

Dan L'Chaf Z'chut:

Judge Other People Favorably/ Give Others The Benefit of the Doubt

Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Day 2 by Rabbi Lisa S. Malik: 5776/ 2015

A scenario that may be familiar to some of you:

You text or call a friend & leave a voicemail message. The friend doesn't respond. A few days go by. Your friend still has not called or texted you back. You call again. Text again. No response. When you are about to contact your friend for the third time, you begin to feel irritated, perhaps even angry. Your friend is snubbing you, being rude and inconsiderate, after all you've done for her! Sure, she's busy. We're all busy. But why does she have to be so self-centered?! Just give me a call or otherwise acknowledge that you received my message. Is that too much to ask?! Finally, after 2 weeks, the friend finally gets in touch with you. As it turns out, she had been called away suddenly on a family emergency out of town. She just now returned and heard or saw your messages for the first time.

Another scenario that may be familiar to some of you:

You're driving a car. The car in front of you swerves for no apparent reason. You slam on your breaks, honk your horn, shout angrily out the window, perhaps even make an insulting gesture towards the other driver. You think (or say out loud): "What an idiot! Why are these bad drivers allowed to remain on the roads?!" Then, as you pass the car, you see that the driver had swerved because a child, chasing a wayward ball, had run into the street.



How might **giving the other person the benefit of the doubt** have affected these two scenarios?

The Jewish virtue (*middah*) of **judging others favorably** is known in Hebrew as "***dan l'chaf zechut.***"

The origin of the term is from Pirkei Avot. In **Chapter 1, Mishnah 6, Yehoshua ben Prachya & Nittai ha-Arbeli** teaches:

(*Aseh l'cha rav u-k'nbeh l'cha chaver.*)

"Ve-hevey dan et kol ha-adam l'chaf z'chut."

"Judge every person favorably. Give everyone the benefit of the doubt"

There is a corollary teaching later on in Pirkei Avot. In **Chapter 2, Mishnah 5, Hillel** teaches:

"Al tadin et chavercha ad she-tagia lim'komo."

"Do not judge your fellow until you have been in his place. "

There is a **Native American saying** that conveys a similar sentiment: "Judge not the other warrior until you have walked in his moccasins."

In the 1960 classic novel by Harper Lee, "To Kill A Mockingbird," **Atticus Fitch** gives the following parental advice to his 7-year old daughter when she complains about her teacher in school (p. 39): "If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kind of folks. You **never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.**"

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Admittedly, "*Dan Lechaf Zechut*" is one of the most difficult *middot* to master, since it is a human tendency to jump to conclusions, to immediately suspect others of wrongdoing or to judge them superficially, just based on appearances. (GIVE PERSONAL EXAMPLE re: pre-judging people with tattoos.)

We are all prone to making quick judgments about the actions, motives, and characters of others; most of these pre-judgments are less than charitable. Since we have all had difficult experiences with people whom we once trusted, or have been bruised by interpersonal relationships with others, we are less likely to give these people the benefit of the doubt.

For many of us, it can be challenging at times to give people a break, to look for the good in others, or to be generous in our judgments of them. Many people find it easier to find fault and to criticize than to give the other person the benefit of the doubt.

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One prime example of someone who didn't give another person the benefit of the doubt can be found in the **Haftarah** that we read in shul (yesterday) on the **first day of Rosh Hashanah**. Yesterday's reading from the Book of Shmuel Aleph (**1 Samuel 1: 12-17**), told the story of **Channah/Hannah:**

Channah, the childless wife of Elkanah, came to Shiloh, where the Sanctuary stood before King Solomon built the Beyt HaMikdash, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The main purpose of Channah's pilgrimage to Shiloh was to express her anguish to God in prayer and to request that she bear a child.

She prayed to G-d, weeping profusely. And she vowed a vow, and said: "Adonai Tz'vaot, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me.... and if you grant me a child, I shall dedicate him to God all the days of his life..."

Eli, the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) at Shiloh, watched as Channah prayed profusely before God... But because Channah prayed silently, with only her lips moving, Eli thought that Channah was a drunkard. In the words of the Tanach, "*Rak s'fa-teha naot, v'kolah lo yi-sha-may-a. Va-yach-sh've-ha Eli l'shi-ko-rah.*"

Thinking she was drunk, Eli the Cohen said to Channah:

"Ad matai tish-ta-ka-rin?!" "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine!"

To which Channah replied: *"Lo, adoni.* No, my lord... I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink. I have poured out my soul before God..."

After realizing that he had **pre-judged** her in a negative and inaccurate way, Eli the Kohen blessed Channah with the words, *"L'chi l'shalom."*

"Go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked."

Later that year, Channah gave birth to a son, whom she named Samuel /*Shmuel*, which means, "I asked God for him. *"Ki me-Adonai sh'il-tiv."* After weaning him, Channah fulfilled her vow to dedicate him to the service of God by bringing him to Shiloh, where Eli and the other Kohanim raised him. Samuel/Shmuel grew up to become one of the greatest prophets of Israel.

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(Rabbi Joel Schwartzman:)

Just think about **how much lessened CHANNAH's angst would have been had Eli the Kohen been less judgmental and given her the benefit of the doubt.** Seeing this woman, who was obviously distraught and mumbling to herself, he could have reached out to her instead of accusing her of being intoxicated.

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In the Talmud's commentary on the interchange between Channah & Eli HaKohen (in **Masechet Brachot 31b**), there is a teaching by **Rabbi Elazar**: "*Mi-kan: la-choshed et chavero ba-davar she-eyn bo, she-tzarich l'fayso , v'lo od, ela, she'tzarich l'var'-cho.*" "From this we learn that those who suspect their fellow human beings of a fault which they have not committed must beg their forgiveness. And that's not all, they must also bless them, as Eli said to Channah, "*L'chi l'shalom.*" "Then go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked."

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What can we learn from Eli's initial failure to uphold the Jewish virtue of "*Dan L'Chaf Zechut*"? **What is the ideal towards which we should aspire as we begin this new year 5776?**

To refrain from being judgmental of others, we have to strive not to jump to conclusions about them based on appearances and first impressions. Until facts prove otherwise, we should initially try to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

In order to do this, **we may have to remind ourselves (repeatedly)** that things are not always as simple as they appear.

**We may also have to remind ourselves** that successful personal relationships almost always require an unbiased and tolerant attitude towards others. This is true when it comes to friendships, employer-employee situations, and teacher-student interactions, as well as in marriage and other family relationships.

In order to strive towards being non-judgmental **we may also have to remind ourselves** that, ironically, pre-judging others negatively hurts the suspicious person more than the one he/she suspects. A judgmental attitude towards others can corrode and harden hearts; it can make people who were originally good.... cruel.

On the other hand, **a non-judgmental attitude can transform one's own life and others' lives as well:**

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There is a story about the famous **Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev**, who was known for [transforming people's lives by] always **seeing the bright side of people's characters**

(A Complete Treasure of Stories for Public Speakers, Morris Mandel, pp. 252-3):

Once, on Yom Kippur, while walking to synagogue, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak saw a young Jewish man sitting on a porch, eating.

"What are you doing?" the rabbi exclaimed. "Surely you must have forgotten that today is Yom Kippur and that Jews are forbidden to eat on this holy Day of Atonement."

"No, I haven't forgotten," the young man replied.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak then said, "Oh, well then, I guess you must not be feeling well, and the doctor suggested that you eat."

"No, I feel perfectly fine," came the reply.

And so it went on. Soon, a number of people had gathered and they were about to denounce this guy who was violating Jewish law in public. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak turned his eyes to heaven and declared: "Adonai, see what a mensch this young man is. Even at the cost of incriminating himself, he still insists on telling the truth!" Levi Yitzhak had certainly mastered the Jewish virtue of "*dan l'chaf zechut*."

Throughout this sermon, I have been translating “*dan l’chaf zechut*” as “giving the benefit of the doubt.” But a more literal translation of this idiom is “judging others according to the **scale of merit**, with the scale weighted in the others’ favor.”

The **image of “scales of merit”** is a familiar one to us on the **High Holidays**. During this period, **God weighs each person’s actions on a scale: with merits on one side and transgressions on the other side.**

In the **Talmud** (Masechet **Rosh HaShanah 16B**), **Rabbi Cruspedai** teaches in the name of **Rabbi Yochanan**: “Three books are opened on Rosh Hashanah: one for those who are entirely wicked, one for those who are entirely righteous, and one for those who are in the middle (“*Bey-no-ni-yim*. “Intermediate People.”) The entirely righteous are immediately inscribed and sealed to live. The entirely wicked are immediately inscribed and sealed to die. **The fate of those in the middle is held [on the scales] in balance** between Rosh HaShanah & Yom Kippur.”

During this 10-day period between RH & YK each of us has the opportunity to **try and tip the scales of divine judgment in our favor** through teshuvah, tefillah & tzedakah. But, **how can we expect God to tip the scales in our favor if we don’t act the same in our relationships with other human beings?!**

During these *Aseret Y’mei Teshuvah*, the 10 Days of Teshuvah between RH & YK, as we pray for God to tip the scales of judgment in our favor, may we emulate God by striving to tip the scales of judgment that we use to judge others in their favor as well.

Ken yehi ratzon. L’Shanah Tovah.

