



TORAH WEEKLY

A project of the Denver Community Kollel



Parshas Kedoshim

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A Taste of Torah

Good Judgement

by Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

“Don’t judge me!” “You’re being judgmental.” “Who am I too judge?”

These phrases are probably familiar to you; in our modern world of diversity, the topic of judging others comes up more than ever before. Judging (or not judging) others is a complex topic with much nuance and numerous facets. Before you flee in abject terror from this frightening subject, I implore you to relax; I simply want to focus on a small yet vital piece of this topic that is borne out in this week’s parsha.

Easily missed among the numerous mitzvos discussed in this week’s parsha, the Torah says (Kedoshim 19:15), “With righteousness shall you judge your fellow.” Rashi comments that one explanation of this verse is an obligation to judge others favorably. The idea behind this mitzvah is that when viewing the actions of another that seem to be morally questionable – or even downright reprehensible – one should give his fellow the benefit of the doubt.

By way of illustration, the story is told of a rabbi who saw one of his ostensibly kosher-observant congregants chowing down in a non-kosher eatery. Later, when the two met, the congregant approached the rabbi and asked him what he thought upon seeing him engaged in what appeared to be such sinful activity.

“I thought that perhaps you had a life-threatening medical emergency that required you to immediately eat whatever food you could get your hands on,” responded the rabbi. The congregant replied that indeed, that had been the case.

This mitzvah is a bit troubling at first glance, however. Are we indeed obligated to view the actions of another through glasses so rose colored that we see no evil, even when it stares us in the face? Are we to overlook sinful behavior by coming up with creative excuses for the perpetrator of what appears to be a serious crime? Ergo, halacha distinguishes between individuals who are known to be pious, those of average moral character, and those who are known

for wicked and immoral behavior, but it is still difficult to understand why the Torah would expect one to bury his head in the sand upon viewing the illicit actions of another.

To gain an understanding of this mitzvah, we need to access the principle that underlies it. Let us suppose one has a very dear friend, a wonderful, upstanding, righteous individual. One fine day, you see this person engaged in terrible behavior that is completely out of character. Other people who see the actions of your friend but don’t really know him are outraged and begin condemning the man for his awful actions. You, however, after being momentarily stunned, begin telling those around you that there must be an explanation for your friend’s behavior; after all, he is such a fine, upright individual who would never behave this way. Further investigation bears out your claim, and the matter is put to rest.

Why did you react differently than the other bystanders? Because you know this person intimately, and you realize that the behavior he manifested simply could not come from him. With confidence in the virtuousness of your friend, you could go out on a limb and state assuredly that there had to be a reasonable explanation for what appeared to be otherwise inexplicable actions on his part.

If we assume that every person is, indeed, a good, well-intended individual, then we will have a similar reaction when assessing less-than-ideal behaviors on their part. The Torah is telling us that every Jew is holy at his core, with a Divine soul of purity and goodness. When we behold negative behavior from another, we have a choice: We can interpret this as an expression of this person’s true essence, or we can say, “This person has a G-dly spark in him, and so there must be a different explanation for his behavior.”

Sometimes, this approach does demand coming up with a creative excuse to explain that what appears to be wrong is really

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Stories for the Soul

Finding the Right Balance

A baker and a farmer made an arrangement: The baker received a pound of butter daily from the farmer, and the farmer would be given a one-pound loaf of bread by the baker. After some time, the baker noticed that the pieces of butter he was receiving from the farmer, which were supposed to weigh a pound, became lighter. He began to weigh the butter, and the scales agreed with his assessment.

The baker angrily went to complain at the local courthouse. The judge summoned the farmer and sternly informed him, “The baker claims your pieces of butter do not have the agreed-upon weight. Here is the butter you gave him - and it weighs less than a pound!”

“That’s impossible, Your Honor,” replied the farmer, “I weigh it carefully every time I give him the butter.”

“Maybe your weights are incorrect!” glowered the judge.

“My weights?” said the farmer in amazement. “I don’t have any weights! I never use weights.”

“If you have no weights,” said the exasperated judge, “how do you weigh the butter?!”

“Your Honor,” said the farmer innocently, “it’s quite simple. When the baker brings me the one-pound loaf of bread, I place the bread on one side of the scale, and add butter to the other side until the scale balances.”

The Torah makes it very clear that it is very important to have honest weights in business. One who is dishonest may well find that, one way or another, it will come back to bite him.

Kollel Happenings

THE M.B. GLASSMAN FOUNDATION LIVE & LEARN LEARNING PROGRAM AT THE WEST DENVER KOLLEL TORAH CENTER

The Live & Learn Learning Program for seniors is held Tuesdays at the West Denver Kollel Torah Center. Coffee and pastries at 10:15 am, two classes of 50 minutes each from 10:40-12:30 (including 10 minute break between classes), and lunch (including take-home option) at 12:30. For more info, email info@denverkollel.org.

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SPRING-SUMMER AVOS UBANIM CONTINUES THIS SHABBOS

The Kollel's spring-summer Avos Ubanim program continues this Shabbos afternoon at the Kollel Torah Centers in West Denver and Southeast Denver. Learning begins one hour before mincha, followed by nosh and prizes. Program ends 15 minutes before mincha in Southeast Denver, at mincha in West Denver. For sponsorships and more info, email info@denverkollel.org.

Halacha Riddles

Last week we asked: How can a cup of wine be a matter of life and death?

Answer: The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 201:3) states that one who rejects the offer to lead a *mezuman* "is shortening his days." The Magen Avraham (ad loc.:5) explains that when one leads the *mezuman*, he also recites a prayer for the well-being and success of the *ba'al habayis*. Hashem told Avraham, "Those who bless you are blessed." One who refuses the opportunity to bless another Jew subjects himself to the negative implication of the verse, namely, that one who fails to bless a fellow Jew (when he should have done so) will

bring a curse upon himself.

The Magen Avraham continues that therefore, refusal to lead the *mezuman* results in shortening of one's days only if one is a guest at another's table, and only when *bentching* is taking place over a cup of wine, as it is under these circumstances that one is fully obligated to bless the host. However, the Mishna Berura (ad loc.:14) notes that while not curse-worthy, it is improper to refuse the offer to lead the *mezuman* under any circumstances.

This week's question: What quasi-blessing is recited only when one has not participated in a meal?

Lives of Our Torah Leaders

Rabbi Meir Shapiro - Part XLV

Thus, this new *pushka* proposed by Rabbi Shapiro was seen as competing with the traditional *pushka* of Rabi Meir Baal Hanes, and this generated great controversy. Bans

were issued against the new *pushkas* which included the names of great authorities such as Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the leader of the old *yishuv* at that time.

A Taste of Torah

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right. But even when this is not much of an option, even when credulity is strained to the breaking point, and all evidence points in the direction of genuine wrongdoing, the mitzvah is still relevant. No, one need not ignore reality and live in a pretend world. But judging another favorably also includes recognizing the innate goodness of the person in question, even when his actions indicate otherwise. Those actions can be seen as distinct and separate from the person himself. They can be viewed as a momentary lapse of judgment, or perhaps brought on by external factors such as upbringing, environment, situational stressors, or the like - but not as being a product of a vile and wicked person.

Truth be told, most people are very generous in this area when it comes to judging themselves. "Yes, I lost my cool and said some mean things, but that is not really who I am. It was just the heat of the moment." "I admit I acted inappropriately, but it was a due to a momentary moral lapse and does not really represent who I am." Sound familiar? People are quick to explain away their own actions because they view themselves as good people who may make a mistake here and there. The Torah is asking us to bestow that benefit of the doubt upon others.

Sometimes, unfortunately, people do commit sins or engage in problematic activities. And halacha tells us that if a person has gone down a path of destructive behavior to the point that he is considered wicked, one is no longer obligated to judge him favorably - for he has, to some degree, defined his essence as evil. In general, however, we are enjoined by the Torah to view other in a favorable light. When possible, judge the action itself favorably. If that is not feasible, you can still judge the person favorably, recognizing that he is a good person with wonderful qualities who had made a mistake.

Which brings us back to the start of this discussion. Can one judge others? The Torah certainly seems to think so - just do so favorably. Is that at odds with the societal demand, "Don't judge me!?" Not necessarily. The message of both ideas is the same. There are times when an action can, indeed, be judged as inappropriate and bad. But that does not mean the person doing that action is also evil. One can judge the perpetrator of the bad behavior favorably, seeing that this person possesses a Divine spark of holiness, waiting to be revealed. By identifying that latent greatness, we are truly judging our fellow righteously, as commanded by Hashem.

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