

## **From Yom Ha-Din To Yom Ha-Rachamim**

### ***Moving From Judgment to Compassion***

I have always been a rule follower. For better or for worse, ever since I can remember, I have tried to be responsible, and live life according to a moral and ethical code. God knows that I am not perfect. God knows that I, like everyone else, make mistakes, break rules, and don't always do the right thing. But at the same time, I was the kid who, when sent by my mother to wash my own mouth out with soap as a child, actually did it- *without* anyone watching me.

I was the kid who had no tolerance, no patience, for the mischief or disrespect or rule breaking that is typical of many teenagers, including my friends. I was always "the good kid." And that is, perhaps, why I find myself feeling quite angry these days. Angry at people who do not seem to want to follow rules during these challenging times. Angry at people who, with no medical background, think they know better than medical professionals. Angry at parents who are putting my children at risk, your children and grandchildren, at risk. Angry at politicians who seem to care more about power than about doing what is right, more about politics than about rule number one: "do no harm." There was a recent article in the NY Times by

Paul Krugman entitled *The silent rage of the responsible*. I am not sure how silent my rage is these days. I am struggling- and I imagine that I am not alone.

Much of this anger comes from my sitting in judgment of others. There is not a day that goes by when I don't struggle with this generally, and as it relates to the pandemic. I find myself continually judging others for their decisions- about masking, about vaccinations, and even about dining choices or other basic social activities.

Perhaps in some ways my inclination to judge people who think or act differently than I think is right -- especially when considering life and death issues -- is just part of human nature. But this is not just about Covid times. Moving away from the specifics of the unusual time we're in right now, we should consider how many of us sit in judgment of people on a regular basis, even when dealing with small and insignificant issues?

"*She wore that?!"* we think to ourselves (or say out loud!). "*I can't believe he actually said that?!"* we say to a neighbor. "*What is wrong with him?!"* we say to our colleagues at work when we are frustrated with a fellow co-worker. You get the point. Many of us, probably most of us, sit in judgment

day in and day out. We get angry, intolerant, and frustrated- some of us more often than we care to admit. We don't understand why people can't just see things our way. And after all, if we are right, they must be wrong!

Maybe, but maybe not. It is not, as we know, really all that simple. Today is Yom Hadin- the Day of Judgment. But maybe there is such a thing as too much judgment on our part. Maybe we need to remember there is only ONE true judge in this world, and we are not them (point up). And maybe we need to remember that while God stands in judgment of us today, and God created a world filled with judgment, God also created a world filled with compassion. On a theological level, our goal during these Yamim Noraim is to move God from the seat of judgment (*kiseh ha din*) to the seat of mercy and compassion (*kise ha-rachamim*). Perhaps it is time for us to consider moving ourselves in that direction as well. Besides, who likes to be angry all of the time?

Indeed the Jewish ideal is that we are to seek a balance between judgment and compassion in this world. There is a midrash, a rabbinic parable, that explains when God set out to create the world, God had a dilemma concerning just how much justice and judgment the world would demand. Our sages compared this to

A king who had empty glasses. The king said “if I put hot water in them, then they will expand and break, and if I put cold water in them, they will contract and shatter. What did the king do? He mixed hot water with cold water and put them in the glasses.

So too, the Holy One of Blessing said: if I create the world with the attribute of compassion alone, no one would be concerned with the consequences of their actions. With the attribute of judgment alone, how could the world stand? Rather, behold I create both with the attribute of judgment, and the attribute of compassion, and hopefully it will stand.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish tradition and law favors a balanced approach to life, so it’s not surprising that we are taught to balance justice and compassion, to balance our sense of judgment with our sense of love and forgiveness.

I don’t know about you, but these days, my sense is that many of us are not walking through life with that balance. Actually, we are pretty off balance. We are frustrated, angry, and filled with judgment. These days, with so many stressors in our world, with so much tension, with so much uncertainty and fear, it can be hard to put ourselves in a forgiving or compassionate mindset.

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<sup>1</sup> Midrash Genesis Rabbah 12:15

But this is the season, this is the day, to challenge ourselves to be better. To understand our anger and judgment, and to see if we can enter a new year ready to be more forgiving and compassionate.

Although God demands a certain type of just and fair behavior in this world, our sages understood that God did not want us to mistake the sinners for the sin. The Talmud relates that there was once a bunch of hooligans in Rabbi Meir's neighborhood who caused him a great deal of trouble. So Rabbi Meir prayed to God that these hooligans should die. Berurya, his wife, derided him saying: "What are you thinking? The book of Psalms teaches 'Let sins (cha-taim) cease from the land (104:35),' but it doesn't say that the sinners (chotim) should cease to exist. You should instead pray to God that they should repent." Rabbi Meir saw the error of his ways, listened to his wife's advice, and shifted his prayers so that he was no longer asking God to punish them, but rather asking God to forgive them.<sup>2</sup>

We can be angry and frustrated when we see injustice, but we must remember that the perpetrator of that injustice, the person causing our

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<sup>2</sup> Berakhot 10a

anger, the person who we are ready to judge, is still a person. Is still someone made in God's image. Is still worthy of compassion.

In order to do this, in order to take this kind of posture, we must first remember that we are all part of a greater whole that is God's human family.

Writer Rachel Naomi Remen tells of a time that she was once in services prepared for her rabbi to deliver a traditional Yom Kippur sermon that was meant to be about forgiveness. But she was surprised that his sermon took an unexpected turn, and ended up teaching her much more than she had expected or planned.

...the rabbi did not speak about God's forgiveness. Instead, he walked out into the congregation, took his infant daughter from his wife, and carrying her into his arms, stepped up on to the bima. The little girl was perhaps a year old and she was adorable. From her father's arms she smiled at the congregation. Every heart melted. Turning toward her daddy, she patted him on the cheek with her tiny hands. He smiled fondly at her and with his customary dignity began a rather traditional Yom Kippur sermon, talking about the meaning of the holiday.

The baby girl, feeling his attention shift away from her, reached forward and grabbed his nose. Gently he freed himself and continued the sermon. After a few minutes, she took his tie and put it in her

mouth. The entire congregation chuckled. The rabbi rescued his tie and smiled at his child. She put her tiny arms around his neck. Looking out at the congregation over the top of her head, he said, "Think about it. Is there anything she can do that you could not forgive her for?" Throughout the room people began to nod in recognition, thinking perhaps of their own children and grandchildren. Just then, she reached up and grabbed his eyeglasses. Everyone laughed out loud.

Retrieving his eyeglasses and setting them on his nose, the rabbi laughed as well. Still smiling, he waited for silence. When it came, he asked: "And when does that stop? When does it get hard to forgive? At three? At seven? At fourteen? At thirty-five? How old does someone have to be before you forget that everyone is a child of God?"

Remen writes: Back then, God's forgiveness was something easily understandable to me, but personally I found [my own ability to] forgive difficult. I had thought of it as a lowering of standards, rather than a family relationship.

*A lowering of standards, rather than a family relationship.* It is a useful way of framing this because we are all family, aren't we? On a cosmic level, at least according to our Torah, we are all God's children. And on a basic level, we are all somehow connected -- whether we like that at any given moment or not. When our inclination to pass judgement trumps us acting with compassion, it is because we fail to remember that we are a part of a greater whole. It is because we fail to truly internalize, to open our hearts, to recognize that the person in front of us -- the one with whom we are so angry, the one who we *know* is acting irresponsibly, the one with whom

there is no reasoning -- we fail to recognize that this person is a sacred human being who is connected to us. He, she, they, like us, are but one puzzle piece in God's puzzle of life. Albert Einstein explained this well, when he wrote:

A human being is a part of the whole called by its universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings as something separated from the rest, a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.<sup>3</sup>

When we fail to remember this, when we fail to recognize this, when we fail to demonstrate compassion for the person who is also a child of God- we only end up imprisoning ourselves, trapping ourselves in feelings of anger, frustration and resentment.

"But wait?", we exclaim, exhausted and frustrated... There are people who I just can't forgive, and people I don't think I should forgive. There are people who don't deserve our compassion and forgiveness. We are not ready, able, or willing to let go of our anger when it comes to certain people

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Einstein (Elkins, YK Readings, 101)



and certain circumstances. There are people who have done the wrong thing, period.

And it is true. But as Rabbi Karyn Kedar explains in her book on Forgiveness:

Abandoning the moral high ground does not mean justifying bad behavior. Do not define yourself by what someone else has done or said, but rather define yourself through your own vision of wholeness for you and the world. *When possible, do not stand in judgment. Tip towards compassion.*

She continues:

I stare at this part of the spiritual map all the time, sometimes letting it tip me towards justice, other times toward compassion. But as I learn more about forgiveness, I tend to tip towards compassion. This is not about who is right and who is wrong or what anyone “deserves.” Nor does it deny justice or punishment. We are commanded to pursue a just world. There is nothing easy about compassion in a world that is harsh and that has inflicted wounds upon our hearts. But a world with more compassion would be a lovelier place in which to live. Lovelier. More love. And that’s the point, isn’t it? To generate more love, despite it all.

...Life is short. And it is unexpected. And we live with the choice to be a light in the darkness or not. To concede the moral high ground is to say to life and to ourselves: walk softly, with kindness, and you will follow goodness all the days of your life.<sup>4</sup>

Can we learn to tip towards compassion, even as we remember our mandate to pursue justice? Can we remember that ultimately there is One judge

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<sup>4</sup> Kedar, The Bridge To Forgiveness, 60-61

before whom we all stand on this day of judgment, and that just as we would want that Judge to grace us with us with compassion, so too should we strive to grace one another with compassion?

There is a story in the Talmud about some biblical kings who were so wicked that they were denied entry into the world to come. One such king was Menashe ben Hizkiyahu, who lived in the seventh century BCE and was described as putting to death so many innocent people that he “filled Jerusalem with blood from one end to the other.”<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Judah explains that, although it is true that Menashe was terrible, it is also true that he repented and was deserving of God’s forgiveness. The trouble was that apparently God’s angels did not agree. They wanted him to be punished. And in particular, the angel of justice (*midat ha-din*) tried to block Menashe from getting into the world to come.

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<sup>5</sup> II Kings 21:16

What did God do? *God decided to accept Menashe's repentance, and to dig a type of tunnel into heaven in order to sneak Menashe past this strict angel.*<sup>6</sup>

Was Menashe, this king who had caused so much pain and suffering, deserving of God's forgiveness? Perhaps not. But God forgave him anyway. God allowed compassion and forgiveness to outweigh the anger and frustration displayed by the angels.

Rabbi Bonnie Koppel writes<sup>7</sup> about a workshop that once took place at her synagogue, led by a communications coach and stress management specialist. In this workshop, the specialist, named Krist Dee Doden, taught the synagogue's members to do a particular exercise, one that I'd like us to all do right now.

Close your eyes and picture a person with whom you are frustrated, or angry. A person [who you are judging]. Think about a relationship that is tense right now, but that you would like to heal. Imagine that

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<sup>6</sup> Sanhedrin 102b-103a

<sup>7</sup> Koppel, Love, Kindness, Compassion, [www.americanrabbi.com](http://www.americanrabbi.com)

person in front of you. With your attention on the person, repeat to yourself:

1. "Just like me, this person is seeking some happiness for (his or her) life."
2. "Just like me, this person is trying to avoid suffering in (his or her) life."
3. "Just like me, this person has known sadness, loneliness, and despair."
4. "Just like me, this person is seeking to fill (his or her) needs."
5. "Just like me, this person is learning about life."

Compassion. Kindness. Empathy. Forgiveness. It starts with learning to see the humanity in one another. It starts with letting go of the anger and the *frustration. It starts with **the choice-** to lead a life that is centered upon being kind, instead of upon being right.* Today is Yom Ha Din, the day of Judgment. But it is a day for *God's judgment*, not ours. It is time for us to try and let the anger and the judgment we are feeling go. It is time for us to lead with compassion. It is time for us to forgive. It is time for us to begin again. It is time for us to start with a clean slate.

*Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'chanun, Adonai our God, who is filled with grace and compassion, help us to see the humanity in one another once*

again, ease our pain, help us to limit our judgment, and tip towards compassion. Grant us the wisdom to see one another *as you see us*, as your children, deserving of love, care, and understanding.

*Gmar Hatimah Tovah*- May all of us be sealed in the Book of Life.