

Recently, I was talking with a woman who was reflecting on having attended her 40 year school reunion. As the reunion approached, she and her friends were getting pretty excited. Until, one day a few weeks before the event, she and others noticed that the neighborhood bully had signed up to participate. Nervous and unsure of what to expect, this group immediately became their 8, 9, or 10 year olds all over. As a result, the group approached the weekend with some trepidation, expecting the bully to still be **well**, a bully. Deciding to face it head on, this woman went up to the bully now man asking him directly – why did you do what you did? He looked at her and equally directly said – ‘my parents were abusing me, I didn’t know better and I am sorry’. They looked into one another eyes, shared some tears, and asked forgiveness of each other.

In all the years of thinking about this boy, the woman and her friends had rendered many judgments and made many assumptions about why he did what he did, but never once had this been their possible answer.

According to our tradition, this is the season of judgement. As the books of life and death are open, the fate of every living thing hangs in the balance.

We pray to God, Malkeinu, our ruler who judges according to justice, but we also pray to Avinu, our parent, hoping for God's rachmanus, God's mercy and compassion. Indeed, we pray that the rabbis of the Talmud were right when they said that in response to the question 'what does God pray?' that God prays the following: "Yehi Ratzon milfanai... May it be My will that When I sit in judgement of humanity, my attribute of mercy always overcome strict justice."

Like God, we too spend our lives judging and in this season of judgement it's not only God's judgement that matters, but our own! Our judgment of ourselves and of others.

Each of us is asked to judge things all the time. We're asked what we think about things that might be happening. We define our values through judgement. The more we care about something, the more we judge with clear, definitive ideas. I may not care so much about your favorite food, but talk to me about Israel or Jewish life, and of course, I have strong feelings about what you could be doing or what is most meaningful.

We choose our friends, our employees, our jobs, our most intimate partners through some elements of judgement. And, as we decide who will be our friends and associates, we judge and evaluate each other on many different things - ex., personality, intelligence, heart, character, values, beliefs, spirituality, occupation, ambition, success, status, wealth, possessions and even physical appearance and attractiveness,

Our own Jewish tradition is full of judgement, full of disagreements requiring individuals to exercise a discerning eye to reach an outcome. Sodom and Gomorah, the Golden Calf, and many more.. Abraham judges, Moses judges, and even God judges.

Judgement creeps in on us all the time and developing good judgment is worthy of our best efforts.

So, how do we know when our judgement has stepped over the line and we have moved between judgment and judgmentalism? When are you making a considered judgement and when is one so opinionated that a room has no

space for others to breathe because your opinions take up all the space? Is it possible to re-train ourselves in how we judge each other?

A few weeks ago, we read in the Torah ‘Shoftim v’shotrim titein LECHA, You should appoint judges and officials... ‘ Looking at the Hebrew words and their meaning, the word "*lecha {for you individually}*," seems superfluous and disjointed. After all, this is a commandment to the community, the collective, and could have been stated simply "appoint judges and officers"! Why did the Torah add the word: "lecha – for YOU" as if to imply this is an obligation for each and every individual?

The eighteenth century Hasidic commentary Toldot Yaakov Yosef (whose was a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov) offers one explanation. Lecha, he says, is intended to say: for you, for yourself. As if to say, you should appoint judges within yourself. Every person has the obligation to sit in judgment of him/herself and his/ her own actions. We are accountable for our decisions and we benefit when we reflect after the fact, consider the consequences of our choices, and seek ways to continue to learn and grow.

But, we know it is sometimes far easier to sit in judgement of others. Perhaps it is for this reason that Toldot Yaakov Yosef continues with another important lesson about the appointment of internal judges... “First judge yourself, and, using the same yardstick, judge others. Do not be lenient with your faults while judging harshly the same faults in others; do not overlook sin in yourself while demanding perfection of others.”

We have all experienced moments when the desire to rebuke or criticize someone else consumes us, especially when we think we are doing so out of love. No one of us is perfect, not the man in the mirror, or the woman sitting next to you.

Yet, we judge. And we are at times judgmental. The difference?

Having an opinion or viewpoint is important. And, we form those opinions through judgment based on our own experience, knowledge, research, and bias. Judgment implies thinking through something before making a decision.

Deciding something quickly, without taking in the whole story – that is judgmental. When an opinion is fueled by emotions – like anger or agitation – towards another or even towards what they represent to us – then the opinion is more likely judgmental. Judgmentalism lacks humility. It lacks the ability to consider that while we may believe what we believe, there is still another or more than one other equally plausible perspective. Refusing to see beyond our own needs, our own interests and judging ideas or peoples because they disagree with us – that is judgementalism.

When we feel a need to be right, to be better than, to be ok ourselves, and we make others wrong, less than, or not ok - that is judgementalism. Let's admit here – we have all had moments when we have made ourselves feel better by making someone else wrong, less than, or not ok. Please know, I am not standing here lecturing you out of any sense of perfection myself. I am as guilty as the next person and know that I struggle with the boundaries myself.

So, how do we avoid judgementalism?

In the Talmud Tractate of Sanhedrin which contains the laws of courts, judges, and civil discourse, our sages ask, when are you allowed to judge another person? The answer: *Who says your blood is redder than his?* (Talmud - Sanhedrin 74a) As if to say – who do you think you are????

As the story of the woman attending her reunion teaches us, we meet people in the middle of their life stories, in "Chapter 3." We have no idea what went on in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, and we certainly don't know what lies ahead in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Yet we are so quick to judge. A person who seems at a low point may in fact have worked very hard to overcome hardship and reach even *this* level. Others, although they may look righteous and accomplished, may be using only a tiny portion of their talents and skills.

Perhaps the Talmudic prayer “When I sit in judgement of humanity, may my attribute of mercy always overcome strict justice” is not just for God.

Perhaps it is for us as well.

Do we look at others with mercy and compassion? Do we ask ourselves what might have happened in chapter 1 that might have led to the behavior or might paint a very different picture of the person in front of us?

***Reb Nachman of Bratzlav taught:* “Judge one and all generously, leaning strongly toward the good, even if you think they are as sinful as can be. Always look for that place, however small, where there is no sin. By by telling them, by showing them, that this is who they are, we can help them change their lives. Even the person you think is completely rotten —how is it possible that at some time in his life he has not done some good deed, some mitzvah? Your job is to help him look for it, to seek it out, and then to judge him that way.**

In this season of judgment, Reb Nachman suggests we should give others the benefit of the doubt, seeking in them even the most minute quantity of goodness.

Consider, if you will the story of David Arbitol, founder of Jewish culture blog Jewlicious. Several years ago, he began receiving messages from Megan Phelps-Roper demanding that Jews repent for their sins. Having found Arbitol on a list of most influential Jews on Twitter, Phelps-Roper began tagging him on her posts so he would see it. Thinking she was being tongue in cheek, Arbitol responded “Thanks Megan! That’s handy what with Yom Kippur coming up!”

After Arbitol realized Phelps-Roper wasn’t joking, he initially responded with anger. But after the pair exchanged a few more messages, Arbitol switched strategies and began engaging Phelps-Roper with something she’d studied every day since childhood — theology. The two kept up a relationship over Twitter and email for months.

In spring 2010, Wesboro Baptist Church picketed Arbitol at a Jewlicious festival in Long Beach, Calif. When Arbitol came to speak to Phelps-Roper, she was standing next to her sister, then a teenager, who was holding a sign that read “Your Rabbi is a whore.”

Nine months later, Arbitol and Phelps-Roper met again, this time in New Orleans, where Phelps-Roper was picketing the Jewish General Assembly. Arbitol brought

Phelps-Roper halva, an Israeli dessert from a market near his home in Jerusalem. Phelps-Roper brought him kosher chocolate and held a “God hates Jews” sign.

Shortly after, Abitbol asked Phelps-Roper about a Westboro Baptist Church sign that read Death penalty for fags. Based on a literal, and increasingly unpopular, interpretation of the Bible, the church taught homosexuality was a sin worthy of death. Abitbol asked Phelps-Roper why the church didn’t advocate the same punishment for a woman in the church who had a child out of wedlock, another sin. And, Abitbol asked, doesn’t the death penalty prevent people from repenting, the ultimate goal?

As she began seeing the double standard of her own family’s doctrine, she began questioning things. Two years later, she gathered the courage to leave the church, which in her case also meant leaving behind her family. She reached out to Arbitol and he immediately invited her to speak to a Jewish group the following week. Since, she and her sister who left with her, have created a new life and regularly talk about their experience, most recently at the Simon Wiesenthal Center.

Her life, his life, and the lives of so many impacted all because one man decided to respond with judgement instead of judgementalism.

K'shem sh'detantuni l'kaf zechut, HaMakom yadin etchem l'chaf zechut

One who judges his friend favorably will be judged favorably.

Arbitol reminds if what we know but sometimes forget. The inner intention we bring to the act of judging others is ultimately a place to meet God. In judging others harshly, our inner work becomes bitter and painful. But if we judge others favorably, and approach them gently and sweetly, with kindness and mercy, then we will meet the corresponding face of God: God's endless love and limitless compassion for all of us created in the divine image, trying as best we can to live up to who we know we can be.

For in the end, the answer to the Talmudic question about God's prayer lies in our hands. How will we answer it?

Shabbat shalom and Shanah Tovah.

