

Jewish Food for Thought Judging Favorably

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Why does judging others negatively hurt us more than it hurts the person we judge? What information do we lose when we judge others negatively? What can we learn about our own faults from our negative judgments of another person? Why can we never know the full truth of another person's experience? Is truth fixed or in flux? How can we judge favorably while ensuring that we are not being taken advantage of?

Some background:

Rather than tell us: "Don't judge others!" Jewish tradition accepts that judging is built into human nature. Jewish teachings also are aware that often, unfortunately, our default judgment of others is negative. Judaism therefore teaches: **When you judge, give others the benefit of the doubt.** This advice is considered so important that it is listed in the Talmud (*Shabbat 127a*) as one of the 6 behaviors that benefit us both in this world, and in the next world as well.

The foundational text:

Yehoshua ben Perachiah says: Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend/study companion, and judge every person positively. (*Pirke Avot 1:6*)

יהושע בן פרחיה אומר עשה לך רב. וקנה לך חבר. והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות:

The Rabbis lived in a world in which the relationships with one's teachers and study companions were central to living a meaningful life. Elsewhere they teach: "Give me companionship (a study partner) or give me death!" (*Talmud – Ta'anit 32a*) For the Rabbis, these were crucial, life-giving relationships.

- Yehoshua ben Perachiah doesn't suggest that we "find" a teacher or a companion. He speaks of "making" a teacher and of "acquiring" a friend. What do these words mean to you in terms of beginning and maintaining a relationship? How would judging favorably help us create these relationships?
- What are the most meaningful relationships in your own life? Do you always judge those people close to you favorably? What happens when you don't? When you do?



1. The Dangers of Negatively Judging Others

1a. Judging others negatively hurts us the most

Mommy: You may be right, you may even win the argument. But you will lose the relationship, and you've deprived yourself of information that can help you. But you can **gain** something, regardless, if you delay judgment, and look for your part in this, while hearing her point of view.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (1902-1994) once told a man who came to see him, "It's better to lose an argument and win a friendship, than win an argument and lose a friendship."

- Have you ever noticed the conversation stop as soon as you speak words of judgement to someone? Why does judging stop the conversation?
- How do you feel when others judge you before you have a chance to explain yourself? What do you do in those situations?
- When negative judgment stops true conversation, we are deprived of important information. Has this ever happened to you? What have been the consequences for you of not having all the information from other people? What have been

the consequences for other people of not having all the information from you?

- Can you think of a time when you delayed judgment and, as a result, learned something important about the other person?
- Have you ever won an argument, but, in the process hurt a relationship? Was it worth winning the argument? What might you have learned if you hadn't insisted that you were right?

1b. As we judge others, so will we be judged.

- i. Our Rabbis taught: One who judges his friend favorably will be judged (by God) favorably. (*Talmud, Shabbat 127b*)

תנו רבנן: הדין חבירו לכף זכות דנין אותו לזכות.

- ii. "God is your shadow." (*Psalms 121:5*) Just as a person's shadow entirely mimics his actions, so does God, as it were, entirely reciprocate our deeds. (*Ba'al Shem Tov*)

- Is there a difference in how you react to someone who you know generally gives others the benefit of the doubt, versus how you react to someone who you know to be quick to judge negatively?
- We often speak of people being in God's shadow, but the Ba'al Shem Tov reads the words of the psalm literally: "God is YOUR shadow!" He says that God actually responds to us exactly as we behave. We "create," as it were, God's actions through our actions. What does this mean about God? About us? About the power and implications of how we judge others?
- Read the Ba'al Shem Tov's teaching in interpersonal terms: "People around us are our shadows." In other words, the key in my relationships is my own behavior, because it influences the people around me. Does this feel true to you?
- The Ba'al Shem Tov speaks in terms of Divine reactions to our deeds. In the Rabbinic value system, it is understood that our actions have equivalent consequences. They called this "midah k'neged midah" (מידה כנגד מידה). For some people it is more helpful to say that the good or positive energy we put into the world comes back to us. Many people

today speak of "karma." Though it is called by different names, many cultures share this idea. Do you experience it to be true that in some way people receive back the energy that they put into the world?



2. Antidotes to negative judgment:

2a. Have the Humility to try to Stand in another Person's shoes

Mommy: He would need to have the humility to believe that there was another perspective unknown to him, where it all makes sense,...And then, I would need to feel safe enough to show him my most personal insecurities: the place where I feel like I have no other way but to lie. But we can't even begin that conversation because he's already made up his mind. He is standing in **his** shoes, not mine. He sees the lie from his perspective and becomes my adversary instead of my partner.

"Hillel taught: Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place." (*Pirke Avot 2:5*)

ואל תדין את חברך עד שתגיע למקומו.

"If you see your neighbor ensnared by some temptation, do not judge your neighbor harshly until you have faced the same temptation and mastered it." (*Rabbi Bartenura Mishnah commentary – 15th century Italy*)

אם ראית חברך שבא לידי נסיון ונכשל, אל תדינהו לחובה עד שתגיע לידי נסיון כמותו ותנצל

We can never truly and fully know what another person is thinking or feeling. Acknowledging the mystery of another human being is the first and most important step in creating a safe space to begin to learn from and about another person. Once we acknowledge the mystery of another person, there are a number of different tools we can use to create a safe place in which we try to stand in another's shoes and learn from that individual. Here are two techniques that help us listen with true curiosity.

i) Don't Argue

Hanan: I wonder who I learned to be critical from - Mommy!

Mommy: ...That's a good point.

Notice that when Mommy doesn't get defensive, the conversation then expands. She takes responsibility. She acknowledges that the advice she is giving to Hanan also is advice that she needs to accept. It is at this point in the conversation that Mommy admits her own failure to tell the truth. This is a turning point in the conversation.

- If Mommy had become defensive at this point, how do you imagine the conversation would have gone?

Do not rebuke a scoffer, for he will hate you; Do rebuke a wise person and that person will love you. (*Proverbs 9:8*)

אל-תוכיח לץ פן-ישנאך הוכיח להכם ויאהבהך:

R. Tarfon said, "I wonder if there is anyone in this generation who knows how to accept rebuke. If one person says to another, remove the toothpick from between your teeth, the other will reply, remove the beam from between your eyes." (*Talmud, Arachin 16b*)

א"ר טרפון: (תמיהני) (מסורת הש"ס: [תמה]) אני אם יש בדור הזה שמקבל תוכחה, אם אמר לו טול קיסם מבין עיניך, אמר לו טול קורה מבין עיניך.

- When others point out our faults, often our first reaction is to point out that person's faults! Why is it so hard for us to accept our own faults when pointed out by someone else?

ii) Be Silent / Listen

The average patient will most often spend no more than 3 minutes to tell their story, but the average physician interrupts the patient after about ten – some studies say eighteen - seconds. (*See, for example, study by Beckman HB, Frankel RM*)

Silence isn't just about not talking. It is about listening with curiosity and openness. By listening from a place of compassion and generosity, we have the power to change the tone and direction of a conversation. Being fully open to another person makes us vulnerable, but it is easier if we recognize that our own vulnerability is what creates a safe place for the other person to be honest. A deeper truth can emerge – even "grow" - from that type of conversation.

Practice: When you are in a conversation with someone and feelings of harsh judgment arise in you, don't talk. Keep listening, silently repeating to yourself phrases such as: "Don't talk." "I don't know the whole story." "Listen." "Be curious." "Don't judge." Even when there is a pause in the conversation, keep silent and keep silently repeating the phrase whenever you feel the urge to speak. When you are certain that the other person is finished, try asking a question of clarification rather than making a statement. Notice what happens to the conversation, to your understanding of the other person and to your relationship with that person if you are able to do this consistently.

Rabbi Akiva said: ...Silence is a protection for wisdom (*Pirke Avot 3:17*)

סיג לחכמה. שתיקה:

"Closing one's lips makes a person wise" (*Proverbs 10:19*).

וְחוֹשֵׁף שִׁפְתָיו מִשִּׁפּוּל:

2b. Notice that which annoys you in others. Then use it as a key for self-discovery

Mommy: And anyway, the flaws we see in other people are usually our own flaws - that's why we're so good at recognizing them.

"The world is a mirror," the Ba'al Shem Tov said. "The faults you see in others are your own."

- Think of something that annoys you about someone else. In what way could that be a reflection of your own fault?
- Why is it so hard for us to see the aggravating behaviors of others as reflections of the very things that are disappointing or difficult in ourselves?

Near the end of the discussion, Mommy gives a reminder to Hanan:

Mommy: We all have dirt on us Hanan. It's what makes us complete human beings. If there's something that really bothers you about her, something you just **can't** let go of, look for that quality in **yourself** before criticizing her. You'll be surprised what you might find...

Said the Ba'al Shem Tov: "It is not good for a man to be alone, for he cannot know his own defects. By observing the acts which he dislikes in a fellowman, he can see his own defects as in a mirror. He would not have been given the opportunity to note his comrade's offense if he had not been unconsciously guilty to some degree of the same offense.... *Keter Shem Tov* by Aaron of Apt, late 1700s; p.21b (Rabbi Aaron of Apt wrote about the teachings of the founder of Hasidut, *The Ba'al Shem Tov*)

Both Mommy and the Ba'al Shem Tov remind us that the very thing that annoys us about someone else may actually be a gift to us if we are willing to be self-reflective. We need to stop and ask ourselves what our anger or frustration about this quality in the other person teaches us about ourselves. This is a powerful tool to learn about our own weaknesses or personal vulnerabilities.

- Since we can learn about our own faults when we judge others, is it possible for us to be grateful to others, even for their faults, since, as the Ba'al Shem Tov says, without the other person we can't know our own defects?

2c. Grow the positive

Mommy: You're not **changing** her, you're shifting your attention towards her strengths and away from her faults. Miriam will then focus on her strengths as well, leading her strengths to increase and her negative qualities to become less.

KNOW that you must judge all people favorably. This applies even to the worst of people. You must search until you find some little bit of good in them. In that good place inside them, they are not bad! If you can just find this little bit of good and judge them favorably, you really can elevate them and swing the scales of judgment in their favor. This way you can bring them back to God. (*Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav Likutey Moharan* I:282)

דע כי צריך לדון את כל אדם לכף זכות ואפילו מי שהוא רשע גמור צריך להפיש ולמצא בו איזה מעט טוב שבאותו המעט אינו רשע ועל ידי זה שמוצא בו מעט טוב ודן אותו לכף זכות על-ידי זה מעלה אותו באמת לכף זכות ויובל להשיבו בתשובה

- Rabbi Nachman says that even the worst people have a little bit of good in them. Is this true, in your experience?

On the other hand...

Maimonides, in his commentary of the teaching "judge every person favorably" states that this applies only to those who you know to be righteous or to people whose character is unknown to you. If, however, you know that someone is wicked, then Maimonides gives permission for you to protect yourself:

"...If a person is wicked and his [evil] deeds are well known, but he performed a deed that looks positive from all vantage points, and it is only with great difficulty and in a farfetched manner that it could be interpreted as evil, one should take precautions and not believe that it is good, since it has the possibility of being evil..." (*Maimonides*)

...וכן אם היה רשע ונתפרסמו מעשיו ואחר כך ראינוהו עושה מעשה שראיותיו כלן מורות שהוא טוב ובו צד אפשרות רחוקה מאד לרע - צריך להשמר ממנו ולא להאמין בו טוב הואיל ויש בו אפשרות לרע...

- How do you reconcile Rabbi Nachman's teaching that there is good in everyone and that we should judge favorably in order to grow that good, with Maimonides's teaching that some people should be treated with precautions? Are these mutually exclusive teachings?
- How do we really "know" if someone is "wicked?"

People justifiably may ask: Won't people take advantage of me if I always judge favorably? Maimonides makes it clear that sometimes we must be careful. But, Rabbi Nachman reminds us that there is at least some good in everyone. And the majority of teachings around this topic ask us to be aware that there is always something that we don't know - we never know the full truth (See next section on Truth). In considering these teachings we might ask ourselves:

- How do I want to be known in the world? Am I going to be the person who is known to give people the benefit of the doubt? Or am I going to be the person known to find fault in everyone?
- Who do I prefer to spend time with? Do I prefer to be with people who assume the best in others or people who assume the worst?
- Can I admit that I don't ever know another person's entire story?
- At a minimum, what would happen if I reserved judgment for a bit longer than usual?



3. What is Truth?

3a. Truth is based on information you have at the time

Early in the conversation, Hanan says:

Hanan: Tzzz, you don't understand Mommy, everybody puts their best foot forward when they create their online profile. It's not phony, it's just... evolving truth...

Here Hanan is choosing to give only some of the information. He calls this "evolving truth." Mommy later refers back to the idea of "truth.":

Mommy: But the truth is **more** than just one particular set of facts. What would motivate her to lie?

And near the end of the conversation, Mommy turns the idea of "evolving truth" around:

Mommy: If there's one thing I learned Hanan, it's that reality is subjective. Reality is based on whose shoes you're standing in and the information you have...

Let Miriam know that you see the best in her, not the worst. Ask questions, keep the conversation going, and get as much information as you can. And then, it's like you said before Hanan - the truth can... evolve. You can actually create a new truth, together.

Mommy is explaining that Hanan is looking at the truth based on the information he has at the time, but that there are other pieces of information that can change the truth by filling in more of the story or by showing the story from another perspective. Even time itself can

change truth, because people, or circumstances, can change over time. When two people in a relationship open themselves up to hearing the other person's perspective, they can gain more information about the other person as well as about themselves and the truth can "evolve." As such, truth can be thought of as always being in flux.

- Compare Hanan's description of "evolving truth" to Mommy's use of the same term.
- Do you agree that a "new truth" can emerge when people are in healthy relationships with each other?

3b. Truth Really Can Grow and "Evolve" – Two Rabbinic Metaphors

i. Truth grows from the earth

Rabbi Simeon said: In the hour when God was about to create Adam, the angels were divided into different groups, some saying "let him be created," while others said, "let him not be created"... Lovingkindness (hesed) said, "Let him be created, and he will do loving deeds (gemilut hasadim)." But Truth (emet) said, "Let him not be created because he will be all deceit." Righteousness (tzedek) said, "Let him be created because he will do righteous deeds (tzedakah)." Peace (shalom) said, "Let him not be created because he will be all quarrelsome and discord." What did God do? He seized hold of Truth and cast it to the earth, as it is said, "You cast truth to the ground" (Daniel 8:12). Then the angels said to God, "Why do you despise your Angel of Truth? Let Truth rise out of the earth, as it is said, 'Truth springs out of the earth'" (Psalm 85:12) (*Genesis Rabbah, B'reishit 8:5*).

א"ר סימון בשעה שבא הקב"ה לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כיתים כיתים, וחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הה"ד (תהלים פה) חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלום נשקו, חסד אומר יברא שהוא גומל חסדים, ואמת אומר אל יברא שכולו שקרים, צדק אומר יברא שהוא עושה צדקות, שלום אומר אל יברא דכוליה קטטה, מה עשה הקב"ה נטל אמת והשליכו לארץ הה"ד (דניאל ח) ותשלך אמת ארצה, אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקב"ה רבון העולמים מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסייה שלך, תעלה אמת מן הארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב (תהלים פה) אמת מארץ תצמח

A Hassidic response: The Kotzker Rebbe (Hassidic Rabbi – Poland, 1787-1859) poses an interesting question: "What good would it do to only banish the Truth? Peace, which had also argued against the creation of human beings, still remained." The answer, he says, is that in banishing the Truth, peace is ensured since the root of most fighting is that everyone battles for his or her own truth. Without the lightning rod of "the Truth", there can be peace and much more. (*Sparks Beneath The Surface, Kushner & Olitzky*)

ii. Truth is the Pendulum

"Swinging back and forth, the arc described by the pendulum is truth. If you stop the pendulum, anywhere along the arc, and you say, this point here at the zenith, say right here, that's truth, or if you stop it down here at the midpoint, and say, that's truth, you're wrong. You'll always be wrong. Because the truth is the pendulum, and you know this because you've lived and you've experienced life and all of its struggles. And you know that it is always a pendulum, and it is always in motion" (*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 1907-1972*)

- Do you believe that truth can "grow?"
- Think of a farmer. What type of environment would be required to grow a healthy "crop" of truth?
- It appears that God realizes that "Truth" must be buried in the earth in order for it to grow properly. We can't see a seed, even though it is there. Entire plants grow from a tiny seed. Once the plant grows, even if it is a huge tree, we can't see all of it since the roots of a plant remain underground. Seasons influence the part of the plant we will see at any given time. How does this metaphor help us understand truth?
- What other "truths" about plants are also true about "truth?"
- What is the relationship between truth and the other elements: lovingkindness, righteousness and peace?
- In what ways has "the Truth" prevented peaceful relationships in your own life?

- How does Rabbi Heschel's metaphor of truth as a pendulum differ from the metaphor from Genesis Rabbah that truth grows from the ground? What does it add?
- Do you agree that truth "is always in motion?"
- How has "truth" changed for you as you have grown older and had more life experiences?

A Final Story from the Talmud:

Once a man went from the Upper Galilee (in northern Israel) to work for an employer in the south for three years. On the eve of Yom Kippur of the third year, he said to his employer, "Give me my wages, and I will go home and support my wife and my children." The employer said to him, "I do not have any money to pay you." "Give me fruit instead," said the worker. "I have no fruit," answered the employer. "Give me land," said the worker. "I do not have any land," answered the employer. "Give me animals," said the worker. "I do not have any animals," answered the employer. "Give me quilts and pillows," said the worker. "I do not have any quilts and pillows," answered the employer. The worker packed his bags and went home, disappointed.

After the holiday, the employer traveled to the worker's home with the man's wages and with three donkeys. One was laden with food, the second with drinks, and the third with delicacies.

When he arrived, after they had eaten and drunk together, the employer gave the worker his wages and all the other gifts, and said to him, "When you asked me for your wages, and I told you that I did not have any money, did you think that was the truth?"

"I thought," answered the worker, "that you had obtained merchandise at a bargain price, and had spent all your money."

The employer said to him, "When you asked me for animals, and I told you that I did not have any animals, what did you think was the truth?"

"I thought," answered the worker, "that they were

rented out to others."

The employer said to him, "When you asked me for land, and I told you that I did not have any land, what did you think was the truth?"

"I thought," answered the worker, "that the land also was rented out to others."

The employer said to him, "When you asked me for fruit, and I told you that I did not have any fruit, what did you think was the truth?"

"I thought," answered the worker, "that the fruit had not yet been tithed."

The employer said to him, "And after you asked me for quilts and pillows, and I told you that I did not have any, what did you think was the truth?"

I thought," answered the worker, "that you had given away all your possessions to the beis Hamikdash by making a vow of hekdesch [pledge to the Temple]."

The employer said, "I swear to you that that is exactly what happened. I had promised away all of my possessions because of Hurkanos, my son, who did not wish to learn Torah. And when I came to my friends in the south, they annulled my vows. And just as you judged me favorably, so may G-d judge you favorably." (*Talmud, Shabbot 127b*)

ומעשה באדם אחד שירד מגליל העליון ונשכר אצל בעל הבית אחד בדרום שלש שנים. ערב יום הכפורים אמר לו: תן לי שכרי, ואלך ואזון את אשתי ובני. אמר לו: אין לי מעות. אמר לו: תן לי פירות. - אמר לו: אין לי. - תן לי קרקע. - אין לי. - תן לי בהמה. - אין לי. תן לי כרים וכסתות. - אין לי. הפשיל כליו לאחוריו, והלך לביתו בפחי נפש. לאחר הרגל נטל בעל הבית שכרו בידו, ועמו משוי שלשה חמורים, אחד של מאכל ואחד של משתה ואחד של מיני מגדים, והלך לו לביתו. אחר שאכלו ושתו נתן לו שכרו. אמר לו: בשעה שאמרת לי תן לי שכרי ואמרת לי אין לי מעות במה חשדתני? - אמרת לי: שמא פרקמטיא בזול נזדמנה לך, ולקחת בהן. - ובשעה שאמרת לי תן לי בהמה ואמרת לי אין לי בהמה במה חשדתני? - אמרת לי: שמא מושכרת ביד אחרים. - בשעה שאמרת לי תן לי קרקע ואמרת לי אין לי קרקע במה חשדתני? - אמרת לי: שמא מושכרת ביד אחרים היא. - ובשעה שאמרת לי אין לי פירות במה חשדתני? - אמרת לי: שמא אינן מעושרות. - ובשעה שאמרת לי אין לי כרים

ובסתות במה חשדתיני? - אמרתי: שמא הקדיש כל נכסיו לשמים. - אמר ליה: העבודה, כך היק הדרתי כל נכסי בשביל הורקנוס בני שלא עסק בתורה, וכשבאתי אצל חברי בדרום התירו לי כל נדרי. ואתה, כשם שדנתני לזכות - המקום ידין אותך לזכות.

Compare the worker in this story to this exchange between Hanan and Mommy:

Hanan: (uncomfortably) Right now I'm a little preoccupied with the fact that she lied to me. And anyway, why are you defending her?

Mommy: I'm just pointing out that you give yourself the benefit of the doubt on your online profile. You might consider getting Miriam's perspective before jumping to conclusions.

Mommy's comment to Hanan is true about all of us. Generally, we give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, but rarely extend that same level of consideration to others. What do you think would happen if you could be more like the worker in the Talmud story? Do you make a habit of giving others the same benefit of the doubt that you give yourself? What would you need to do in order to reach this level of judging positively?

Glossary:

Mishnah: The first major written text of the Jewish oral tradition known as the "Oral Torah". It is also the first major work of Rabbinic literature. It was compiled around 200 CE.

Pirke Avot: A collection of ethical teachings, Pirke Avot is one of the most well-known sections of the Mishnah.

Talmud: An extensive work of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprised of both the Mishnah and the Gemara. Like the Mishnah, the Gemara material originally was oral. There are two versions of the Talmud: the Babylonian Talmud (which was written down from about the 5th -6th century CE but, since originally it was oral, includes earlier material) and the earlier Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud. Unless noted, any references to Talmudic material refer to the more commonly studied Babylonian Talmud

Maimonides: 1135-1204 Also known as RaMBaM (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon), a Jewish philosopher, rabbi and medical doctor, born in Spain and a major theologian and writer of Jewish thought and law.

Ba'al Shem Tov: 1698-1760, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known as the Ba'al Shem Tov (or the BeSHT), a mystical rabbi who lived in the Ukraine. He is considered the founder of the Hassidic movement. We don't have writings by him, but his students wrote extensively in his name.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav: 1772-1810, The great-grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov, and the founder of the Bratzlaver Hassidic movement.

A Personal note on *Judging Others Favorably from the animation's* scriptwriter and animator:

I have to confess that I was reluctant to make an animation about judging others favorably, because I personally tend to judge others negatively, especially myself, and I felt that it would be hypocritical to teach about the merits of judging favorably when I do the opposite. In fact, it was my wife, a far less judgmental person than me, who urged me to take on this topic *dafka* because I was struggling with it. In my studies, there were five teachings that I found particularly profound and helpful, which I tried to emphasize in this animation:

First, I learned that my tendency to judge other people negatively was paradoxically hurting *me*. Besides alienating myself from others, my quick, negative judgments and assumptions about others was actually preventing my own growth and development, because my judgments were shutting the conversation down, stopping the flow of information, and leaving me with the same limited knowledge and experience that I entered the relationship with. This kept me in a “bubble” of sorts. I thought I was growing, getting smarter, and learning about myself and others, but in reality I was left cycling through the same idiosyncratic bits of knowledge and experiences, most of which I acquired as a child (when I still dared to explore and be truly creative). My tendency to quickly sum up people and situations was a form of arrogance that came from a place of insecurity, not strength. It came from a need for self-protection and self-assurance. It came from a place of fear - fear of being wrong, fear of the unknown, and the fear of discovering that I might not really know or understand anything at all.

The second teaching revolved around the realization that I was expecting other people to give me the benefit of the doubt, while I was not extending the same courtesy to others. I usually had what in my mind was a perfectly reasonable or logical justification/excuse/explanation for my own failures or inadequacies but I rarely allowed others that same luxury. I found that the mitzvah, “...love your neighbor as yourself” (*Leviticus 19:18*) was particularly difficult to implement when it came to judgment.

My third discovery in researching this topic was the teaching that it was easier to see our own faults in others. When I was feeling particularly judgmental of another person (to the point of contempt or indifference), it was a strong indicator that I could find the same trait in myself that I was judging in the other person. I just had to look hard enough. This discovery was embarrassing and humbling, but also very helpful as a tool for self-awareness and improvement.

The fourth teaching I came across, was that my concept of a fixed “truth” was flawed. I learned that truth is based on information, and since no one can have *all* the information (no one can ever truly be in another person’s shoes, no one can be in every place, “Makom”, all the time, except for God) that there was no way to really know or comprehend an ultimate truth. Furthermore, when we contemplate how much our actions and choices can affect our reality, and we add in the actions and choices of the people around us, combined with other circumstances that are beyond our control, we realize that reality is constantly changing and that truth is much more in flux than I would have wanted to believe. This realization was particularly difficult for me, having grown up with a father who was a brilliant nuclear physicist who seemed to have the “answer” to everything.

The fifth, and possibly most profound teaching I came across in relation to judging others favorably, was the idea that by focusing on the *positive* in another person as opposed to the negative, one can actually help to increase or “grow” those positive traits within that person because he/she then focuses on those positive traits as well. This was especially interesting because it meant that my negative judgments were not only unhelpful, but that I was actually making the problem worse, while passing up an opportunity to improve the situation.

When I began sharing my early versions of the script, I was frustrated by the fact that many listeners were not hearing anything profound in the script. I would receive responses such as “Ok. So what? Obviously it’s important to judge people favorably. You’re not really saying anything new.” When I would go through the multitude of teachings in the script, the listeners would respond with, “Oh, I didn’t really hear that the

first time.” (In my unscientific sampling, I can say that I would get this response mostly from men). What I realized was that most people, including myself, tend to believe that we are already judging others perfectly fairly. We believe we know exactly what is going on about everything and everyone. It reminded me of the George Carlin joke: “Have you ever noticed that anyone who is driving slower than you is an IDIOT, and anyone driving faster than you is a MANIAC!!!” We feel that our own particular perspective is the “right” one. I suppose this ego-boost is necessary on some level in order for us to function and produce, however, it left me wondering about the challenge this creates for honest and meaningful growth and change.

What I am trying myself these days, is to use the “antidotes” listed in parts 2a, 2b, and 2c of this study guide: arguing less, being silent/listening more, trying to use what annoys me about others as a tool for self-discovery, trying to find and focus on the positive in others instead of the negative - all of these “antidotes” by the way, as shown in the study guide, are rooted in Jewish wisdom – but maybe most of all, I am trying very hard to give people the same benefit of the doubt that I expect others to give me.

I would like to thank all of my teachers for having the patience to navigate this particularly difficult topic with me, especially Maoz and Tali Kahana who are two of the kindest and least judgmental people I have had the fortune of meeting, and who have introduced me to a loving, open, inspired, and most importantly non-judgmental reading of Judaism that has affected me deeply. I would also like to thank Beth Huppin who embraced the writing of this study guide in such an intense and personal way, that I felt we became learning partners. I would also like to thank The Covenant Foundation for making these animations and study guides possible. And finally, I would like to thank my wife who urged me to take on this topic and helped me realize that judging favorably is one of the most important and rewarding character traits a person can work on, both for the person who one is judging favorably, and even more so for oneself.

- Hanan



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