

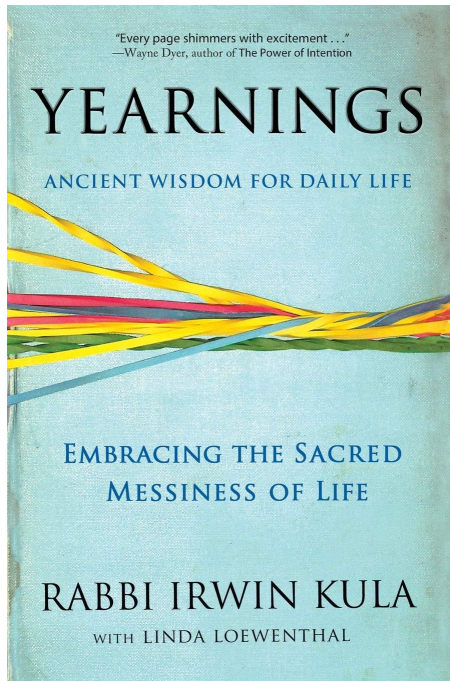
Judging Others and Ourselves



Rosh Hashanah II
5783

Yehudit Samet was asked by a friend for a recommendation for a wedding photographer. She gave her friend the name of a photographer she knew, of whom she always thought quite highly. Her friend said, "I heard he's unreliable. He recently did a bar mitzvah party where he showed up in the middle. The band leader told me about it, he saw it himself. I can't imagine any good reason for a photographer to show up late for something like that. I know things come up for people, but when you're taking pictures at an event, you plan to get there so early that you would be on time even if your car broke down! I would never hire this guy." Yehudit left this conversation feeling rattled. She thought well of this photographer, and this didn't sound like something he would do. But her friend's information seemed so clear. Had she been recommending an unreliable photographer for all these years? Still, something didn't feel right. She called the photographer and asked, "Is it true that you showed up at this celebration halfway through?" "Yes," he said, "I did. Why do you ask?" She explained. He paused for a moment, obviously taken aback, and said. "That bar mitzvah wasn't my job. The photographer they had hired never showed up. I got an emergency call once the event had started. I dropped everything to run over there and help them out!"

Another story.



Rabbi Irwin Kula tells a story in his book *Yearnings* about a teacher who changed his life. When he was in elementary school, Irwin was a challenging student. He was smart and got good grades, but he constantly misbehaved. He would shout out answers, get up and walk out of class when he got bored, and talk to his friends. His teachers tended to assume that he was being rebellious, or that he didn't respect his teachers or classmates. They saw him as a smart kid who didn't take school seriously, and they tended to respond with punishments, sending him to the hallway or even to the principal's office. But one teacher, Rabbi Mordechai Glatzer, had a different approach. In his classroom, Irwin had to sit in the front of the classroom, right next to the teacher's desk. Whenever he would fidget or turn around to talk to a friend, the teacher would come over, and say under his breath, "It's okay, it's okay." And Irwin would calm down.

While some teachers assumed the worst about Irwin, Rabbi Glatzer's approach was different. What was it that allowed him to be more successful in addressing the situations that Irwin was regularly finding himself in?

Rabbi Glatzer didn't just respond to the behavior he saw, and he resisted making assumptions about why Irwin was behaving that way. Instead, he took the time to pause and wonder what Irwin was feeling and needing in that moment. He took the time to become attuned to this specific person in front of him. That pause, that thought that maybe something else was going on, opened up the possibility for him that Irwin didn't misbehave because he **chose** to, he misbehaved because he couldn't help it. He recognized that his student was struggling, and took the time to figure out how to support him. Now, today it is thankfully much more common for teachers to recognize when a child may have trouble focusing or regulating their emotions, and there is much more emphasis in teacher training in learning a variety of ways of supporting students.

Nevertheless, there is something about Rabbi Kula's story that I think we can all find relatable. I'm going to guess that all of us have had the experience of someone else making an assumption about us, an assumption which was not – true. We have all felt that frustration at being misunderstood. And I'm going to guess that each of us have also been on the other side of that story, the side of making assumptions about others without knowing all of the facts.

Every day, every one of us goes through life, and learns incomplete information about the people with whom we interact. And each time, we make assumptions to fill in the gaps in our knowledge, and we do it so quickly we don't even realize we are doing it. Often, our assumptions are correct. But sometimes they're not. There's an ethical principle in Judaism called "dan lekhaif zekhut," judging people favorably. Our tradition calls upon us to make an **active choice** to assume the best about those around us.

A great example of the importance of judging others favorably is from yesterday's Haftarah. Yesterday, we read the story of Hannah, who desperately wanted to have a child. When Hannah entered the tabernacle to pray, she did so with a fervent quiet intensity, rocking back and forth, moving her lips to form words that only she could hear. When the Priest Eli entered the room and saw her, he thought she was drunk. Now Eli could have paused to watch her a bit longer, to try to puzzle out from her actions why she was behaving in such an unusual way. He could have gently spoken to her, perhaps asked her who she was, and what she was doing there. But he didn't. In fact, it was so obvious to Eli that Hannah was drunk that he just went right up to her and told her to leave. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Sober up!" Eli didn't think he was making an assumption– he just thought he was perceiving reality, and acted accordingly. Now, I would suggest that even an intoxicated person deserves more respect than Eli gave Hannah. Nevertheless, Eli clearly would not have acted the way he had, had he understood what was going on.

Of course, Eli has his own back story that we don't know. We don't know if there were some experiences in his life that made him particularly sensitive to suggestions of

drunkenness. Maybe he had close family members who were alcoholics, and had been hurt by them. But we do know that for whatever reason, he jumped to conclusions, and he reacted in a way that was quite hurtful to Hannah.

To his credit, when Hannah tells him she was not drunk, but rather brokenhearted, Eli immediately changes the way he interacts with her. He joins his prayer to hers in asking God to send her a child. He doesn't act defensively, such as by saying "well, you were shaking and mumbling, and usually when people do that, they're drunk." He – accepts – that– he – was – wrong, and, at least as far as Hannah is concerned, changes his behavior.



It is so easy to assume that our interpretation of reality is the real one. And yet, when we have the humility to realize that some of the time, there may be another explanation, then we have the opportunity to let go of the negative feelings inside ourselves and to be more generous of spirit. We might become less angry, more forgiving, and more comfortable with ourselves. And we might then manage to deepen our relationships with those around us.

In discussing the importance of judging others favorably, the Talmud states: "One who judges another favorably is herself judged favorably."

What a profound message. We all want to be seen and understood. One moment we may be judging others, and the next moment others are judging us. We all hope to be recognized, in some deep way, by God and by people, for our best impulses, and for trying to get it right. Being misunderstood hurts deeply, just as being truly seen and understood feels profoundly validating. When Eli recognized his error and joined Hannah in praying for her to have a child, Hannah actually felt better. She had already

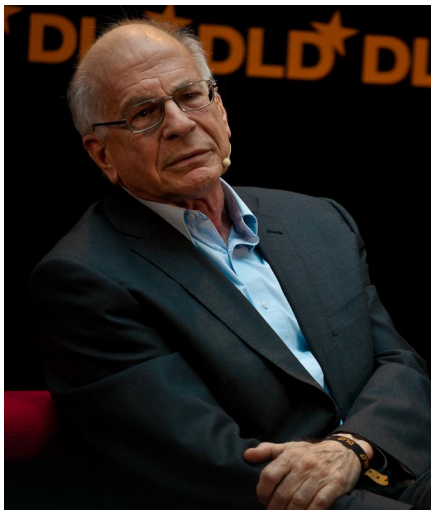
prayed, so her changed mood isn't just about the hope that God had heard her. I think that her changed mood was because Eli, this actual person she had interacted with, had recognized that her behavior, which may have seemed so unusual, was coming from a deep place of pain.

The message to judge others favorably doesn't just apply in cases like the wedding photographer or in cases like Hannah's, when the person was actually doing something praiseworthy. Judging favorably can be important even when somebody in fact does something wrong.

When Irwin Kula was a child, he really was disruptive to the class. But he wasn't doing it out of malice. Judging others favorably sometimes means being open to the idea that people's motivations may be more positive than we realize. We all make mistakes. And when we do, we still want someone to understand how hard we tried. We all let down the people around us, or ourselves, from time to time. And when we do, we all hope that the people around us, and God, won't take our failure as an indicator of our overall character. But before we ask for generosity from others, we can start by cultivating it in ourselves.

What does this look like, to consciously try to judge others favorably? Well, first of all, it may take some imagination. Eli was sure that he knew what a drunk person looked like. It didn't occur to him that he was looking at anything else. Judging Hannah favorably would have meant realizing that not everyone who looks drunk is drunk, and that even drunk people deserve respect. Had he recognized that, he could have opened the door to a question, which would have led to his learning what was really driving her behavior. So too, in the case of the photographer, the facts seemed clear. The photographer really did show up halfway through the celebration. It seemed to the person who heard the story from the bandleader that there was no possible explanation that would justify the photographer's lateness. When Yehudit called the photographer, she didn't really have a clear idea of what could have possibly explained his lateness, but because she was open to the possibility that such an explanation existed, she asked. So the invitation

here is not to be oblivious to our assumptions, but to suspend *judgment* until we learn more. We don't actually need to come up with a full alternative explanation of what happened, but just to recognize that we don't know the full story. When we recognize that we don't know what we don't know, we leave room for ourselves to ask non-accusing questions, questions of curiosity, to help us learn more about the other person or about the situation. You never know what you'll learn, until you ask.



Daniel Kahneman, the Israeli-American Nobel Prize-winning economist and psychologist, writes about how we make decisions. In his book *Thinking Fast and Slow*, he writes about how often we make assumptions with the part of our brain that works in the background, acting so quickly that we aren't conscious of it. That part of our brain is easily influenced by factors that are not actually related to the facts of the situation. One factor that impacts our judgments is what he calls the Halo effect, where we allow first impressions to color every other interaction that we have with a person. As an example, Kahneman explains that he gives his students exams that consist of a number of essay questions, and he tells his students that each essay is given equal weight in determining the grade on the test. At the start of his teaching career, he used to grade his students' exams one student at a time. He would read a full exam, giving each essay a grade, and the final grade would be the average of the grades on all the essays. He felt confident in his ability to grade fairly. At some point, he noticed that typically, students got similar grades for each of their essays. This makes a certain amount of sense— after all, if a student is prepared and skilled, we would expect quality essays across the board, and vice versa. However, Kahneman noticed that when he came across an ambiguous or confusing sentence, he often would assume that if the previous essay had been good, the student must have had the correct answer in mind, and his grade would be more generous. And if the previous essay had been of low quality, and he came across a similarly ambiguous statement, he would assume that the student in fact was not prepared, and grade that

essay more critically. He became worried that he might be basing his grades on his expectation of how each student would do, based on their first essay, and not on what was actually written in front of him.

One day, he decided to try a different method. He instead read all of the first essays, for all of the students, and wrote the grade in the back of the students' exam books. He then read all of the second essays, grading each of those one at a time, and wrote down those grades as well. And he went on this way until he had graded all of the essays on all of the exams. What he discovered was disconcerting to him. Often he would give a particular student wildly different grades on each of their essays! By changing his method, he came to change the grades he gave to his students. As it turned out, his previous method had been much less accurate than he had thought. He had thought he was giving each essay equal weight in his grading, but in fact, the first essay had been more influential than the later ones in determining the student's grade. By grading each essay separately, he was countering the Halo effect, and judging each essay only on its own merit, and not based on the merit of the same students' previous work.

Kahneman's story reminds us how easy it is to be influenced by factors that have nothing to do with the actual facts of a matter. Even someone who spends his life researching how people make decisions needed to consciously change the way he decided on each student's grade so that he would be more likely to assess his students fairly.

This is something that we can all strive for. We may not all be grading essays, but when we interact with the people around us, we can try to cultivate the ability to see people for who they really are, and not who we expect them to be.

Giving the benefit of the doubt can benefit the one who judges at least as much as the person being judged. Having a mindset of curiosity makes us more likely to be able to

build positive relationships with others. Furthermore, assuming the best about others can lead us to have a better feeling about the world as a whole.

Rosh Hashanah is known as the day of Judgment. We imagine that all of our choices, all of our actions, are laid out in front of God. We certainly hope that God will judge us *לְכַף זְכוּת*, generously, with full understanding of the many factors that influenced our decisions and our reactions. And it's not only God by whom we may feel judged. Many of us are our own worst critics. As we attempt to soften our judgments of others, we should not forget to turn that same generosity towards ourselves as well.

May we all be judged, by others, by God, and by ourselves, *lekhaf zekhut*, with generosity, mercy, and understanding. Shanah Tovah.