



“From Judgement to Understanding”
Rabbi Jeffrey Saxe
Yom Kippur 5774/2013

If you sat in our living room on a typical weekday evening, there are certain phrases you would be likely to hear. Shoshana, although at three and a half she lacks the proper authority, might announce to one of her brothers that he has “lost his iPad time!” She and her two brothers, Aaron and Jonah, who are two, would giggle between pronouncements that Jaimee and I either are or are not, their best friends, and Jonah might tease Shoshie with the statement that she is “not a big girl.” And it’s not just *people* who get zinged and dissed in our house: If I showed you the lock screen on my phone, you would see a picture of Shoshana putting her Minnie Mouse in time out.

Our kids are learning quickly the skill of judging other people. They are learning this because judging, it turns out, is something we grown-ups spend a lot of our time doing. The news asks us to boil people down to one trait: this politician has no self-control, that financier is a thief, or this pop star is promiscuous. As parents, we hear a child crying in the other room, and we have to try to determine whom to blame. As employers, we might find ourselves in the unpleasant position of having to fire people. The truth is we are constantly making quick judgments: which people with whom to entrust our kids or our credit card numbers, with whom to



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do business, with whom to be friends. Judging, whether we want it or not, is a very big part of our lives.

Our prayer book tells us that on Yom Kippur, God judges us for our transgressions. It also tells us that among those transgressions is the act of judging another. How do we make sense of that? If you think about it, it's quite confusing. God judges but expects us not to, like a parent who says one thing and does another. Judgment is necessary: to keep us safe, to uphold the law, and to pursue justice. And yet, it is when we judge other people that we are the most at risk of acting unfairly, unforgivingly, self-righteously and hurtfully. The liturgy for Yom Kippur contains a line, “*Al cheit shechatanu l'fanecha biflilut* for the sin we have committed against you by passing judgment.” The Reform *machzor*, recognizing the complexity of this question, has tried to add some nuance: “The sin we have committed against you by judging without knowing the facts, and by distorting the facts to fit our own theories.” What is Judaism's message for us on this complex question of judgment?

In the bible, we read about a woman named Hannah. Hannah and her husband Elkanah's marriage is strong, but she has no children. Every year they go to the temple for the Sukkot sacrifice and feast. I picture it like a Thanksgiving dinner: Elkanah, his wives, and their families, the



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crowded table, the eating and laughing. But Hannah sits alone. The text even tells us that Elkanah’s second wife, Peninnah, purposely provokes Hannah’s distress. She picks on her for her lack of children, so harshly that Hannah can’t bring herself to eat. Imagine what this must be like for her!

In a moment of desperation, she gets up from the table, walks to the altar, and utters a prayer. Through her tears and her sobbing, she begs for a son and promises to dedicate him to God. She is so upset that her lips are moving but she isn’t making a sound. The priest, whose name is Eli, sees this woman, teetering, shaking and muttering in God’s sacred space, and he rebukes her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!” She turns to him and says, “O no my lord. I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine nor other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to God.” I imagine the shame Eli must feel in this moment – a priest, having insulted a person who was in the midst of a genuine and heartfelt prayer. How could this exchange have been different had Eli withheld his judgment and approached her with comforting words?

Hannah’s story makes me think of all the times we have been wrong because we made a quick judgment about someone else: the taxi driver



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who used to be a student of philosophy, or the homeless person asking for food who turns out to be a war veteran. We think about the people we see on the metro, and we decide who they are without knowing anything about them. Many of us take pride in our ability to assess person within seconds of meeting them. Sometimes we may have to do this, and often we may be right. But the story of Hannah reminds us how much information is buried underneath that snapshot of a person’s life. It teaches us to try to make those judgments with humility, and with an awareness that we could easily be wrong.

It’s sad that there is usually no chance for the kind of conversation that takes place between Hannah and Eli. The moment of judgment is there, and then it is gone. This act can have tragic consequences, as we saw last year when teenager Trayvon Martin was misjudged based on his black skin and the hoodie over his head, and he was killed when a neighborhood watch volunteer thought he didn’t belong. But this is a danger we face on a smaller scale every day. How many people have we misjudged? How many opportunities have we missed, to know someone, to learn from them, or to help them?

This act of judging without knowledge of the facts can be a momentary occurrence, or it can stretch over months and years. A friend



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of mine once told me about some new neighbors she enjoyed meeting. They had a lot in common. She and her husband had this couple over three or four times for dinner, and they laughed and told stories, even played some scrabble. Each time she hoped the invitation would be reciprocated. Finally she gave up, wondering what kind of neighbor expects to have such a one-sided relationship. She grudgingly stopped inviting them over. She resented these people she had thought were friends for being selfish, or perhaps only pretending to enjoy spending time with them. Years later she learned, second-hand, the rest of the story. These neighbors' home situation was strained, to the point that they couldn't talk about it openly. They had a brother living with them who was not well, making it impossible for them to have guests. After hearing this, my friend regretted her quickness of judgment. She was the one who had dropped this budding relationship. When faced with something she didn't understand, she had jumped to a negative conclusion, instead of assuming that there must be a deeper explanation.

Rabbi Maimonides wrote that when judging, we must make an effort to look for the positive qualities in a person. It sounds very simple – like our mothers always taught us, if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all. But Maimonides is telling us more than that: we actually



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have to *find* something nice to say. This is not just about refraining from negative statements. It’s about being proactive and seeking out the good. When someone does something we don’t understand, we ask a question: “Who would do that?” Who would just ignore me, and not return my call? What kind of person would leave their lawn uncut for weeks at a time? Too often, though, we don’t actually look for an answer. The rhetorical question is itself a judgment. What would it be like to find out who that person really is and what made them say that thing, or act in the way they did? While judgment puts up a wall between us and another person, something changes when a relationship is about not judgment but discovery.

My wife Jaimee is a fast-paced, charging-forward kind of person, and she’s always been that way. But she told me about a moment that slowed her down. She used to think people who had an injury, or were held back by pain, were weak. She even had a sneaking suspicion that they were faking it. When she had her first injury, a sprained ankle that took months to heal, she suddenly understood. She’d been lucky until then and had no idea what it felt like to be really hurt, or unable to walk. Now that she knew, she was sorry about the many people she might have failed to be there for, because she had passed judgment on them.



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Hillel tells us in *Pirkei Avot*, “Don’t judge your fellow until you have arrived at his or her place.” This is perhaps the most difficult Jewish teaching on judgment. We think it’s enough to *imagine* how we would behave in another person’s position – what *we* would do if *we* lost our job, how *we* would react to being humiliated or insulted. But according to Hillel, we don’t really know until we’re there. Hillel himself took this teaching to the extreme in his life. He was known to be endlessly patient and unfailingly giving, as if he, the supreme jurist of his time, was in no position to judge another person. I believe Hillel understood that we can never truly arrive at another person’s place, because everyone’s life is different. There is no one who has lived that very same life, and stood at the very same place.

All these teachings about *how* to judge seem to be guiding us *away* from judgment. They are leading us towards something else: the understanding of one’s actions, the sharing of their feelings – in a word, they are leading us towards empathy. Trapped inside our own bodies, our own nervous systems and brains, we *can’t* really feel the emotions and sensations of others. Wrapped up in our own lives, it is impossible to know what it is like to be living someone else’s. True empathy is a lifetime struggle. Nonetheless, we are commanded to try. Through



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empathy we discover each other’s struggles and to learn to accept one another’s faults and transgressions. Empathy brings us closer to each other, and helps us see what we have in common instead of what separates us.

Something changes between Hannah and Eli after Hannah explains herself, and Eli is now aware of what he has done. I can see him at this moment, this tall and powerful High Priest; but his posture towards this small woman has suddenly changed. He is no longer standing over her, looking down as she trembles. He is now on his knees. His hands are reaching for her shoulders. As the text tells us, he offers her a blessing: “Go in peace,” he says, “and may God grant you what you have asked.” Eli is now far from judgment; he feels himself drawn into Hannah’s struggle. In answer to her prayers, Hannah has a son, Samuel, who will eventually become the next prophet of Israel. She brings him to the temple to be Eli’s apprentice, and each year Hannah returns with a beautiful new robe she has woven for him. Eli blesses Hannah and her husband, and they have more children in the years that follow. A special friendship has formed between Eli and Hannah, a friendship built not on the quick snapshot years before, but on the conversation that followed it, not on Eli’s initial



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act of judgment, but on the subsequent nurturing of understanding and empathy.

Let’s follow this example given us in the Torah. We know, like God, we will continue to make judgments, and because we are not perfect, we will often be wrong. But like Eli, let’s be open to correction. As Eli blesses Hannah, let *us* seek blessing, for the stranger, for ourselves, and for the ones we love. When we have nothing nice to say, let’s try harder to find the good. And as Eli walks away from judgment and towards empathy, let’s join each other on that same journey. Let’s go in search of discovery and understanding.