

“With righteousness shall you judge your fellow.” (19:15)

We judge people all of the time. Interestingly, to become a judge, one must have training. He must have profound knowledge of the law coupled with an acute understanding of people. Yet, we sit in judgment of people – all of the time. We certainly are not qualified for this position. *Chazal* teach us that in addition to its simple meaning, our *pasuk* is teaching us to be *dan l'kaf zchus*, give everyone the benefit of doubt. Regrettably, this does not coincide with human nature. The average person judges people according to his proclivity towards them. *Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita*, cites the *Chazon Ish* in his *Emunah u'Bitachon* who posits that the sign of a great man is to blame himself and to always find merit in his fellow's actions. The *Chafetz Chaim* writes in his *Shemiras HaLashon* that the fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of judging our fellow favorably is dependent upon the *mitzvah* of “loving your fellow as yourself.” One who truly loves his friend will always find a way to advocate his actions.

In his *sefer Asaprah Kevodecha*, *Horav Yitzchak Goldwasser, Shlita*, explains the concept of judging people favorably in the following manner: *Chazal* teach us that one who judges others favorably will himself be judged favorably. They relate an incident that occurred concerning Rabbi Akiva, in which he demonstrated exemplary trust in someone and judged every one of his ambiguous actions favorably. In the end, the man blessed him, saying, “As you judged me favorably, so should Hashem judge you favorably.” This statement begs elucidation. We do not know the real motivation for another's actions. We do not know if they are favorable or not. We are told to judge favorably – regardless of what we might think. Hashem, however, knows. He knows what goes on in someone's mind and what motivates his actions. How does the concept of judging favorably apply to Hashem?

Rav Goldwasser explains that judging favorably does not mean that one looks for a far-out explanation to justify or validate his fellow's actions. To judge favorably means to view the positive, to look for something constructive and productive in every action that our fellow does. Searching for extreme or unconventional excuses is a tangent of this positive way of looking at things. We do not conjure up stories or scenarios; we do not make up excuses. We just look for a favorable way to view someone's actions. Think positive: look positive, and you will see the positive. Thus, Hashem will look positively at our actions. He will not look at the negative, only at that part of our actions that may be deemed worthy and admirable.

Horav Shalom Schwadron, z.l., relates a story that occurred in Yerushalayim during World War I, which illustrates the tragic consequences of not judging people favorably. Furthermore, we derive from the story that it is usually the spectator, the one who originally was not connected to the incident, who will ultimately be held accountable for his malignant view. Indeed, this story is paradigmatic of so many other instances in which we foolishly mix into situations which really do not involve us personally, in which we get carried away for no reason, and for which we will one day have to answer.

During the first World War, *Eretz Yisrael* was, for the most part, poor and underdeveloped, since support from Europe was completely severed. Hunger was a way of life, as people literally starved. Yet, there were some who had incredible good fortune, who were able to raise themselves out of the financial straits that were so common. This story is about one such family whose father was a *mohel*, ritual circumciser, and also well-to-do. In fact, he kept a gold Napoleon in his desk. A gold Napoleon was very valuable, worth enough to feed a family for six months.

One day, the father told his seven-year-old son to take a coin from the desk and buy himself some candy at the grocery store. A few hours later, when the father went to take something from the desk, he noticed to his chagrin that the gold Napoleon was missing. After questioning his son, it became apparent that the child had taken the wrong coin. Instead of taking a simple metal *chirale* (a cheap metal coin), he took the Napoleon.

Now the father was enraged. How could the grocer have taken such advantage of his son? The boy claimed that he gave a coin for the candy and received no change. This was highway robbery! Yet, the father – being a distinguished person – felt it would not behoove him to go to the grocer and accuse him of taking advantage of his little son. This did not prevent the mother from going to the store and heaping accusations and scorn on the grocer, who vehemently denied receiving anything more than a *chirale* from the boy.

As is regrettably part of the Jewish landscape, whenever there is a dispute, especially a loud one, a crowd will gather – and take sides. This incident was no exception. It did not take long for a small crowd of neighbors to become the judges and jury and to find the grocer guilty of stealing. People demanded that the grocer take an oath, but the father of the boy refused to cause the grocer to swear “falsely.” The grocer was humiliated beyond repair. He lost his customers; after all, he was a thief! The *mohel* lost his Napoleon and never believed the grocer’s side of the story. The neighbors who involved themselves in something that was not their business succeeded in destroying a family. Why should anybody have believed the grocer? Perhaps, however, he was telling the truth. Whatever happened to judging people favorably? Regrettably, history has such a way of repeating itself.

The story is not over. Three years after the tragic ending to the episode, the *mohel* received an anonymous letter from a young man. He felt that he had to finally confess the terrible misdeed that he had committed three years previously. He had been overwhelmed with debt, with no visible means of supporting his starving family or paying off his debt. He saw a young boy playing with a gold Napoleon. Imagine, a coin that could pay off his debts and feed his family! He would “borrow” it from the child and pay it back one day. He did just that by convincing the child to exchange his Napoleon for a *chirale* – and the rest is history. Heartbroken, and begging forgiveness for any problems it “may have caused,” he was now repenting and returning the Napoleon.

It seems like a happy ending, but *Rav Shalom* explains that when we analyze the entire scenario, we see that in the end, the story has a bitter ending. By now, the main protagonists had passed on

to their eternal rest. Let us see how they fared when they came before the Heavenly Tribunal. The grocer certainly went to *Gan Eden*. His humiliation and destroyed life earned him his entrance ticket. The *moהל* really did nothing wrong. Indeed, he had refused to allow the grocer to make an oath, “just in case” it would be false. His wife also simply reacted to a situation involving her and her child – personally. Even the young man who “exchanged” the gold Napoleon for a *chirale* can be viewed in a positive light. His family was starving; he had nothing. He was driven to a point that was beyond his control. The only ones who will be prosecuted for this episode are those who “mixed in,” the neighbors who took sides, who immediately blamed the grocer and who ultimately drove his business to the ground. They had no reason whatsoever to involve themselves in this incident. Why did they not judge the grocer favorably? There will always be spectators who involve themselves in areas that are of no concern to them – and they will ultimately pay for it.