

ROSH HASHANAH 5769 – First Day
Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett
Temple Beth Abraham

On Being Judgmental

One spring evening a few years ago, I was walking out of our apartment building in Queens when I passed a neighbor sitting by the walkway ramp. He was smoking a cigarette, and I was surprised. He was not just any neighbor – I was the rabbi at his wedding, and the sponsor of his wife’s conversion to Judaism before that. He’s not an old friend, or my closest, but we lived in the same building and he is someone I’d spent many hours with in deep conversations about life, his work, family. Over the years we have known each other, I have always thought of him as reflective and deep beyond the norm.

So I said a brief “hello” and hurried along down the block. And I caught myself thinking the following stream of thoughts: He smokes? That’s foolish. I thought he was smart. I can’t believe it. He has a little baby! He has to take care of himself. He’s younger than me, I guess he’s not as mature as I thought, otherwise how could he make such a foolish decision.

The next thought I had was about myself: Man, am I judgmental!

So I was doubly surprised – surprised at my friend, and rather startled at myself. I mean, that was some flow of criticism that gushed out almost instantaneously in my mind, so much and so fast. Am I really that judgmental?

I hadn’t really thought of myself that way, but apparently I am, at least some of the time. As I started to turn this little incident over in my mind, though, I flashed back to a series of conversations I had back one summer while I was in rabbinical school. In 1994 I was an intern at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in Manhattan in the clinical-pastoral education program. The method there was to throw us into the hospital wards, where we would walk into patients’ rooms and introduce ourselves, invite conversation, and see what happened next.

One of my first days on my assigned unit, I walked into a room and found in the far bed a young man hospitalized for an acute crisis of sickle-cell anemia. We exchanged a couple of words, and he seemed uninterested in talking. As I got to the door, he asked me a question. “Do you think God punishes us” or something like that. I turned around and went back in, asked him what he thought, and off we went.

For the next four or five days, I visited this man regularly. He was African-American, probably a few years older than me. On the third day he showed me a manuscript he had been working on – would you believe it, a story about a girl who was the child of black and Jewish parents, university professors as I recall. Her name was Liberty. The story was written out in longhand. The man told me about his health, jobs he had and had lost, and about drinking and womanizing. I probed some, I showed interest, I listened. He had fears about the sickle cell disease and its effect on his employment, his ability to keep a stable life and make good choices for himself. I tried to be understanding and encouraging.

Each of us in the chaplaincy seminar would present a case at our regular meetings, and we would get feedback from peers and supervisors. I wrote up my conversations with this particular patient for my verbatim presentation. It was early in the summer, and I was one of the last in my group to make an initial presentation. Most of those who had gone before had been ripped apart, gently by the group then not so gently by the supervisors. That’s another story. Anyway, I felt pretty good about the report I was going to share about the conversations I was having with this particular man.

Apparently, I was the only one.

My group seemed uncomfortable with my responses to this man who, as they saw it, had allowed his disease to excuse a series of sins, not only against himself but against others. Finally, Reverend Lawrence, the head of the program, captured what the group was saying and what he thought I had done with this patient. He said, “You are blessing the battleship.”

His kavvanah -- his meaning -- was this: I was giving my blessing not only to the man, but to the destructive path he would obviously be continuing after his discharge from the hospital. I was sending him off to do more of the same, this time with the *hekhsher* of the chaplain (*hekhsher* wasn’t

Reverend Lawrence's word, of course). I was too captivated by the conversation, by the interesting interethnic manuscript; I responded to his humanity but in the process led the patient to think I had no problem with the womanizing and the self-destructive drinking. That's what Reverend Lawrence suggested, at any rate, and he taught from my case presentation that our role as chaplains entailed not surrendering our judgment. As I look back, judgment was a pretty big word with him.

So maybe I am not so judgmental after all.

Actually, I suspect that I am, and that we all are – and really the issue is what does it mean to be judgmental? How and in what ways might it be all right to be judgmental? That's what I want to explore.

Laurie and I lived moved here just a couple months ago. Not long ago, we were living in New York, in the same community for eleven years. So as you can imagine, I have had an exquisite laboratory in which to observe myself in the process of forming impressions about other people. Since we got here, I've met at least a couple hundred of you in person, adults in the congregation, plus about 100 children and teens. There are professional colleagues in the community and in Boston, not to mention some new neighbors. That might be 400 first impressions to digest in a very short time. Then there's our baby, who is still pretty new, and forming a picture of who she is – happy or crabby, easy or difficult. And of course, those 400 first impressions go the other way too. I try to remember that although I know myself for a long time, you're just meeting me, and I try to see myself through your eyes, as you met me and form an impression for the first time. And these judgments matter – our sense of community and my professional role are bound up with my relationships with you.

I've become more keenly aware than ever of the trap exemplified by Eli the Kohen, who we read about in this morning's haftarah. This professional holy man, keeper of the shrine at Shiloh where the Ark of the Covenant was kept, saw a woman there mouthing words silently and took her for a drunk, rather than a soul in heartfelt prayer. Apparently seeing a Jew praying spontaneously in shul was pretty rare in his experience! Eli the priest seems to exemplify a phenomenon that social psychologists document. When we see odd or questionable behavior in others, we quickly assume some kind of negative personal qualities in the other person. When it comes to our own bad acts, we attribute them to extenuating circumstances.

I catch myself doing what Eli does from time to time, but I've learned at least to notice and to try and start over. I'm understanding more and more two teachings that appear in the first chapter of Pirkei Avot, advice the sages of the Mishnah gave to each other in their role as professional judges. According to the first mishnah in Avot, the Anshei Knesset Hagedolah, the men of the Great Assembly who returned from exile in Babylonia, taught: *hevu metunim badin*. You may recognize that last word, *din*, which means judgment.

This statement *hevu metunim badin* I have usually understood to mean: be moderate and measured in the judgments you make. Avoid extreme characterizations. It's a kind of golden mean, an ideal *middat hadin* to operate from, like God's own Attribute of Judgment. Let your first judgment be careful, moderate, considered. The word *matun* carries that connotation of moderation in modern Hebrew. It's the way politicians or voters are characterized if they are middle of the road, centrist.

There is another interpretation of that word *matun*, the adjective that is supposed to characterize our judgments. In Hebrew, *l'hamtin* means to wait. Often in Israel you see it above a line for the cashier. Back in the days before the *pelefon*, you used to hear the word when you were on hold making a collect call to the States. If *matun* has that sense, of waiting, or holding, then the teaching could mean something different: Wait to make a judgment. Be *deliberate*.

The two translations for *metunim* yield different teachings. It might be a goal to be moderate in our judgments, to avoid extreme characterizations of people we meet or as we get to know someone better. But I think that's for the long term, maybe the very long term. More realistic is to teach ourselves to wait, to delay making a judgment until more facts are in. If you work in an office and a colleague responds to a question curtly, don't rush to judge him rude or difficult to work with – maybe something else is preoccupying him. Wait for more information, weigh more encounters, don't come to a hard and fast view of someone new just yet.

Or, thinking of my friend smoking at the curb, the same advice applies to someone you know well already. I had no idea whether that cigarette was a regular habit or not, whether he's cut down from two packs to one, whether something stressful had just happened upstairs. Don't be so fast to judge.

Don't be so fast to *change* your judgment of someone you already know, just because you see something different about them one time.

A bit later in the same chapter of Pirkei Avot, Yehoshua ben Perachiah teaches: *aseh lcha rav unkneh lcha chaver, v'heve dan et kol adam l'chaf zechut*. The first part of the teaching is famous and quoted often all over the place – arrange for yourself a teacher, acquire a study partner, a *chavrusa*. But the last part deserves to be equally memorable: *v'heve dan et kol adam l'chaf zechut* – judge every person on the positive side of the balance. The image in Hebrew is the scale of justice, and the injunction is to put a finger on the side of innocence, of favor, of a positive assessment.

I like the image because it recognizes that from the outset, our judgments always include both sides of the scale. It's not just a matter of first impressions. Probably it's even more true of people who are deeply in our lives. We are continually collecting weight for both sides of the scale. We know our family members well enough to pile the bricks to weigh down the critical side. With longer friendships comes the same thing. Bosses and coworkers, it's even more understood. The Mishnah here acknowledges that even in our most important relationships, there is plenty that we want to put on the side of guilt, criticism, or just plain annoyance. Nonetheless, says Yehoshua ben Perachiah – put something extra on the other side. I think that's the picture he has in mind – don't ignore what weighs negative, but add something to the positive.

Some of you may have read Malcolm Gladwell's book a few years ago called *Blink*. It was a fascinating essay on the nature of judgments we make, often without even being aware that we are doing it. Often, he says, our most meaty judgments about something new are made in the first couple of seconds, and they don't involve the parts of the brain that articulate what we are thinking. We read facial cues and judge moods. We attribute personality characteristics based on a face, or a look. A single word we read or hear can convince us that someone is in a good or bad mood, and we adjust our own behavior accordingly and unconsciously. Often, Gladwell notes, our first hunch about how genuine someone is acting is pretty good.

Blink was really about the fact that we come neurologically wired to make judgments about people, snap judgments at that. It's the installed hardware, and it doesn't unplug. Sometimes those judgments are good ones. But, as Gladwell noted in his book, the instant response is always based on a

simplification about people in general, a stereotype. We have to be on guard, to notice our quick judgments, and to figure out when it pays to judge quickly and when to judge more deliberately.

And that is the gist of the second teaching from Pirkei Avot -- *v'heve dan et kol adam l'chaf zechut* – judge every person on the positive side of the balance. If the instant judgment is critical, notice that, and make a conscious effort to adjust toward the more cheering side of the scale of judgment.

I learned that big-time in my last job. I had a colleague who loved to kvetch, I mean really loved to. But she was a brilliant teacher and mentor for our students, and I saw that it paid to let her blow off steam even when I thought the complaints were over the top – because then she would become thoughtful, and give the good advice. I had another colleague who would sit in meetings and claim there is no conceivable meeting he would ever want to be at, and he could never take yes for an answer. He seemed to revel in being on the outside, he was the very embodiment of Groucho Marx's statement about never wanting to belong to any club that would have him for a member. But he was supportive and appreciative, unfailingly interesting, and never rushed away when I asked him a question one on one. Even now I write him when I need a resource or a text I don't think anyone else would have.

It's not an easy or static process, this judging *l'chaf zechut*, adding to the positive. Sometimes you can't add to the plus side without knocking loose a brick on the critical side, right onto your head or your foot. Keeping the proper balance, or the proper level of imbalance *lchaf zechut*, to the side of favor – it's hard, since there is always something on the minus side. I still think of Reverend Lawrence telling me that I don't judge enough. He's the pushback against Pirkei Avot.

What did the head of the chaplaincy program want from me? I don't think he wanted me to tell a man off as he lay in pain in a hospital bed. And I know he didn't want me just to sit and smile politely. What he wanted, though he wouldn't have put it quite this way, was for me to engage in the mitzvah of *tochacha*, of communicating in a way that's both caring and judgmental. That's in today's reading, where Avraham reproves the Philistine king for letting his servants steal Avraham's well. The command of the Torah is *lo tisna et achicha bilvavecha, hocheach tochiach et*

amitecha. Do not hate your kinsman in your heart, but criticize him directly and loyally.

I have come to understand this mitzvah as the counterpart to teshuvah, as the part we play in one another's teshuvah. One way to show contempt is by not judging – by not stepping up to a responsibility to express a judgment. Reverend Lawrence might say: You didn't really take the young man seriously as a person because you pretended that there is nothing to judge and open a conversation about.

I'm not sure how far that goes. There is probably some kind of statute of limitations. Just as we are expected to ask forgiveness three times, and then give up, maybe we can criticize or be judgment three times and then our duty is done. Maybe less.

When we find ourselves muttering judgments under our breath on the sidewalk, there are a few choices. There's *lashon hara* – kvetch and gossip to someone else – not endorsed by the rabbinic authorities.

Another option is always *lisno et achicha bilvavecha*, to complain about someone inside your head and harbor that silently. That's never a stable situation. That's leaves *tochacha* – honest conversation about something worth judging and changing. Or judging carefully to begin with, deliberately and with extra favor.

In the Musaf service we will soon move into, we encounter the most famous image of the high holiday season. It is God, seated on the *Kisei Hadin*, the throne of judgment, reading a book about each of our lives, written in our own hand. I relate to the metaphor having been for so many years a classroom teacher with a gradebook. We talk in education about “assessment” rather than “judgment”, though the grades teachers give are certainly perceived as judgments! And the point is to make assessments based on standards that really matter, and based on the best evidence of learning and performance. When my gradebook is too thin, not filled with enough data, or if the tests and assignments weren't worthwhile, the judgments will be suspect, whether I give an A or a D. Under those conditions, the students won't accept a critical judgement, and they won't be confident that a positive judgment is worth anything.

God's gradebook is not like that. What makes God a good judge, if we buy into the image, is a combination – sensible standards, and all possible information about every aspect of our lives, of the life we have each lived the past year.

We have to remember that none of us has a book that good on the other people in our lives. Our understanding is always partial – better or worse, but never as complete, always filtered through our own eyes, not quite written in the hand of our spouse, our child or parent, our coworker or boss or friend. Can we judge? We should, and we do. How? By following the advice of the Sages, about judging slowly, carefully, and paying attention to both sides of the scale.

And even God has to remember that there are two thrones. We ask in our liturgy for God to get up from the *kisei hadin*, the throne of Judgment, and move over to the *kisei harachamim*, the throne of Mercy. These two seats are always around, whenever we are with people, whether we're making an acquaintance for a first time or after decades living together. There is a time to sit in each seat, but at this time of year may we, like the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, the Blessed Holy One, make the extra effort to find our way toward the throne of compassion.