

Imagine yourself in a store, where you hear the cries of a child who has thrown himself onto the floor kicking and screaming. Customers turn to stare and comment on the parenting skills of the exasperated and frustrated adult. Is it your inclination to judge harshly? Do you shake your head and think, “That adult needs some better parenting skills?” Would you conclude, “The adult needs to restrain that child and stop that inappropriate behavior.” Do you simply leave the store?

Or can we give parents the benefit of the doubt? Can we ask ourselves instead, “What difficult factors may be contributing to this outburst? I wonder if the child has been up all night with an illness. Are there circumstances that contribute to the child having tantrums? Could something difficult have occurred recently in that family’s life, possibly a great loss?¹”

The Jewish value of giving others the benefit of the doubt, called *kaf zechut*, is hard. It’s particularly hard to pause and give others the benefit of the doubt especially when you’re angry.

But one of the most beautiful things about the notion of *kaf zechut* – of giving the benefit of the doubt... is that it is a tool for precisely those difficult moments. The full phrase in the *Mishnah* is “*v’havei dan et kol adam lekaf zechut*,” which translates literally to, “and judge the ENTIRE person as though he has merit.” The entire person...

Kaf zechut “is the ability and willingness of an individual to look beyond the superficial externalities of another person’s conduct and attempt to understand the essence of what is going on.²”

Kaf zechut is not easy and it’s not situational. Rather, it’s a character trait we all need to develop.... Giving the benefit of the doubt is a spiritual discipline. It takes practice. We all slip up, especially with those we care deeply about.

¹ (Michelle Princenthal- Mussar Institute)

² chizukshaya.com

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that we might condemn someone for doing the exact same thing we ourselves have done. A perfect example of this is in the Book of Samuel: King David had an affair and impregnated Batsheva, a married woman, and, to cover up the crime, sent her husband to be killed in the front lines of battle. God sent Nathan to David with a fictitious story for David to judge. “There were two men, one rich and the other poor.² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³ but the poor man had nothing except one little lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ “Now a traveler came to the rich man, hungry looking for food. The rich man took the lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the traveler.”

⁵ David burned with anger against rich man and condemned his behavior. The story, of course, was David judging his own actions. David, with many wives, had stolen Bathsheba.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that only when one can look at someone else doing exactly what he himself did and pass judgment can he realize what he himself did. “The fashion in which man judges his friends is in reality the way in which he is judged from heaven.” This is the reason we are taught to judge everyone favorably because we may be judging ourselves.³

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, author and current scholar-in-residence at Temple Emanuel in San Francisco, tells a story of being called to jury duty. Not only was he selected; he was also appointed jury foreman. He describes this experience as the toughest discussion group he has ever led.

The defendant, was indicted for trafficking cocaine. The police raided the pigsty where he lived, hoping to make a big drug bust. But there was just the defendant and a friend, wrecked out of their minds. Beneath one of the cushions where they were sitting was a bag with 15 grams of coke. The defendant had 31 cents. Was he guilty of trafficking?

³ (midreshetamit.org Dan Lechaf Zechut by Tami Leibman)

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The jury was split. Rabbi Kushner felt the weight of his ordination certificate on his shoulders. The *smicha* we receive reads, “*yoreh yoreh*, this one is fit to teach, “*yadin yadin*” this one is fit to judge... but as he explains, we are “equally bullish on forgiveness. We have no concept of three strikes and you’re out. Seeking and receiving forgiveness is always possible, even up to the moment of death.” As the foreman and rabbi, Kushner taught, not all “giving” is giving.

For example, as you’re leaving my house, I say, ‘Here, I’d like you to have this bottle of expensive Scotch. Take it home; it’s yours.’ This means I gave it to you. But, if during a similar visit, I offer you a shot of whisky and you accept, I didn’t give it to you. I shared it with you. The young man was found guilty of possession but not guilty of trafficking and sentenced to time served.

Rabbi Kushner knew his job in this instance was to judge, but he also embodied *kaf zechut*, giving the benefit of the doubt, even to someone he couldn’t relate to at all. We need to be able to give *kaf zechut* to those we love most and those we can’t relate to at all.

Practicing *kaf kechut* takes great fortitude, because it takes a hard look in the mirror. I know many of us struggle with this concept. How do we work through our own emotional baggage, so that we can give others the benefit of the doubt? That is exactly the struggle: if we were not constantly judging ourselves, we would not constantly be judging others.

Most sermons rabbis give, are for us. I need to hear what I am saying even more than you. Years ago when R. George accidentally read a section I was assigned during HHD, I was furious, literally, furious that he had intentionally stolen my reading. I didn’t afford him even an ounce of *kaf zechut*. I can look back and laugh at how silly it sounds, (we make these mistakes while leading all the time and they are never intentional) but then it felt so real. A young, female rabbi trying to be legitimate, feeling silenced. Cantor David thought I had lost all of my marbles- to be upset about this while actively repenting!

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Sometimes we put people into camps, those that can only do wrong, and those that can do no wrong. Both are dangerous. The question to ask our selves is why?

Why can some people (typically not our spouses or family) do no wrong? What is it about them, or those relationships?

And then we all have certain people, or periods of time with people, that we never give the benefit of the doubt to... Why? What did they do? How do we get back on track?- Its an interesting question to ponder.

I actively work at taking a step back and giving everyone the benefit of the doubt. It's a work in progress, it's hard because it also takes a lot of introspection.

Conversely, I too sometimes feel condemned unjustly. I get upset that others don't afford me the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes we are in a hurry, sometimes we move fast and skip process, sometimes we need to use the restroom, and we cant smile all the time... trust me that its never personal, or intentional. The world would be an easier happier place if we could find it in ourselves to give others *kaf zechut* in our personal relationships. (especially those we put in the "always wrong camp")

As a society we practice *kaf zechut* every day...take the use of Uber or Airbnb... these new forms of commerce would not be plausible if we weren't willing to give others the benefit of the doubt. You could not ever rent your home out to strangers without giving them the benefit of the doubt, the assumption that they are not going to steal or burn the house to the ground. You couldn't get into an Uber or Lyft without putting your trust in others. I drop my son off at school every day, and I drive on public streets. To do these things, I must give those around me the benefit of the doubt. Rabbi Sarah Bassin argues, "Trust in other people – giving them the benefit of the doubt – is essential to our economy. It's also essential to our most intimate relationships."

No matter how terrible we believe the world has become, the majority of people are good! Most people are not out roaming the land looking to steal, murder or cause harm. That is not the natural human tendency. Rather, Judaism teaches us that people are born good and pure, acts of

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theft and assault are the exception. This belief in natural goodness allows us to leave our house, to participate in society and keep the world turning.

As our country has become more polarized, it has become more difficult for people with divergent worldviews, to give each other the benefit of the doubt. But it's actually more important than ever before. We must not demonize those with opposing political views; we must give them *kaf zechut*, they believe their choices are for good and not bad. People are not out to destroy the world, they might be ignorant, and wrong, and not aligned with us... but lets try to give everyone the benefit of the doubt.

What would it be like to assume that other people's intentions were good, that their transgressions were accidental and often based on their own struggles? What would it look like to forgive ourselves for not always being our best? Once we begin to practice *kaf zechut*, to give everyone, including ourselves, the benefit of the doubt, we are able to sympathize rather than criticize, the first step toward a more peaceful world.

Alan Moranis, a contemporary Jewish thought leader in the ethical tradition of *mussar*, translates a medieval philosophy into a contemporary practice. Today I leave you with this powerful tool. Picture the face of the person who irks you – whom you are apt to judge harshly.... And then imagine that person as a baby. Imagine the love his or her parent felt holding the baby for the first time. Imagine who people were before they could ever have the consciousness to go astray. That innocence – that core of purity—is still present in each person. Picture that innocence as you are evaluating others' actions.

May we all be sealed in the Book of Life.