

Judging Generously

Yom Kippur Evening Sermon
Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
October 7, 2011
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Friends, let me begin tonight with a heartfelt *Viddui*. For any way in which I, as your rabbi, may have caused you harm or engendered disappointment in the past year, please know I am sincerely sorry. Where I have failed to express my thanks, where I have not succeeded in conveying concern, know those were sins of execution—not intent. It is an honor to serve as your rabbi, and I will, as ever, strive to be worthy of it.

It's a very daunting task to preach on Yom Kippur. What do you say when the liturgy we will say over the course of these 24 hours or so says it all? If you count up all of the transgressions to which we have and will confess, the list totals just over one hundred *chata'im*, one hundred distinct ways in which we have missed the mark—and I am as guilty as anyone. What we recognize needs improving from our prayerbook is enough to keep us busy for the entirety of the next year and well beyond. So, rather than adding to the list, I'd like to explore one of those all too human errors already in our prayers—one that, without reflection, we may easily overlook.

An essay by a colleague of mine in Los Angeles, Rabbi Howard Weiss, has stayed with me. In it, he describes an incident that happened while he was waiting in his car outside Schwartz's bakery on Fairfax Avenue. While his wife finished shopping for Shabbat dinner, he saw a man that he had known for some time, but as he writes:

That was the first time I saw him do it. As I watched the crowd go by, my attention was drawn to a poorly dressed young woman pushing an old shopping cart, filled with bundles of rags, paper bags, and whatever else goes into living hand to mouth. A small child sat cushioned in the cart, and another kid walked alongside her. Passengers in poverty, I thought.

Coming from the opposite direction was this man whom I recognized. As he passed her, he turned around suddenly and called out something to get her attention. I didn't hear what. When she turned, he pretended to be picking up some money. I could tell that it was green, but how much wasn't meant for me to know. He motioned that she had dropped it, quickly put it in the child's lap, and was gone.

Less than a month later—Weiss continues—I saw that man again. I was waiting at the checkout counter at Ralph's Market. He was standing behind an elderly woman who was counting out her pennies to pay for her milk and bread. He didn't see me, but I saw *him* as he bent down and came up holding a twenty in his hand, all the while saying that the woman had dropped it. She said, No—it wasn't hers. But finally, when urged to take it, she did.

What caught my eye when I read this story was not simply the moving details of a touching act of kindness—though, as Weiss writes, “when anyone is lucky enough to see an act of kindness, it makes for good feelings.” Rather, it was the detail Weiss reserved for the end: You see, though he couldn’t have said why, he had never liked the man... until now.

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha bif'lilut...

For the sin we have committed before You by hasty judgment, forgive us.

Consider this poem by Roger Bush, whose sentiments are all too familiar:

She was pretty and she smiled at the men approaching.
I could see her in profile. A sweet thing, and cheeky, too.
Embarrassed males turned away,
Quickened their pace; looked guilty, some blushed
But undaunted she met with an expectant smile the next,
Only again to be refused.
Soliciting, I thought; a prostitute; in broad daylight;
Until she turned,
And I saw she was selling buttons for charity.

He staggered down the steps and fell, God,
A crumpled mass on the footpath.
His bottle broke and liquid spilled across the walk.
He’s drunk, I thought. Disgust. Disdain. Until...
Two girls rushed from a nearby car and cried;
“It’s Daddy. Please help. He’s ill.”

He caught my gaze. This greedy-eyed young man.
He too had seen the open handbag on the aged arm,
With the few dollars exposed to view.
He stalked the prey, and the old woman just window-shopped.
He’ll grab and run, I thought, but no,
Quietly he tapped her shoulder, pointed to the bag,
Exchanged smiles.
They went on their way.

O God, forgive me.
Why do I always think the worst of Your children?

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha bif'lilut...

For the sin we have committed before You
By hasty judgment
Forgive us, God,
And help us to change.

Why do we make such harsh and hasty judgments? Where we recognize potential, why must it be for the worst? Perhaps personal hurts lead us to limit our vulnerability; unmet expectations guide us to minimize emotional risks. If we assume the worst in people, imagine the most negative outcomes, we might be sad and dismayed, but at least we won't be disappointed. Perhaps our inclination to hastily draw pessimistic conclusions is natural in the climate of the world and its news today. Given the state of global events, there may be no way to refute the destructive power of an individual, the senseless acts of which some are capable. But then I would ask you to reflect upon the insight of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav:

"Im atah meivin she-efshar l'kal'keil, ta'amin she-efshar l'takein.

If you believe that it's possible for a single person to make a difference by being destructive, you have to believe that it's possible for a single person to make a difference by repairing."

We tell ourselves stories all the time—we fill in the gaps, guess at motivation, project feelings. And that's OK, necessary even. But why not tell ourselves a *good* story, then? Why not cast another in the best possible light? We need realize that doing otherwise can have most damaging consequences.

There's a story told of a king who sent a message to another king in the neighboring kingdom. The messenger arrived late and out of breath. He was hastily admitted to the throne room, and he breathed out his message through heavy panting breaths, his face red with the exhaustion of the long trip. "My lord's message to you is that you send him a blue horse with a black tail, and if you don't...."

The messenger stopped to catch his breath, but the king responded at once. "Stop! I will listen no more to your insolent words. Tell your majesty that my answer is: 'I have no horse that answers that description, and if I had....'"

The messenger was shocked by these words of the king, who had up until now been friendly to his monarch. He ran out of the palace, jumped onto his horse and galloped back to his king to report back on what he had been told. When his king heard the answer that his messenger had received, he flew into a rage, and at once declared war on the neighboring kingdom. The war lasted for many months. Thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed. A vast stretch of land was laid waste and enormous sums were squandered.

Finally, both kings—their armies and their money exhausted—agreed to an armistice.

When the two unhappy monarchs sat around the conference table, the first king said to the second: "What did you have in mind when you sent me a message, saying: 'Send me a blue horse with a black tail, or else....'"

"Very simple," he replied. "I requested that you send me a blue horse with a black tail, or else send me a horse of any other color. And as for your reply, what did you mean when you answered that you had no such horse, but if you did have...."

“Very simple. I meant to say: ‘If I did have such a horse, I most certainly would send it to my good friend.’”

“God in heaven!” both of them said in one voice, and they wrote the incident down in their history books, so that—even though each was ashamed of his own share in what had unfolded—the story could serve as a lesson to all future generations that one should not be so quick to anger by carelessly misjudging another’s intent.

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha bif’lilut...

For the sin we have committed before You by hasty judgment, forgive us and grant us atonement.

Looking for positive potential—choosing to see the good and assume the best of others—isn’t just about being optimistic, or naïve, or viewing the world through rose-colored glasses. It’s a challenge to see the world in a special way—the Jewish way. Many of us are familiar with the famous reading, “I Am a Jew,” written by Frenchman Edmund Fleg as *A Letter to an Unborn Grandson* in 1927. The complete poem is found in the Baskin Hagaddah and our *Mishkan Tefila* prayerbook, but one particular line has been quoted repeatedly, again and again appearing in sermons, confirmation speeches, and personal statements of all kinds: “I am a Jew,” it says, “because every place despair cries out, the Jew hopes.” As we read on Rosh Hashanah, “We see imperfection, disorder, and evil all about us. Yet before our eyes is a vision of perfection, order, and goodness.... There is evil enough to break the heart, but also enough good to exalt the soul.”

Yet, sometimes in our hasty judgment we do worse than fail to see the good in others—we fail to even see them at all. It seems like a necessity of today’s fast-paced *modus operandi* that we quicken our evaluations; dismiss complex scenarios with oversimplified assessments. And that can hold true for our treatment of people, as well. In an article published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, cardiologist Blair Grubb describes a night he was on-call in Toledo, Ohio. There were so many admissions that night, he had begun to lose count—and his temper.

As a seasoned intern—Dr. Grubb writes—I had learned well the art of quick, efficient workup. Short-cutting had become a way of life. Morning was coming and, with it, my day off. All I wanted was to be done. My beeper sounded. I answered it. I heard the tired voice of my resident say, “Another hit, some 90-year-old with cancer.” Swearing under my breath, I headed to the room. An elderly man sat quietly in his bed. Acting put upon, I abruptly launched into my programmed litany of questions, not really expecting much in the way of answers. But his voice was clear and full; his answers articulate and concise. In the midst of my memorized review of systems, I asked if he had ever lived or worked outside of the country.

“Yes,” he replied. “I lived in Europe for 7 years after the war.” Surprised by his answer, I inquired if he had been a soldier there.

“No,” he said. “I was a lawyer. I was one of the prosecuting attorneys at the Nuremberg trials.” ...

I blinked. “The Nuremberg trials?” He nodded, stating that he later remained in Europe to help rebuild the German legal system. *Right*, I thought to myself, *some old man’s delusion*. My beeper went off twice. I finished the examination quickly, hurried off to morning sign-out and handed over the beeper.

Officially free, I started out the door—but suddenly paused, remembering the old man, his voice, his eyes. I walked over to a phone and called my brother, a law student, who was taking a course on legal history. I asked him if the man’s name appeared in any of his books. After a few minutes, his voice returned. “Actually, it says here that he was one of the prosecution’s leading attorneys at the Nuremberg trials.”

I don’t remember making my way back to his room—Dr. Grubb writes—but I know I felt humbled, small, and insignificant as I knocked. When he bid me enter, I sat in the very seat I had occupied a short time before and quietly said, “Sir, if you would not mind, I’m off duty now and would very much like to hear about Nuremberg and what you did there. And I apologize for having been so curt with you previously.” [*Al chet shechatanu lifanecha bif’lilut....*] He smiled, staring at me.

“No, I don’t mind,” he said, and for the next four hours, I sat like a child, silent, drinking in every word.

The next morning, when Dr. Grubb returned to the old man’s room, it was empty. He had died during the night. More than two decades later, this doctor still remembers that night and that man. He shares the realization that the beauty and horror of this world are mixed in a way that is sometimes beyond understanding. It is often only by chance that we come to share in the lives of others—lives more complex and mysterious than we can possibly know at first glance. But if we take the time to listen, we see that chance as a true privilege.

Friends, there’s an old saying: “God gave us two eyes to see—the right one to see the good in others, and the left to see the fault in ourselves.”

Al cheit shechatanu lifanecha bif’lilut...

For the sin we have committed before You by hasty judgment, forgive us.

And may we all see just a little better this year.
Amen.