Transforming Attitudes

by Judging Favorably

**INTRODUCTION**

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Vayikra (Leviticus) 19:15

You should not commit a distortion of justice [as a judge in court]. You should not favor the poor, nor honor the great. With righteousness you should judge your fellow.

Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #235

*There is a mitzvah to judge with righteousness … which means treating the litigants fairly and equally …*

Another aspect of this mitzvah is that it is appropriate to judge another’s actions positively, always interpreting other people’s actions and words in a favorable way …

Pirkei Avos 1:6

*Yehoshua ben Perachya says: Establish a rabbi for yourself, acquire a friend, and judge every person favorably.*

Pirkei Avos 2:4

*Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place.*

Pirkei Avos 6:6

*… the Torah is acquired with 48 ways. These are: … (38) judging others favorably…*

**#1 Question: What is your response?**

**Scenario A**

You’re at the local gym getting dressed. You overhear a child say to his father, “Daddy, these pants aren’t mine.” The father responds, “It doesn’t matter. Just put them on and let’s go.”

What do you think about this incident?

**Scenario B**

You are in a classroom waiting for a class to start. Two students are talking. One whispers something to the other, and then they both look at you and continue talking.

Are they talking about you? Is it good? Is it bad?

**Scenario C**

You have a good friend who lives in a different town, to whom you speak on the telephone every Friday while driving home. One Friday you call and there’s no reply, so you try again on Sunday. After leaving three messages during the week, he has not returned your call.

Is he giving you the cold shoulder? Or is his cell phone broken?

**#2 Question: Why judge at all?**

**#3 Questions: Does judging favorably make logical sense?**

**Are we required to be naïve?**

**#4 Question: Are there any benefits to judging favorably?**

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**#5**

**The Torah Law on Judging Favorably**

Judging favorably doesn’t apply to all people equally.

Categories of people:

1. A *tzaddik* [an upright person]: someone who is known to always act correctly in a certain area of Torah law and/or interpersonal relationships.
2. A *rasha* [habitual wrongdoer]: someone who is known to always act incorrectly in a certain area of Torah law and/or interpersonal relationships.
3. An average person: someone who usually doesn’t act negatively, though occasionally it does happen.
4. Someone you don’t know.

The law for each category:

1. A *tzaddik* [an upright person]:
	1. We must always give the *tzaddik* the benefit of the doubt and judge his actions positively, even when they appear negative. This is even if it requires a real stretch of the imagination to justify his behavior.
	2. Furthermore, in the case of a Torah scholar or a person who is truly righteous in all aspects of his life - even if he clearly **did** sin, one should assume that he repented.
2. A *rasha* [habitual wrongdoer]: We must always suspect the *rasha*, even if he appears to be doing something good. This is true even if requires a real stretch of the imagination to interpret his actions as sinful.
3. An average person:
	1. In the case of an average person – where it is equally possible to judge his action positively and negatively – you must judge him positively.
	2. When it is more likely that he acted negatively, but there is a chance that he acted positively, it is praiseworthy, but not required, to give him the benefit of the doubt.
4. Someone you don’t know: If it is unknown to you how he usually acts, it is praiseworthy, but not required, to view him as a righteous person and to give him the benefit of the doubt.

**#6 Question:**

**Is there any connection between the 3 parts of the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos 1:6?**

Pirkei Avos 1:6

*Yehoshua ben Perachya says: Establish a rabbi for yourself, acquire a friend, and judge every person favorably.*

**#7 Question:**

**How would you apply these concepts and your findings to your own life and personality?**