

Kol Nidre Sermon 5770
Rabbi Fine

Judging For the Good: Seeing the Diamond in the Rough

In the early commentary Seder Eliyahu Rabbah, it is taught that Yom Kippur is a day of great rejoicing for God, a day that God gave to Israel out of His love for us.

The Midrash says, “When God pardons the iniquities of Israel, he is not sad at heart, but rejoices exceedingly, saying to the mountains and the hills, to the springs and the valleys, “Come and rejoice greatly with me, for I am forgiving the iniquities of Israel.”

We are told that God takes joy on Yom Kippur in sweeping away our transgressions like the wind sweeping away the clouds.

According to Rabban Gamliel Yom Kippur is one of the two most joyous days of the year for us as well -- we too can rejoice on Yom Kippur.

But in order to do so we have to be able to come to see one another in a positive light, just as God does.

Maimonides summarized earlier traditions when he wrote the following:

“Teshuvah and Yom Kippur only atone for sins between a person and God; for example, a person who ate a forbidden food, and the like. However, sins between human beings; for example, someone who injures another, curses someone, steals, or the like will never be forgiven until he gives his fellow what he owes him and appeases him.”

In other words, if there is still judgment hanging in the air tonight, the place it resides is not with God, but with us. God rejoices in judging us favorably on Yom Kippur. The question is will we rejoice in judging one another and our selves favorably?

Tonight I want to speak about the power of human judgment.

I want to share a story with you.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was a rabbi who lived part of his life on the upper Westside in Manhattan, and wrote a tremendous number of melodies that are sung throughout the Jewish world today.

Reb Shlomo as he was known, was not only the rabbi to the members of his synagogue, but was also rabbi to many of the homeless people who lived on the upper west side.

At night he would go out and play guitar for them, talking with them and giving them hope as well as tzedakah.

When he died, hundreds of homeless people gathered at his funeral crying and mourning his death.

One time Reb Shlomo was delivering a noontime lecture to Jewish members of Manhattan's Diamond Dealers' Club, when a man suddenly interrupted him and challenged him belligerently. "Shlomo!" he demanded, "We love your music and your *hasidische meisalach*, your Hasidic stories, are also nice, but there's one thing about you that bothers some of us and which we just can't understand: Why are you always so busy with low-lives and *meshugoyim* – crazy people?"

Shlomo stroked his beard thinking and looking around the room and said, "You know, I'm sure that all of you here today are among the greatest specialists and top authorities in the world when it comes to jewelry. Is that true?" Members of the audience nodded their heads yes. Shlomo continued, "many of you are also probably big experts in diamonds, right?" The audience concurred, that yes, they were experts in diamonds.

And then Shlomo asked, "Did you ever accidentally throw out a million dollar diamond in the garbage can?" Everyone in the room burst out laughing – "Are you crazy, a million dollar diamond in the rough? We'd know in a second what we were holding in our hands?"

Shlomo paused for a moment, surveyed the men thoughtfully, and then said in a quiet voice, "You know my friends, I'll let you in on a secret. I'm also an expert on diamonds. I walk the streets of the world every day and all I see are the most precious diamonds walking past me. Some of them you may have to pick up from the gutter and clean a bit, polish a little. But once you do, my friends, oh how they shine! Truly like the purest, bluest, most perfect gems you'll ever uncover during your own distinguished careers."

"So my friends," Shlomo said, "please try to remember this because it's truly the most important thing you have to know in life. Everyone...everyone...is a diamond in the rough."

If we truly seek full atonement tonight, not only between ourselves and God, but between ourselves and one another, we too must take Reb Shlomo's message to heart.

In the Mishna we have a section called Pirke Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers, which is filled with axiomatic teachings by the early rabbis about how we should live our lives.

In one of these statements, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachiyah says the following:

"Aseh l'cha rav, knei l'cha chaver, v' heve dan et kol Adam b'caf zchut."

Get for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a spiritual friend, and judge every person on the side of merit.”

It is the last part of this teaching that I want to look at more deeply, the call to judge every person on the side of merit

At the basic level, this can be understood to mean that in cases of law, or in daily life, we should presume people are innocent as opposed to guilty.

But there is a deeper spiritual understanding of this idea that I want to share with you.

Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, one of our most psychologically insightful spiritual teachers, understood this statement in Pirke Avot to imply a spiritual practice that is particularly pertinent to us on Yom Kippur.

He said the following:

“Know: a person needs to judge everyone favorably (Pirke Avot 1:6). And even if you have reason to think that person is a totally bad person, it is necessary for you to search and find in him some bit of goodness, some way in which they aren’t a bad person. When you find that bit of goodness and judge a person that way, you genuinely raise him up to the side of merit and help him become a better person....for even someone who seems completely rotten, how is it possible that he does not still possess even a little bit of good? How is it possible that at some time in his life he has not done something good, or some *mitzvah*?...”

Rebbe Nachman tells us that we need to make a spiritual practice of finding the good in other people, even people we generally think are bad people or who bother us.

In this teaching, Rebbe Nachman picks up on the fact that if we translate the Hebrew of Pirke Avot literally, it can mean “judge every person to the side of merit, or onto the side of merit.

He makes the powerful claim that when we look at a person and see the goodness in them, we actually make it realer in the world by reaffirming that part of them.

This is what it means to judge on the side of merit – when we judge someone for the good it has the power to truly bring that person to the side of merit.

I want to share with you another story about Reb Shlomo Carlebach that illustrates this point.

Reb Shlomo traveled a great deal playing concerts all over the world, and wherever he happened to be, he tried to visit local prisoners, whether they were confined in a huge state penitentiary or a small village jail.

In our society prison inmates are among the most abandoned and forlorn people in society.

Rabbi Tzvi Mandel once accompanied Reb Shlomo to a prison in upstate New York where he had been invited by the Jewish chaplain to play a Chanukah concert for the eight Jewish inmates there.

Rabbi Mandel recalls the day as follows:

“The concert was a huge success, and Shlomo made the event into a real Chanukah celebration, but that was only the beginning. When the Chanukah party was over, Shlomo turned to the chaplain, and said, ‘Please...I would like to visit with the rest of the inmates here. Could you get permission?’

“Shlomo went into every cell, where he talked with each inmate and offered them hugs. Then he went into the dining room, into the recreation room, into the kitchen, into every possible nook and cranny of the prison where he was permitted to go, not satisfied until he had ferreted out every prisoner, making certain no one had been overlooked.

“Finally, when he was ready to leave, and we were walking down the hall when a big burly inmate with a scarred, pitted face started running after us. ‘Rabbi, Rabbi,’ he shouted. ‘Please wait.’ We stopped and Shlomo turned to him. ‘Yes, my friend?’ he inquired. The man began to shift in embarrassment, almost as if he regretted his impulsive act, and then, finally gathering the courage, blurted out, ‘I just loved the hug you gave me before! Would you mind giving me another one?’ Shlomo gave him the most radiant smile in the world, and then tenderly enfolded him in his arms. They stood hugging for a long time.”

“Finally, the inmate broke away and heaved the deepest sigh in the world. ‘Oh Rabbi,’ he said. ‘No one, no one, ever hugged me like that before.’ And then tears began to stream down his face.

“‘You know, Rabbi.’ He sobbed in remorse, ‘If only someone would have hugged me like that ten years ago, I surely wouldn’t be here in this prison today.’”

For this man, it was not only after he became a prisoner that people looked at him and judged him negatively. What he was saying was that almost no one had ever looked at him as Reb Shlomo had and saw the good in him. The way people had judged him negatively his whole life was not just a result of his actions, but actually shaped who he became.

This is an extreme example. Most people during their lives are judged by others sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. Likewise, I am not suggesting that each of us is cut out to go to the extremes that Reb Shlomo did in this case.

But the principal holds true for each of us.

Rebbe Nachman's point is that we are constantly judging one another in subtle and not so subtle ways, and that the way we do this effects people in ways we can't even know.

Tonight we need to ask ourselves:

Who are the people you have not yet forgiven this year? Can you find a point of goodness in them, and come to see them with compassion and forgiveness?

Who are we holding grudges against in our hearts? Can we find a bit of good in them? Can we relate to them in a way that will help bring that good aspect of them to light?

And in what ways have we judged others harshly, whom we need to ask for forgiveness?

This practice is important even if there is a basis for our negative judgment of another person.

But it is also important because as human beings we can fall prey to judging others negatively for false reasons.

Discrimination, racism, xenophobia, homophobia – all of the ism's -- can subtly come to shade the lenses through which we see the world.

I want to share a second story about how our ability to keep our vision clear and see the good in others can have a huge impact.

In this case, it is a story I heard a few weeks ago on National Public Radio that moved me deeply.

During World War II, the Nazis occupied Albania and Kosovo and the Jews there faced persecution and death by the Nazis, as they did throughout Europe.

In response to this persecution, a group of Albanian Muslims risked their own lives to save over 2,000 Jews from death.

Photographer Norman Gershman spent five years taking photos and collecting the stories of this remarkable group who were recently honored by the Holocaust Museum in Washington as righteous among the nations.

The rescuers were members of a Shiite sect called the Bektashi.

Mr. Gershman told how at times an entire village became a shelter for Jews who were fleeing the persecution.

There were countless individual acts of courage to save Jewish lives. In one case, a doctor bandaged the face of a Jewish man and hid him from the Nazis, keeping him safe in his infirmary.

Under the Nazi occupation, the foreign minister of Albania was a Bektashi. And he sent out a secret message to all Bektashi saying, “the Jewish children will sleep in the same bed as your children. The Jewish children will eat the same food as your children. The Jewish children will be your family.”

So why did the Bektashi do this? What made them put their own lives on the line to save Jewish lives?

They did it because the Bektashi have an ancient code of honor called Besa that they derive from the Koran that is based on the idea that God dwells in every person.

The spiritual leader of the Bektashi said it as follows:

"We Bektashis see God everywhere in everyone. God is in every pore and every cell, therefore, all are God's children. There cannot be infidels. There cannot be discrimination. If one sees the good face, one is seeing the face of God.

Because this group of Muslims saw the inherent worth of their Jewish neighbors and had the courage to act accordingly, they saved thousands of lives.

How we view others has the power to determine our actions, whether heroic or everyday.

There is a second part to Rebbe Nachman’s teaching about judging for the good that I would be remiss if I didn’t share with you as well tonight.

Rebbe Nachman says the following:

“Likewise, a person needs to find goodness in himself. For we have learned in the past, that a person needs to be very careful to live with joy and to stay away from sadness and depression. Even if a person starts to think about himself and can’t find anything good, he needs to search until he finds something good.... By focusing on the good points of yourself, you can revive yourself and attain joy, and really get closer to being the person you want to be.”

While we often judge others harshly, we are probably even tougher on ourselves.

In what ways are you hard on yourself?

What are the hardest things for you to forgive of yourself?

On Yom Kippur it is not only our job to judge others on the side of merit, but also ourselves.

On Yom Kippur, we ask God and others to forgive us and judge us favorably.

But wouldn't it be chutzpadik to expect God and our companions to find the good in us if we aren't willing to do so our selves? To expect others to forgive us without forgiving ourselves?

Yes, we must do the work during this time of looking honestly at ourselves, but this also needs to include looking honestly at the good.

This does not mean being arrogant and overlooking those parts of ourselves that do need work. It means being honest with ourselves about parts of ourselves that perhaps need to be worked on, while using those positive aspects of ourselves to guide us.

If we take this spiritual practice seriously, 'la'dun et kol Adam b'kaf zchut," to judge every person favorably, then we can join God in rejoicing on Yom Kippur.

Rebbe Nachman, in fact, compares this practice to the making of a melody.

Every time we find a point of goodness in another person, it is like finding a musical note.

He says the following: **“One must search out and gather more and more points of goodness, and in this way, melodies are made. For the origin of melody is in sorting out the good from the ill, and by sorting out and gathering the good points from amid the ill, by means of that, melodies are made.**

“And then one can pray, and sing, and acknowledge God.”

May we each experience the joy in finding the good within ourselves and others this year.

Gmar Chatima Tova.