

The Benefit of the Doubt

Parashat Vayyigash 5776

ד וַיֹּאמֶר יוֹסֵף אֶל-אֶחָיו גִּשּׁוּ-נָא
אֵלַי, וַיִּגָּשׁוּ; וַיֹּאמֶר, אֲנִי יוֹסֵף
אֶחֱיָכֶם, אֲשֶׁר-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי,
מִצְרָיִמָּה. Genesis 45:4 And Joseph said unto his brethren:
'Come near to me, I pray you.' And they came
near. And he said: 'I am Joseph your brother,
whom ye sold into Egypt.

ה וְעַתָּה אֶל-תֵּעָצְבוּ, וְאֶל-יִחַר
בְּעֵינֵיכֶם, כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֹתִי,
הֲנֵה: כִּי לְמַחְיָה, שְׁלַחְנִי
אֱלֹהִים לִפְנֵיכֶם. 5 And now be not grieved, nor angry with
yourselves, that ye sold me hither; for God did
send me before you to preserve life.

Leviticus (19:15): "In righteousness shall you judge your fellow"

והוה דן את כל האדם לכף זכות.

Ve'heveh dan et kol ha-adam l'kaf z'chut –

"Judge everyone on the positive side of the scale." (Pirkei Avot 1:6)

The idea is that if there is a person who you don't know and you can't tell whether he/she is righteous or evil and you see him/her doing something or saying something that if it is interpreted one way it is good and in another way, bad, you should interpret it as good and not think of it as bad. However, if the person is known to be righteous and well-known for good deeds and one sees an action that seems bad and the only explanation for it being good is not very plausible, one should explain it as good, since there is such a possibility. Rambam, Peirush HaMishnah, Avot 1:6

"Judge not the other warrior until you have walked in his moccasins." - Native American

"If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kind of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." - To Kill a Mockingbird

DAN L'CHAF ZECHUT: GIVE THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

דן לכף זכות

OVERVIEW

The three words, *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*, mean “judge [others] according to a scale of merit.” But, in order to capture the underlying idea of the Hebrew expression, a more accurate idiomatic meaning would be “give the benefit of the doubt.”

There are some other phrases which expand upon the meaning of these words and help us get a clearer picture of the essence of this *Middah*, such as: judge others favorably (with the scale weighted in their favor); don't rush to judgment; don't jump to conclusions; don't immediately suspect others of wrongdoing (even if the situation seems to warrant it, even if it is easy to assume something improper is going on); be generous in judgment; give people a break; look for the good in others.

Such elaboration just to explain this one virtue! It might be said that if so many words are needed to explain the *Middah*, it can't be that significant. Or, if it were really that important, someone would have invented one strong Hebrew or English word for the virtue, right? After all, we have such succinct, to the point, one-word virtues as hospitality, generosity, mercy, and so on. Well, let's not rush to judgment on this *Middah*. *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* — give the virtue the benefit of the doubt!

This virtue is not obscure. Possibilities for violating it come up all the time. Indeed, how easy it is not to give the benefit of the doubt. Think about all the times in any given day we have the opportunity to make a judgment about

someone? Do we leap at assumptions or jump to conclusions? How good are we at refraining from hasty judgment? Read through the following scenarios which highlight challenges to *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*.

1. You call a friend. The friend is not home, so you leave a message. A few days go by, and your friend doesn't call back. You call again. No answer. You leave another message. When the same thing happens a third time, you begin to feel . . . irritated. Your friend is . . . snubbing you . . . she is rude and inconsiderate . . . after all you've done for her. Sure she's busy; we're all busy. Just give me a call . . . is that too much to ask. Finally, after two weeks, the friend calls. She had been called away suddenly on a family emergency. She just now returned and got your message. She called immediately.

2. A classmate has been out with the flu for almost a week. When he returns to school on Friday, there is a test covering the material studied this week. The classmate goes ahead and takes the test, and gets the best grade in the class. You feel sure he must have cheated — after all, he missed the sessions covered by the test. Later, you find out that the classmate's brother had brought home study material from the teacher. The classmate had studied the material diligently, even while sick, and so was able to do well on the test.

3. Your friend borrows money from you, saying she will pay you back tomorrow or the next day. Tomorrow passes, the next day passes, a week goes by. No money. You assume your friend planned all along not to pay you back.

You suspect your friend is hoping you will just forget about the money. Days later, you're sweeping your front hall near your mail slot. You move the rug aside and find an envelope. It must have been dropped through the mail slot. It no doubt slid under the rug. Inside the envelope is the money from your friend with a note of thanks. Apparently, your friend had come by late in the evening of the day she had borrowed the money from you. She hadn't rung the doorbell because it was so late. She had wanted to repay her debt as soon as possible, so that you would have it back without delay.

4. You're driving a car. The car in front of you swerves for no apparent reason. You slam on your brakes, lean on your horn, shout angrily out the window, and make an insulting gesture toward the other driver. As you pass the car, you see that the driver had swerved because a child, chasing a wayward ball, had run into the street.

How might giving the benefit of the doubt have affected the above scenarios? Opportunities for rejecting or embracing the virtue are all around us. *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*, as a virtue, reflects a general attitude. We may or may not rush to judgment concerning a particular situation. But, more importantly, do we give the benefit of the doubt in general in our interactions with others? Isolated occasions of judging others favorably is not enough. We need to strive to make such mental generosity a regular part of our way of relating to people.

And the virtue isn't limited to relationships with other people. Giving *oneself* the benefit of the doubt, judging *oneself* on the scale of merit also applies. All of us have told ourselves things like: "Oh, I could never learn Chinese; I'm not smart enough." "I have no creative talent." "I don't make efforts socially because I don't think people are that interested in getting to know me." "I'd be a lousy parent." We may have amassed quite a list of such "judgments," all of which

violate the *Middah* of *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*. We need to give ourselves the benefit of the doubt. We might just be smarter, more talented, more likable, more competent than we give ourselves credit for. (Of course, we shouldn't give ourselves too much credit. *Anavah* [humility] is another important trait!)

We usually don't assume we are in the position of judging God on a scale of merit or on any other kind of scale, for that matter. God is beyond being weighed or measured. On the contrary, it is *we* who hope and pray that God will judge *us* on the scale of merit! We think of God as being in the position to judge us. But we do "give the benefit of the doubt" to God by having confidence in God, by having faith and trust in God's justice and mercy.

The concept of judgment is complex and the procedures to achieve it are very involved. This is so in modern society, and this has been the case for millennia. Jewish literature focuses on legal issues (judgment, justice, courts, law, punishment) more than on any other topic. *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* is like a commentary, an ethical gloss on the subject of judgment. The virtue helps temper the potential harshness of judgment, and reign in the temptation to judge too quickly.

Dan L'Chaf Zechut can be applied to complex issues related to judgment, and it can serve us well in our day-to-day lives. Making assumptions can harm us and can harm others; rushing to judgment can destroy reputations and relationships. Our success in mastering *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* is something we may need to check often, as each day places opportunity for judging others before us. How did we respond last time? How will we respond next time? Can we do better?

Not only do we need to master *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* in our relationships with others, we need to attend also to this *Middah* as it relates to ourselves and to God. All three of these focus areas for *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* are summarized below.



BAYN ADAM L'CHAVERO, BETWEEN PEOPLE. Judging *people* on the scale of merit, giving *others* the benefit of the doubt, is the plain meaning of *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*. Are we generous in judgment? Do we tend to see others in the best possible light, judging them as favorably as possible? Do we wait until all the facts are in? Once we can answer yes to all those questions, we will be on our way to mastering the virtue.



BAYN ADAM L'ATZMO, BETWEEN YOU AND YOURSELF. Every person has an enormous potential in many realms of life. Do we really give ourselves credit for our strengths and creativity? Humility may also be a good trait, but false modesty or making excuses for not living up to our best potential are not worthy traits. Judge ourselves favorably; look for the best in ourselves.



BAYN ADAM L'MAKOM, BETWEEN YOU AND GOD. It is not within our purview to judge God. But there are times when we may have doubts about the nature of life and the "fairness" which we witness or experience. To employ this virtue with respect to God means that we reserve judgment, nurture a positive attitude toward life and the workings of nature, have confidence that all will be "fair" in the divine scheme of things, and cultivate trust and faith.

TEXT STUDY

Tanach

A Joseph gives his brothers the benefit of the doubt. Though they sold him into slavery, he takes a wider view of the situation. What the brothers did had a purpose that they could not have known.

Joseph . . . cried out . . . to his brothers. "Do not be worried or angry with yourselves because you sold me into slavery; the purpose was to save life . . . God sent me ahead of you to make sure you survived on earth and to save your lives in a remarkable deliverance." (Genesis 45:1-7)

► What is the benefit of the doubt Joseph gives his brothers? Do Joseph's brothers *deserve* this favorable judgment of their actions? Should you give others the benefit of the doubt even if they don't *deserve* it? Does it seem that Joseph is also giving the benefit of the doubt to God? Explain.

B Hannah is barren and prays to God of her anguish. Eli the priest assumes she is drunk. The Talmud explains that people who falsely suspect others, as Eli did, need to offer apologies, and even blessings. That is, they need to make amends for not giving the benefit of the doubt, for not carrying out *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*.

As [Hannah] kept on praying before the Eternal, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah was praying in her heart. Only her lips moved, but her voice could not be heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" And Hannah replied, "Oh no, my lord! I am a very unhappy woman. I have drunk no wine or other strong drink, but I have been pouring out my heart to the Eternal. Do not take your maidservant for a worthless woman; I have only been speaking all this time out of great anguish and distress." "Then go in peace," said Eli, "and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked . . ." (I Samuel 1:12-17)

From this passage the Talmud posits a teaching which can be applied to daily living.

Then Eli answered and said, "Go in Peace." Rabbi Eleazar said: From this we learn that those who suspect their neighbors of a fault which they have not committed must beg their pardon. And even more, they must bless them, as it says: "And may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked" (I Samuel 1:17). (*Brachot* 31b)

► What did Eli do that showed he was not giving Hannah the benefit of the doubt? How did Hannah react? What does Eli say when he realizes he'd been mistaken in his judgment of Hannah? What lesson does the Talmud see in the interchange between Eli and Hannah? Should Eli have behaved differently toward Hannah? What could Eli have done in order to give her the benefit of the doubt? If you had been in Eli's place, would you have "jumped to conclusions" as quickly?

Rabbinic

A The origin of the actual term "*Dan L'Chaf Zechut*" is from *Pirke Avot* 1:6.

Joshua, son of Perachyah, said: Judge all people on the scale of merit.

► "Judge on the scale of merit" is a literal way of translating *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*. "Give the benefit of the doubt" is more idiomatic. Which translation do you like better, and why?

B There are ways in which we can heighten our willingness to give the benefit of the doubt. Hillel offers some relevant advice.

Hillel said: Judge not your fellow until you have been in that person's place. (*Pirke Avot* 2:5)

► Say you followed Hillel's advice. Would you be more likely to judge others on the scale of merit, to give the benefit of the doubt? Do you yourself follow Hillel's advice? Should you try harder to do so? How might your relationships change with others if you refrained from judging others until you had been in their place? Can you ever really know what another person is going through? If not, how does that impact on the validity of judging others — is it ever fair to jump to conclusions, to make assumptions?

C Moses doubts that the Israelites would believe in God, and he is punished for his suspicions concerning them. Moses learns a lesson about giving the benefit of the doubt.

Resh Lakish said: Those who are suspicious of innocent people will be smitten in their bodies. Thus, when Moses said, "But, behold, they will not believe me" (Exodus 4:1), the Holy One, to whom it was known that they would believe this, said to Moses: "They are believers, children of believers. It is you [Moses] who will end up not believing." And where is the proof that Moses was smitten? The verse "And the Eternal said furthermore unto him: 'Now, put your hand into your bosom.'" And he put his hand into his bosom. And when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous, as white as snow (Exodus 4:6). (*Shabbat* 97a)

► What does Moses say that shows he was not giving the benefit of the doubt? How does God react? Have you ever expressed feelings of doubt similar to those Moses expressed, feelings which judged people unfavorably? What was the result?

D In this story one man is “set up” to be judged unfavorably by his companion. Despite the set-up, the man is judged by his companion with the scale weighted in his favor.

There once was a young girl who had been taken captive. Two saintly individuals went after her to ransom her. One of the men entered a harlot’s house [where the girl was being held]. When he came out, he asked his companion: “Did you suspect me of anything?” The other replied, “Of finding out perhaps for how much money she is being held.” Said the first, “By the Temple service, so it was!” And he added, “Even as you judged me with the scale weighted in my favor, so may the Holy Blessed One judge you with the scale weighted in your favor.” (*Avot d’Rabbi Natan*, chapter 8; also see *Shabbat* 127b for several stories of a similar nature.)

► What is it about the situation that could easily arouse suspicions of impropriety — that could make one think that improper behavior was going on? At the end of this story, why does the man tell his companion, “You judged me with the scale weighted in my favor”? What would you have said if you had been the companion in this story?

Post-Rabbinic

A The Baal Shem Tov makes a connection between a commandment and a virtue.

Said the Besht (Baal Shem Tov): “From the biblical commandment to love your fellow person as yourself [*V’Ahavta le’rayachah kamocha*], we learn the Talmudic virtue to judge your fellow person on the scale of merit [*Dan L’Chaf Zechut*]. Since you always find excuses for your own misdeeds, make excuses

also for your fellow person.” (*Derech Emunah Umaaseh Rav*, Warsaw, 1898, p. 59)

► Do you think judging your fellow person on the scale of merit is *required* in order to fulfill loving your fellow person as yourself? Consider what the Baal Shem Tov says about making excuses for people. Do you agree that making excuses for others should be part of the requirements of *Dan L’Chaf Zechut*?

B The tendency is to think that when you don’t judge others on the scale of merit, you harm those individuals. You might assume such harm is the reason why you should refrain from weighing others’ thoughts, motivations, actions, etc. A Hasidic saying gives us something else to consider.

When you talk to people, do not weigh whether or not their thoughts are clinging steadfastly to God. A soul that weighs suffers harm. (Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs: Hasidic Sayings*, p. 101)

► What reason does this saying give for not weighing whether or not others’ thoughts are clinging steadfastly to God? How might a soul that weighs suffer harm? Do you agree with this saying?

ACTIVITIES

Language Arts



1 (10 minutes) The Overview includes four examples of scenarios in which the benefit of the doubt is not given.

Review those. Then, come up with examples of your own — either from actual experience or made up altogether. In terms of actual experience, you may want to think of the most recent occurrence

of when you did not give someone else the benefit of the doubt. Be sure to discuss how the situation might have been different had *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* been kept in mind.



2 (10-15 minutes) When Eli wrongly suspects Hannah, he has to apologize to her, plus offer her a blessing (see Text Study, Tanach #B). Not giving the benefit of the doubt to someone may result in the need to offer an apology. Eli's apology is short and to the point: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked." (I Samuel 1:17)

Imagine you have harmed someone by not giving the person the benefit of the doubt. Using one of the four scenarios in the Overview, imagine the person you suspected found out about your suspicions. Or, you can come up with your own scenario. Now write a letter of apology to the person for judging him/her unfavorably.

In a group share your letters with each other. Is there a letter you *really* need to write (or that you should have written a long time ago)? It's not too late — write and send that letter as homework!



3 (10 minutes) When we think of *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*, we might get the picture in our mind of something that happens between two people. One person should judge another person favorably. But very often not giving a person the benefit of the doubt becomes contagious. It's called everyone picking on one person. A whole group can bully one individual. One person makes an unfavorable judgment of one other person, and then others join in.

Talk about the above experience. Is it something the group has witnessed? experienced or participated in? Is *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* something that operates in your classroom (or other place of meeting)? Do the people in your community

give each other the benefit of the doubt? Come up with as many reasons as you can as to why *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* should be a rule in your classroom (or other relevant place).



4 (15 minutes) Do we give our public figures the benefit of the doubt? Are they any less deserving of receiving the benefit of the doubt than anyone else? If we vote someone in as president, are we obliged to weigh his/her actions on the scale of merit? What about rich, famous, glamorous movie stars — should we judge them more harshly because of their privileged lifestyle?

Bring in a bunch of different newspapers and magazines. Assign one for each individual or small group to examine and report on. They are to look for how well the newspaper or magazine follows the principle of *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*. Rate the newspaper or magazine on a scale from one (lowest) to ten (highest) in terms of practicing the virtue. Then explain the rating you gave and why it deserves that particular rating.

Hold a discussion. In general, does our culture, through media, give people the benefit of the doubt? *Should* newspapers and magazines give people the benefit of the doubt? That is, should they tilt the scales one way or the other; or neither way (if that's possible)?



5 (10 minutes) It may be clear that giving the benefit of the doubt is a good thing. Even so, you are not supposed to deliberately do things that look suspicious, then trust and expect others will give *you* the benefit of the doubt. There's a Jewish concept called *meirat ayin* (inciting or alerting the eye — that is, other people's eyes). In English, we might say causing others to "raise their eyebrows." In other words, *meirat ayin* suggests avoiding doing things that easily arouse others' suspicions, that look bad. For example, if you claim to be a strictly



kosher person, you shouldn't be seen at the local hog roast, even if you plan to consume only a can of certified kosher Coke. Being seen there surely would raise an eyebrow or two. In Text Study, Rabbinic #D, the man entering the harlot's house knew it looked suspicious (*meirat ayin*). Luckily, for him, despite the fact that it didn't look good, the man's companion still gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Review the above mentioned examples of *meirat ayin*. You also may want to check out the extensive examples given in the Talmud, *Shabbat* 127b. Then, brainstorm examples of *meirat ayin*.

Meirat ayin and *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* are both important principles in Judaism. Do you tend to pay attention to one of these principles more than the other? What most do you need to work on concerning either *meirat ayin* or *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*?



6 (15 minutes) Though Joseph's brothers had treated him wrongly, Joseph eventually is able to judge what happened in a favorable light (see Text Study, Tanach #A). Joseph also gives God the benefit of the doubt.

Everyone has doubts now and then. Even big doubts — concerning major decisions, life directions, relationships, and so on. Write about serious doubts you had at some point in your life. Why did you feel doubtful and how did you deal with the doubts? Then explore the meaning behind the path you eventually took. How did the way you resolved the doubts become revealed to you? Is the meaning of the path you chose (after doubting) still in the process of being revealed to you?



7 (10 minutes) As a variation on #6 above, focus on self-doubts and how you overcame them. Are there ways in which you judge yourself more favorably than you

used to? What do you need to work on now in terms of giving yourself the benefit of the doubt?



8 (15 minutes) Judging another's spiritual worthiness is misguided.

It's not a good idea to weigh whether or not others' thoughts are clinging steadfastly enough to God. Doing so causes harm to your own soul. So we learn from a Hasidic saying (see Text Study, Post-Rabbinic #B). Have you experienced or witnessed harm that has come about because of religious conflicts — because one person judges the other unfavorably in terms of the other's religious observance or commitment?

Religious conflicts of this sort may take place in various contexts, e.g., within the realm of a large Jewish population, like Israel, or within the confines of the local synagogue. Invite a guest to class (or other setting). The person could be an Israeli who has good knowledge of religious conflicts in Israel, or the person could be a representative from your synagogue's Ritual Committee. Begin by sharing with your guest the passage about harm caused by judging others' religiosity (see Text Study, Post-Rabbinic #B). Then ask your guest some questions, such as:

- What conflicts have you experienced or witnessed concerning religious issues?
- What happens when the different parties try to discuss conflicting views?
- Do people who are in disagreement give each other the benefit of the doubt? What results when they don't judge each other favorably?
- Have you seen religious conflicts resolved peaceably? What were they, and how was it done?
- Do you agree with the Hasidic saying?

Visual Art



1 (10 minutes or more) *Dan L'Chaf Zechut* literally means "judge on the scale of merit." What would such a "scale" look like?

Music



1 (15 minutes or more) Music is a great way to communicate an idea.

Try coming up with a song that will explain *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*. For a "story-line" for your song, you may wish to use one of the four scenarios presented in the Overview. Here's an example of lyrics for a song based on the first scenario.

Say you call your friend, on the phone,
Trouble is — nobody's home.
You leave a message on the machine —
Say something nice, never something mean.

You give the benefit of the doubt —
Dan L'Chaf Zechut,
Give the benefit of the doubt.
Next day comes, you call another time,
Two days in a row — that's surely not a crime.

Once again you tell the machine —
"Hi, it's just me,"
But not one calls you back —
To call again would be number three.

Will you give the benefit of the doubt,
Dan L'Chaf Zechut,
Give the benefit of the doubt?

It's been two weeks now,
You're feeling quite distraught,
Your friend just has no manners,
Must never have been taught.

And you've lost it — that benefit of the doubt,
You've ditched it — *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*.

Then, suddenly, while you're sitting,
slumped over, feeling mad,
Your friend phones —
"Sorry I didn't call back;
Guess what happened —
it's really bad."

But you never reveal how you could have —
Given the benefit of the doubt;
Should have — *Dan L'Chaf Zechut*,
Next time — will give the benefit of the doubt.



2 (10 minutes) Movement #4 can be adapted for the category of music.

Instead of using physical bodies to initiate and echo movement, use instruments to initiate and echo sounds.

Once, on Yom Kippur, while walking to synagogue, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak saw a young Jewish man sitting on a porch, eating. "What are you doing?" the rabbi exclaimed. "Surely you must have forgotten that today is Yom Kippur and that Jews are forbidden to eat on this holy Day of Atonement." "No, I haven't forgotten," the young man replied. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak then said, "Oh, well then, I guess you must not be feeling well, and the doctor suggested that you eat." "No, I feel perfectly fine," came the reply. And so it went on. Soon, a number of people had gathered and they were about to denounce this guy who was violating Jewish law in public. But Rabbi Levi Yitzchak turned his eyes to heaven and declared: "Adonai, see what a mensch this young man is. Even at the cost of incriminating himself, he still insists on telling the truth!" Levi Yitzhak had certainly mastered the Jewish virtue of "dan l'chaf zechut."

A man once came to the house of R. Yehoshua looking for lodging. R. Yehoshua fed him and brought him to the attic to sleep. When the guest was upstairs, R. Yehoshua removed the ladder. In the middle of the night, the guest packed up R. Yehoshua's belongings and tried to escape, only to discover, as he plunged to the floor, that the ladder was missing. In the morning, R. Yehoshua found his guest lying injured on the floor and commented to him that he removed the ladder because the guest seemed a little suspicious. (Source: Masechet Derech Eretz Rabbah 5:4)

Judging Others Favorably

Giving people the benefit of the doubt applies to children too. In fact judging our children favorably is the most effective tool for teaching them this powerful commandment by [Sarah Chana Radcliffe, M.Ed., C.Psych.Assoc.](#)

Money is missing from your wallet. Your daughter says "I saw Josh take it out of your wallet." What are your immediate thoughts? Do you first give him the benefit of the doubt – maybe someone came collecting charity, or the paperboy came to be paid, or do you assume the worst?

Judging others favorably is a mitzvah. Instead of jumping to conclusions that your son is the culprit, look for possible positive explanations for the seemingly incorrect behavior.

Since we want others to give us the benefit of the doubt, we should try not to be quick to make negative judgments about our fellow humans and come up with "escape clauses" -- possible, reasonable, favorable explanations for their behavior. The Torah teaches that the way we behave toward others is the way that God will behave toward us.

THE FAIR FAMILY The obligation to judge favorably applies to our children too. In fact, it applies first and foremost to the members of our family circle.

Fulfilling this commandment varies according to who is being judged. There are three categories to consider:

Category 1

The first category concerns a person who has demonstrated a good track record in the behavior that is being judged. For example, we may have a child who has always been honest. Now, at age 12, this child has been caught shoplifting. Since it is the child's first offence, the parent should not think "What a little thief he is!" or "What an ingrate, after all we've done for him!" Don't ignore his excellent track record. In this case, the Torah commands us to judge him favorably -- to search for good, reasonable explanations for his misbehavior, not farfetched excuses.

The parent could think that the child was suffering from undue peer pressure, or he was impulsive and not thinking about the consequences of his actions, or he just forgot to pay for the item, etc.

Positive judgment does not preclude taking action that will help the child to remember not to steal in the future. The parent can certainly create a logical consequence -- having the child write an apology to the store, do some community service, pay back the value of the item.

Category 2

The second category concerns a person who has a mixed track record. The child is generally honest, but who has been known on occasion to do some questionable things -- perhaps he's told small lies sometimes or he has taken small change found in the house without permission. Now he has been found shoplifting.

In this category, we are obligated to make a favorable judgment if it's fairly easy to do. There is no reason for us to assume the worst. Only in cases where it would be very difficult to come up with a positive explanation would we be exempt from judging favorably.

Category 3

If the child has a poor track record in this specific area, let's say he's been caught shoplifting twice before, we are not obligated to try to come up with positive explanations.

Nonetheless, if we choose to try to find a favorable judgment it is considered meritorious on our part.

Seeing the good does not preclude taking steps to discipline our children. Understanding that our son shoplifts because he may be suffering from very low self-esteem, or a biologically based impulse control problem, does not stop us from instituting punishment for this behavior. There is still an enormous



difference between condemning the child as a no-good thief and trying to understand his behavior in the light of personal or physical challenges. <http://www.aish.com/f/p/48899832.html>

A story:

A man came home from work late, tired and irritated to find his five-year-old son waiting for him at the door.

"Daddy, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes sure, what is it?" replied the man.

"Daddy, how much do you make an hour?"

"That's none of your business, why do you ask such a thing?" the man said angrily.

"I just want to know, please tell me, how much do you make an hour?" pleaded the little boy."

"If you must know, I make \$20 an hour."

"Oh," the little boy replied with his head down, looking up, he said,

"Dad, may I please borrow \$10?"

The father was furious.

"If the only reason you asked that is so you can borrow some money to buy a silly toy or some other nonsense, then you march yourself straight to your room, go to bed, and think about why you are being so selfish."

"I work long hours every day and don't have time for such childish behaviour."

The little boy quietly went to his room and shut the door.

The man sat down and started to get even angrier about the little boy's questions. How dare he ask such questions only to get some money? After about an hour or so, he had calmed down, and started to think he may have been a little hard on his son. Maybe there was something he really needed to buy with that \$10, and he really didn't ask for money very often.

The man went to the little boy's room and opened the door.

"Are you asleep, son?" he asked.

"No daddy, I'm awake," replied the boy.

"I've been thinking, maybe I was too hard on you earlier," said the man.

"It's been a long day and I took my aggravation out on you. Here's the \$10 you asked for."

The little boy sat straight up, smiling. "Oh thank you daddy!" he yelled.

Then, reaching under his pillow, he pulled out some crumpled up bills.

The man, seeing that the boy already had money started to get angry again. The little boy slowly counted out his money, then looked up at his father.

"Why do you want more money if you already have some?" the father grumbled.

"Because I didn't have enough, but now I do," the little boy replied.

"Daddy, I have \$20 now, can I buy an hour of your time? Please come home early tomorrow, I would like to have dinner with you."

Unknown author

