

And judge every person in a favorable light. (1:6)

וְהוֹי דִּן אֶת כָּל הָאָדָם לְכַף זְכוּת.

HILLEL:

Do not judge your comrade until you have come into his place (2:5)

וְאַל תִּדְיִן אֶת חֲבֵרְךָ עַד שֶׁתִּגִּיעַ לְמִקוֹמוֹ.

Judge every person in a favorable light. The Hebrew is literally, “Be judging every person to the pan of merit”—the pan of merit or innocence being one of the two pans in the scales of justice. A number of stories in *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* and the Talmud make clear what this means: we should try to construct interpretations of events that are favorable to the people involved and charitably interpret their intentions.

Does this rule mean that we always should judge everyone favorably? Maimonides wouldn’t go so far. In his commentary on this mishnah, he distinguishes three cases: If we don’t know a person’s reputation, we should judge him or her favorably. When we know the person has a good reputation, we should give him or her the benefit of the doubt, even if an action of his or hers looks bad. However, if the person has a bad reputation, we should not trust him or her to do right, even if his or her actions look good.

This principle of judging charitably is so fundamental in Rabbinic Judaism that it is included in the list of things “the fruit of which one eats in this world and the principal remains in the world to come” (SHAB 127a). This means that we gain a reward in this world, and not only in the world to come—as is thought to be the time of reward for most good deeds.

MODERN LIFE

THE PRINCIPLE of judging charitably has become still more important in modern life. In the modern world we have much more flexibility in defining our roles in the relationships of husband and wife, parent and child, and boss and subordinate. This flexibility opens up opportunities for more effective cooperation and better relationships, but it also means that the fundamental conditions of our relationships are open to change. This makes discussions of how responsibilities are to be divided and carried out emotionally charged for both parties.

We humans are nervous and cantankerous creatures, quick to become suspicious and to blame when anything goes wrong. This ever-present human tendency can and does easily sabotage relationships that could otherwise be happy and productive. Responding out of anxiety in this way has two damaging aspects. The first is that it renders our own thinking primitive and limited; instead of seeking better solutions, we begin thinking only in terms of dichotomies—fight or flight, friend or enemy, good or bad. The second damaging effect of suspicion is that attacking or criticizing the other person in a relationship raises his or her anxiety and defensiveness, so that he or she tends to return blame and to do the same kind of simplistic thinking, instead of problem-solving and seeking more effective ways to cooperate on common goals.

If we follow this mishnah, it breaks this negative spiral of fear, mistrust, and the ensuing communication breakdown. It first moves us to empathy, so even if our assessment of the other person in a relationship with us is not entirely favorable, it still opens the way to engaging in cooperative efforts to solve problems, instead of practicing mutual blame and recrimination.

Do not judge your comrade. *Haver*, here translated as “comrade,” can also mean “friend” or “colleague.” One interpretation of this saying is that we should not make judgments at all. For how can anyone ever fully put himself or herself in the place of another person? This would be a misinterpretation, however. For Hillel, in fact, acted as a judge, and we have already read the injunction to be careful in judging in *Avot* (1:1b). What is Hillel asking us to do, then? He is saying that when it is appropriate for us to judge another person, we should try to imagine ourselves in his or her place, and see the situation through his or her eyes, and only then come to a judgment. Ideally, this involves actually listening to the other person’s account of events.

MODERN LIFE

PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH has confirmed that the ability to imagine ourselves in another person’s situation is a key to developing compassionate feelings for others. A revealing example of failure to have compassion is the case of men who beat their wives to control them. They lack a sympathetic understanding of the suffering they are causing. And, interestingly, they themselves were often cruelly beaten as children,

but did not see their own suffering as abusive. In other words, without making a conscious decision about it, they have accepted the viewpoint of the abusive parent who lacked compassion for them. Psychologist Steven Stosny has found that, remarkably, when taught to put themselves in the place of others, abusive husbands actually are able to learn compassion and stop their abuse. Sympathetic understanding creates a transformative experience.

Hillel's injunction indicates that judging others fairly is difficult and something that we should be reluctant to attempt. However, there are circumstances in which it is important to make judgments of others' characters: rebuking to prevent wrong, in keeping with the Torah's commandment (LEV 19:17); avoiding association with the wicked (*Avot* 1:7); protecting ourselves from harm; and doing our duty as a judge or juror in a court of law.

Why are failures of empathy so widespread? Psychologist Alfred Adler observed that when we divide "us" and "them," and label "them" as "enemy," we dangerously excuse ourselves from having compassion. Stosney has similarly noted that anger drives out compassion. When we are in the grip of anger, we think of fight or flight, not of trying to understand the other person, or even of how best to serve our own goals and fulfill our obligations. The combination of unchecked alienation and anger causes a great deal of human folly and cruelty.

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