of selfish greed and not to indulge in profiteering; and we are told that the lawful profit which has God's blessings is the one that we are able to make through perfectly honest dealings with others. The injunctions contained in these ayaat and found elsewhere in the Qur’an close the door of all dishonest and unjust transactions. We should not forget that justice is a master virtue. Giving others just measure and just weight is tantamount to saying that we should be fair and just in our dealings.

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
IONA Research & Publications
publications@ionaonline.org
www.ionaonline.org