

Moshe said to Aharon, “What did these people do to you that you brought a grievous sin upon it?” (32:21)

Rashi interprets Moshe *Rabbeinu's* question as, “How much trouble did they put you through before you felt compelled to make the Golden Calf for them?” *Ramban* disagrees, because such a sin is considered *avodah zarah*, idol worship, which is one of the three cardinal sins for which the law of *yehoreg v'al yaavor*, one should be killed rather than transgress, applies. In other words, regardless of the *yissurim*, painful troubles, to which Aharon might have been subjected, he still did not have license to make the Golden Calf. While it is beyond the scope of this *dvar Torah* to distinguish between *yissurim* and *missah*, death, with regard to the sin of *avodah zarah*, we can derive one powerful lesson from Moshe's question: When one judges the sinful behavior of his fellow (judging, as in preparation to rebuke), he must take into account everything and anything that could have catalyzed the sin.

Horav Gamliel Rabinowitz, Shlita, observes that when we see our fellow acting inappropriately, regardless of the sin, we must first ask ourselves what his reason could be, what mitigating circumstances could have forced him to act in this manner. We must assume that he was not acting with malice; it was not the evil within him that was expressing itself. He must have an underlying reason for his actions. [This neither justifies nor vindicates his actions. A sin is a sin regardless of the underlying excuse, but it is good to know that the individual did not act maliciously.]

Chazal assert (*Pirkei Avos* 1:6), *Hevei dan es kol ha'adam l'kaf z'chus*; “Judge all men favorably.” Most people justify acting the way they do. One does not simply sin because he wants to sin. He has a story. Every person has a pathology. If we were to go back to his past—family, community, education, upbringing, marriage, economics, etc., we will most often discover a compelling (and mitigating) reason for his actions.

Aharon replied to Moshe, “They had already murdered Chur. I was next. I could not allow them to kill us, for this would have created an unpardonable situation.”

The *Sefas Emes* presents a fascinating exposition concerning this *Mishnah*. First and foremost, we are not instructed to ignore a person's actions. It is vital that we criticize constructively, with love and understanding, while being sensitive to the sinner's emotions and (perceived) reasons for acting in such a manner. We must try to understand what would make him act in such a negative manner. The *Sefas Emes* draws this conclusion from the unique vernacular of the *Mishnah*. The *Mishnah* exhorts us to judge “all men” *kol ha'adam*, which actually means, “all of the man.” The whole of the person/all of the man, in this context means that you must give each person the benefit of the doubt. We do not judge one action in isolation, without taking into account the sinner's entire personality, his background and what he has gone through in life. This way we realize that had we been in his place, we might not have acted differently.

Horav Nachman Breslover, zl, offers a powerful thought concerning the obligation to judge others favorably. He teaches that the way we view others actually empowers us. We must search for a positive quality within the person whom we are judging. Within that positive quality, only good exists. If we can find that good and judge him in accordance with it, it is possible to elevate him to the point that the scales of judgment will swing in his favor. Thus, the individual whom we were about to disregard can be saved and brought back, if we take the time to expend the effort to look for that good and judge him based upon that good.

Furthermore, the way we view others can, in turn, become a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Rav Nachman's* teaching applies not only with regard to the way we view others, but, likewise (perhaps especially) the way we look at ourselves. Two types of people render two types of judgment. The first type is quick to vilify others, while simultaneously finding enormous merit in their own actions. Conversely, others are quick to heap praise on the actions of others, while deriding themselves mercilessly. For this reason, *Rav Nachman* underscores the importance of also judging oneself favorably.

One who has difficulty in finding the positive qualities which he possesses will fall prey to depression and melancholy. "Do not listen to the negative voice from within which tries to depress you," declares the *Rebbe*. Surely one has acted properly or performed good things with his life. That is sufficient reason to claim merit and establish a baseline upon which to focus. Once we have discovered the good, the rest is all about focusing on that good. This will ultimately bring us back to Hashem, Who is waiting for our return.

An elegant wedding was celebrated at one of the more exclusive halls in Yerushalayim. The assembled guests knew the *chassan's* family quite well, as fine, upstanding – but economically challenged – people. They were frequently borrowing or requesting assistance, simply to put food on the table. Therefore, the guests were quite surprised to witness the luxury and opulence of this wedding. It was not as if the *kallah's* side had any money either. As is common when people congregate and have nothing better to do, some of the guests began to gossip, wondering how a family of "*shnorrers*," who usually requested charity, could have the temerity to incur such exorbitant expenses to marry off their son. When the *Rav* of the community heard the slander based upon rumors, he felt that he had an obligation to reveal the truth about the wedding.

Shortly before the wedding, the father had searched for a hall large enough for the wedding. He was about to make his first wedding and felt it prudent to invite the community. After all, without the constant support of the community, he would not be here now. He was in for a shock when he discovered that weddings are not given away for free. A caterer must earn a living. He went to the first hotel in which his son could get married and was prepared to sign a contract. As he was inquiring about prices, the woman who owned the hall burst into tears. She wept profusely after discovering the identity of the *chassan's* father.

A few moments elapsed and, after she gathered herself together, she explained to the puzzled

father why she had reacted in the manner that she did: “Your father (the chassan’s grandfather) helped my family escape Germany during the second world war. If not for him, we would not be here today. I insist that your son’s wedding be celebrated in this hotel and that I assume all the expenses for the wedding.” This is how people who were otherwise destitute were able to have a lavish wedding. A story always has two sides.

After reading this story, one might say that it is best not to talk, because we never know how, why, where they had the money to make such a wedding. The flipside is, why would they be so thoughtless as to make such a wedding and feed the slander mongers their daily rumor? They should have known better. People – even good people – when they see a poor man living in luxury will question his sanity and integrity. Why give them the opportunity to speak negatively?

To judge favorably is an expression of deep love. We care about the person and want to see him happy and empowered. This is how it should be. We pray for the day when this is how it will be.