

### Sound Judgment

There is a story told in the Talmud of a field hand who asks his employer to pay him his wages so he can go home to his wife for the New Year with money to support his family. The farmer tells him, "I don't have any money to pay you." "Pay me in crops," the man says. "I don't have any crops." "Pay me in land, in cattle, in bedding..." With each suggestion, the farmer says no. The field hand leaves empty-handed.

Following the holidays, the farmer travels to the home of the field hand with the wages he is due, along with three donkeys laden with additional gifts. He asks the field hand, "What did you think of me when I said I didn't have any money?" "I assumed you had found a deal on important merchandise and spent your money." "When I couldn't give you land?" "That you had leased it." With each question, the field hand had an explanation that justified the farmer's response. The farmer was astounded. He explained that he had been forced to vow all of his property, that his vows had since been voided, and that he was now able to pay the field hand his wages. As the farmer left for home that day, he shouted back to the field hand, "As you have judged me favorably, may God judge you."

The farmer expresses a wish that resonates with the language of our season. The *machzor*, our High Holy Day prayer book, is full of images of God as Judge. In the words of the *Unataneh Tokef*, which we recited just a few minutes ago: "You are Judge and Arbiter, Counsel and Witness...who shall live and who shall die... temper judgment's severe decree." We often think of today, Yom Kippur, as the day when God judges us, but in fact, Rosh Hashanah is the day entitled *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. Tradition views these ten days as a unit, a progression from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. On Rosh Hashanah, God made an initial judgment of our deeds, and we were given through today to repent and seek forgiveness, hoping that God's final judgment as the gates are closing will be for the good.

And yet, while the High Holy Days put God squarely behind the judge's bench, we are often the ones behind the bench, judging others. Every day we form dozens of opinions: we judge the people we see, the words we hear, the events we witness... To be clear, Judaism believes that we are meant to judge and form opinions. To tell people not to form opinions is not only impossible, but unwise. Making decisions using sound judgment helps us succeed, brings us happiness and keeps us safe... Judging the world around us is an essential part of life. The question is, what kind of judge are we? God is depicted as both just and compassionate. Can we learn from God and hone our judgment to be more fair, accurate and kind?

We can learn first, from the name for Rosh Hashanah that I mentioned a moment ago: Rosh Hashanah is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgment. It is not the Day of Being Judgmental. Think about the difference. "Judgment" implies forming an opinion. Being Judgmental does the same, but is layered with an additional assumption that the opinion will be negative. A judge is hopefully a person who is fair and reasoned, versus a judgmental person who is critical and quick to disparage.

Every one of us is guilty of rushing to judgment at times. And if this was a typical year and we had entered the temple this morning in a sea of people, we would have already passed judgment on some of our fellow worshipers: we may have been judgmental about another person's outfit, the behavior of another person's child, or the absence of someone we thought

should be here. In each of these cases, though, we should have asked ourselves, do we know the whole story? Have we considered all the data before forming our opinion?

And we make these kinds of quick, harsh judgments all the time. Some of them have little impact, but others will dramatically affect our relationships. Three short examples: 1. You leave a voicemail for a friend, expecting he will call you back that day. After two days, you are furious, convinced that he is purposefully ignoring you. 2. An employee turns in a report late and it has numerous typos. You conclude she is lazy and not putting in enough effort. 3. Your child shouts at you and slams her bedroom door. You fear that the teen years have come five years earlier than expected.

All of these conclusions may be accurate – your friend may be avoiding you; your employee may have spent the week surfing the web; your child may have entered a difficult phase. On the other hand, maybe your friend washed his phone in the pocket of a pair of pants and never got your message; maybe your employee has a sick parent whose needs she has been struggling to balance with work; maybe your child had a hard day at school and is embarrassed to tell you what happened... Most of the time, we do not have enough information to judge other people with any kind of accuracy. Most of the time, we make a quick judgment and then look for evidence that supports our conclusions. And yet, according to Jewish tradition, ten days ago, on a day called THE Judgment Day, God did not finish judging us, but gave ten days for new information to surface, for us to work on our souls and to change God's mind.

An article in Forbes magazine on acting with sound judgment suggests that we “conduct decisions with an air of wonder.”<sup>1</sup> That when we are forming an opinion, we pause to ask if we are missing anything, and assume that we are. That we consider the information before us more than once before forming a conclusion. Today's technology allows us to instantaneously share our judgments. And too often, we share them without the necessary time to review, to wonder if our opinion is fair, accurate and justified. Today, the farmer's reputation likely would have been bashed all over social media before the field hand even made it home. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Over and over again, Judaism urges us to give people the benefit of the doubt, a virtue known in Hebrew as *dan l'chaf zechut*. The field hand in the opening story is just one of the people the Talmud puts forward as an exemplar of this virtue. Their examples teach us to not jump to conclusions, to not assume the worst. They also teach us to balance what we observe with what we already know about a person's character. The field hand knew his employer to be an honest man. He assumed there was a legitimate reason for not getting paid. When someone we know acts in a way that we do not like, we have to weigh that one instance against what we already know. If a friend lets us down, has she done it before? If a spouse hurts our feelings, has he said those things before? These questions don't excuse the behavior, but they force us to pause and put it in context.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/maynardwebb/2016/10/24/the-good-and-the-bad-on-judgment/#5a7b2ab778d0>

*Dan l'Chaf Zechut*, which I translated earlier as “giving the benefit of the doubt,” literally translates as “judge on the side of merit.” Our tradition is telling us to go ahead and judge – but to lean toward the good. On the High Holy Days, we are hoping that God does the same: we are hoping that as our deeds are weighed out on the scales of justice, that God tilts the scale just a little toward the good.

When we give the benefit of the doubt, when we tilt the scales, we may be wrong. But less damage is caused by giving the benefit of the doubt than by judging harshly or jumping to conclusions. By giving the benefit of the doubt we are leaving open possibilities and opportunities. Where judging harshly may end a friendship, giving the benefit of the doubt leaves it open for repair. Where judging quickly may stall a career, giving the benefit of the doubt allows for growth.

These last many months of the coronavirus pandemic have been a time that has demanded we exercise sound judgment. The pandemic is, in fact, a perfect example of how difficult it is to draw the line between judgment and judgmental. With each new development, we have been forced to make new decisions that upend and disrupt our lives in order to protect our own health and the health of our family, friends and the wider community. But unfortunately, the necessity of forming judgments for ourselves around the pandemic has all too often led to being judgmental of others, critical of the decisions they make for themselves and their children.

Being judgmental of others during a crisis is to be expected – there are reasonable fears surrounding our decisions and actions. But might we take a breath and approach our judgment of others with a bit of wonder? Perhaps the person we judge to be taking unnecessary risks has carefully weighed their options against financial and psychological needs. Perhaps the person we think has taken the precautions a bit too far is protecting the health and privacy of a loved one with a compromised immune system. We just don't know.

When other people's actions directly affect our health and safety, like the person in the grocery store walking toward you with their mask down around their chin, there isn't time for giving the benefit of the doubt. But when we disparage another person's choices that do not directly impact our lives, we are crossing the line from sound judgment to just being judgmental.

During festival services, we stand before the ark and recite the thirteen attributes of God: *The Eternal God, the Eternal God is merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving, and true, showing mercy to thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and granting pardon.* With these thirteen attributes we see the balance toward which we strive: God is both true and merciful; God judges us according to what we have actually done, both good and bad. But in the end, God shows mercy and compassion.

As we pray during these Days of Awe that God will show us both justice and mercy, we also pray that we will be able to do the same in the year ahead. That we will give each other the benefit of the doubt, form judgments carefully and thoughtfully, and offer critiques discreetly and with kindness. As God is *merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, loving, and true*, may we have the strength, courage and will to be the same.

Kein Yehi Ratzon, Be this God's Will.