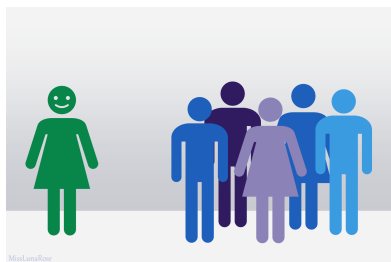


## Seeing Those Around Us - Mishpatim 5783



When Justine Yan was in high school, she didn't feel comfortable in many social situations. She had doubts about her ability to make friends, and so she didn't try. Walking through the halls between classes, she was usually by herself. So when she heard about a special summer program that builds an intentional community, where each of the 20 participants is supposed to acquire not one or two or a few friends, but to become friends with **everyone else**, she decided to try it.

The idea of a community where EVERYONE becomes friends with EVERYONE ELSE may sound preposterous. After all, that's just not how humans work. We need close friends, we need individual relationships, we can't possibly have identical relationships with all of the people in our lives. But at this 6-week program, they had several rules and mechanisms in place that all worked to create this unusual dynamic. The big overarching policy was that **no exclusive relationships were allowed**. Not just romantic relationships, but any relationships. No best friends, no set groups of people that excluded anyone else. When students left campus, it had to be in groups of three or more. The only time that participants were permitted to spend together one on one was when they specifically identified people they didn't feel a connection with, and went on "friend dates" with them, to try and get to know each other better. A dynamic emerged where the whole group of 20 would have long, deep, vulnerable conversations, all together.

Obviously, this environment sounds somewhat forced, and is unlikely to be sustainable over time. But for Justine, those six weeks were a transformative experience. Leaving the program, she felt much more comfortable coming out of her shell, and taking chances in social situations. Having been in a place where she felt socially at ease, she was more able afterwards to feel confident in herself, and to reach out to others.<sup>1</sup>

I'll come back to Justine later. For the moment, I'd like to share a law from Parashat Mishpatim which, at first glance, has nothing to do with Justine.

In chapter 23, God warns judges not to accept a bribe, "for bribery blinds the open-eyed and perverts the words of the innocent." In other words, bribes change our relationship to the person who is bribing us, and therefore may actually impact our perception of reality. A person may think, I can take this money,



<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1037902699>

but I will still judge the case fairly. After all, I am a perceptive, intelligent person, I will still pay attention to all the details, ask all the right questions, and come to the proper conclusions.

The Torah suggests, however, that this may not be true. And of course, social science about bias backs up the Torah on this. We may not be aware of it, but taking the bribe changes the way we perceive the person who gave it to us, and changes the way we may assess the situation.

Now, most of us are not in the habit of taking bribes. We may never have taken a monetary bribe, and if we're here this morning, I'd like to think that we will never take one in the future!!! But, our rabbis suggest that this verse isn't just talking about monetary bribes!!!"

The Talmud says<sup>2</sup> that even small favors, which it calls "verbal bribery," are problematic when accepted by a judge from a party in a case. It gives some mundane-seeming examples. Even the simple acts of giving someone a helping hand out of a boat, removing a feather that floated onto someone's head, or covering up spit on the ground to make sure someone else doesn't step in it, have the potential to influence the way one person sees another, and therefore fall into this category.

Now, this reasoning makes sense, given how easily we can be swayed, and it makes sense that Jewish law would have it that judges, and, I might add, jury members, should never be making decisions regarding people that they know personally. In order for a judge to be impartial, both parties must be on equal footing, and almost any social interaction could provide the opportunity for unfair bias to creep in. Even a tiny favor that a plaintiff or defendant does for a judge has a tinge of self-interest about it.



This dynamic is not limited to judges. A different midrashic tradition points out that Isaac favored his son Esau because Esau used to feed him delicious food.<sup>3</sup> The midrash does a play on words, suggesting that Isaac, who was blind, was blinded by his son's gifts. In this midrash, of course, the word blind is being used metaphorically. I want to point out that blind people can be very astute, and sighted people can be clueless, which the rabbis certainly recognized as well. The midrash suggests, however, that Isaac's challenge was not his physical blindness, but was rather a kind of social blindness, really an inability to accurately perceive.

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<sup>2</sup> Talmud Bavli Ketubot 105b

<sup>3</sup> Bereishit Rabbah 65:7

Because of his preference for Esau, he didn't fully see Esau's flaws, or Jacob's strengths. As a result, he wasn't able to relate fairly to either of his sons.

Now, while I think the midrash has a point, the rabbis can't possibly be saying that Esau shouldn't have made tasty food for his father, can they? What's wrong with doing something nice for another human being? Yes, maybe it would be inappropriate to give a **judge** a helping hand if you are a party to a case that they are deciding, but Esau was doing something nice for his dad. Shouldn't we all give helping hands to those around us, and especially our family members? We're talking about basic acts of kindness, acts that we want to see more of in the world!

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, in writing about this topic, says "Those who are truly open-eyed understand the ways in which we are all potentially influenced by others, and how even small favors color the way in which we behave toward and treat others."<sup>4</sup>



Perhaps the problem here is not that Esau did something nice for his father, assuming that he really did simply make him food because he cared about him and not to get something out of him, but the problem is with Isaac, who allowed himself to overlook one of his sons because of his special feelings for the other.

Let's take this one step further. In a community, inevitably, people form particular friendships. However, part of what is so special about a community is that we have the opportunity, and the responsibility, to look out for each other, even those who aren't our particular friends. We don't have to be friends with everyone, like in Justine Yan's summer program, in order to notice who in our community might use some support, who in our community might be falling through the cracks.



A beautiful practice occurs in Jewish communities when someone is sitting shiva. Everyone in the community is encouraged to come to their house to support them, even people who aren't their friends. We might in other circumstances feel social discomfort about calling up or

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paying a call on someone we don't know very well, but shiva is a time when it is expected that anyone might come to offer support and caring. A rabbi that I know shared that sometimes, people tell him there is no need to send out a bereavement notice about their loss. "My friends," people say, "already know." This rabbi always responds, "Your friends may know, but there are other people who aren't your friends who might want to know as well." It's not just our friends who can buoy us up when we need comfort and support.

Likewise, when someone is ill, we all have the opportunity to bring food, or to visit. You don't have to be a close friend in order to help out. By the way, at Temple Emunah, we can all take part in the mitzvah of bringing food or providing rides to those who can use the help, by volunteering with the Hineni Committee, organized by Jane Aronson, and we can visit folks who are sick or lonely through the Hineni Connecting Team.



In a courtroom, small favors might be a problem. But in community, small acts of kindness are central to our lives, and are things that we should all be doing for each other. Those teachings from the Talmud about the ways that acts of kindness can make us see each other differently remind us that it is important to notice those folks who we aren't paying as much attention to as well. In a community, we have a responsibility to remember that everyone, whoever they are, and however well we know them, deserves care and attention. Shabbat Shalom.