

Seeing the Whole Picture
Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5779
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Gary Rosenblatt, the editor of the New York *Jewish Week* and frequent critic of President Trump, reported that the week after Trump announced his plans regarding the move of the U.S. embassy and recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capitol, a friend posed this question to a group (which included Rosenblatt) who'd expressed mixed feelings about Trump's decision:

If President Obama had done what Trump is doing would you feel differently?

Rosenblatt, who endorsed Hillary Clinton, admitted that it was a good question because it made him determine whether his reaction was based on the policy itself or on who was initiating it. So, from now on when you find yourself rejecting an idea out of hand, pause and ask yourself if your thoughts are being colored by an antipathy towards the person who made the suggestion. If the answer is yes, do yourself a favor and pretend someone you like made the suggestion and reevaluate. Conversely, if you find yourself quickly embracing an idea out of hand, pause and ask yourself if your thoughts are being colored by a favorable view of the person who made the suggestion. If the answer is yes, do yourself a favor and pretend

someone you don't like made the suggestion and reevaluate. This simple exercise is invaluable in letting you evaluate suggestions based on their merits, without being colored by personal bias.

This exercise shouldn't only aid you in making better decisions, it should allow you to see people in a more nuanced manner. After all, if even people you have an antipathy for can come up with good ideas, they too must have some redeeming value. *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 4:3 reminds us "not to be scornful of any person... for no person is without his hour." However, this is a lot easier said than done. Particularly in today's age of instant information sharing, our minds can become overloaded. Our brains naturally cope by filing the information into easily identifiable mental folders. The result is people often quickly get placed into our "good guy" or "bad guy" folder.

Pirkei Avot 1:6 famously advises us *hevei dan et kol adam l'kaf zechut* (judge your fellow favorably); in other words, give people the benefit of the doubt. But what does that really mean? If we were to blindly give everyone the benefit of the doubt, we would be opening ourselves up to being taken advantage of. You are certainly not going to give telemarketers the benefit of the doubt as they make promises that are too good to be true.

So how can we practically understand this idea of giving someone the benefit of the doubt? The idea of judging favorably

also appears in the Talmud (Shavuot 30a). Here the Talmud teaches that, by judging your fellow favorably, you fulfill the biblical *mitzvah* (command) of *b'tzedek tishpot et amitecha* (with righteousness shall you judge your fellow). The concept of judging your fellow with righteousness first appears in *Vayikra* (Lev. 19:15) and is addressed to judges. Certainly judges cannot simply give litigants the benefit of the doubt; that would be inviting a miscarriage of justice. Rambam (Hilchot Sanhedrin 23:10) teaches that judges should view opposing litigants who stand before them as wicked, with the presumption they are lying. Rather than giving the claimants the benefit of the doubt, judges must view them with skepticism in order to ascertain the facts and provide a just verdict. After the proceedings have ended, the judges are to view both litigants as righteous as long as they have accepted the judgment.

Though we may not be sitting at the bench in judgment, we do make judgments about people regularly. Now we certainly should give people the benefit of the doubt in situations in which we don't have sufficient information to judge fairly. For example, if you see a man that you don't know wearing a *kippa* walking into McDonalds, you should assume that he is going in to buy a soda not a hamburger. *Rabbeinu Yonah* (Shaarei Teshuvah 3:218) teaches that the degree to which one should favorably judge the action of another depends on the person's previous behavior. If one has a good track record, we should give

him the benefit of the doubt. If not, we should view his claims skeptically.

Perhaps, we can apply this to Senator Cory Booker of N.J., who is being mentioned as a possible Democratic candidate for president. Booker, who has long been considered a close friend of Israel, has been heavily criticized for recently appearing in a photo holding a sign reading, "From Palestine to Mexico, all walls have got to go." The explanation provided by Booker's spokesman was that Booker had been in the midst of taking several photos with various people just before addressing a conference and didn't realize what was written on the sign. In other words, the sign was thrust into his hands, and he simply smiled for the picture. We'll never know if Booker knew what the sign said, but his track record of pro-Israel support makes his explanation more believable.

However, giving people the benefit of the doubt even when appropriate can be difficult. If anything, by nature we tend to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt while failing to extend that same benefit to others. In fact, psychologists tell us that our minds naturally focus on the negative behavior of others. Does anyone remember that Bill Buckner of the Boston Red Sox was a lifetime 300 hitter? All he's remembered for was allowing the ball to go through his legs in Game Six of the 1986 World Series, allowing the Mets to complete an improbable comeback and defeat Boston.

So this year let us try to catch ourselves as we quickly place people into our “bad guy” folder and instead judge others the way God judges us. The *Zichronot* (Remembrance) section of the Rosh Hashanah *Musaf Amidah* reminds us that God takes into account the totality of our actions as he presides in judgment over us.

Therefore, we must make a conscious effort to take into account the good along with the bad. By doing so, we can, on one hand, protect ourselves from being taken advantage of and, on the other hand, allow ourselves to find redeeming value in those whom we previously placed in our “bad guy” folder.

The Talmud (Berachot 7a) speaks of the *tzadikim* (righteous individuals) and *rashayim* (wicked individuals). It even suggests that there are those individuals who are worthy of being considered a *tzaddik gamur* (completely righteous) and those who are worthy of being considered a *rasha gamur* (completely wicked). In truth, I don't think there is anyone completely righteous and sin free. You live; you make mistakes; that's life. That's why this season of *teshuvah* (repentance) is given to us. Particularly today on 9/11 we should be cognizant of the reality that there are people such as terrorists who are worthy of being labeled a *rasha gamur*. Fortunately, we don't come into contact with those types regularly. The truth is there are plenty of imperfect but good people and some not so great people that occasionally do good. Our job is to fight the mind's tendency to

pigeonhole people as good guys or bad guys and instead view people in their entirety. Yes, this is a nuanced approach, and it takes more work, but judge others as you'd want to be judged. You certainly wouldn't want God to write you off as a bad guy just because you'd you made some mistakes.

Before concluding this discussion about judgment, let's address the question of how you judge one more person – yourself. As we already mentioned, we tend to view others harshly; we tend to instinctively give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. Was Al Capone busy trying to figure out how to do *teshuvah* (repent) as he sat in prison towards the end of his life? No, he was kvetching (whining) that his good works had gone unappreciated by society. And he was a cold blooded murderer! *Kal V'chomer* (how much more so) are we likely to view ourselves favorably. In order to help you conduct an accurate *cheshbon hanefesh* (accounting of your soul) and not fall into the trap of giving yourself a pass, the Talmud (Kiddushin 40b) advises you to view yourself as half guilty and half meritorious, a *beinoni* (a middle of the roader) who can tip the scales of judgment in his favor by performing just one more *mitzvah*.

You can even change the world for the better by performing a single *mitzvah*! Think I'm kidding? Listen to this story. Senator Scoop Jackson of Washington was once asked why he'd championed the issue of Soviet Jewry. After all, there weren't many Jews in his state, and there was not much of a political

upside for him to fight this fight. Jackson explained that, as a teenager, he had worked in a store owned by a Jew and watched as anti-Semites tormented this decent man who'd always treated him well. Jackson vowed that from then on he would do whatever he could to save suffering Jews. This Jewish man's simple kindness inspired Jackson to become a leading force in a movement that resulted in tens of thousands of Jews participating in a modern Exodus.

Now go find your mitzvah and tip the scales of judgment in your favor!