

Judging Others and Judging Ourselves

Shabbat Shuvah 5766: October 8, 2005

Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught:

You have to judge every person generously.

Even if you have reason to think that person is completely wicked,

It's your job to look hard and seek out some bit of goodness,

Someplace in that person where he is not evil.

When you find that bit of goodness

And judge the person that way,

You may really raise her up to goodness.

Treating people this way allows them to be restored,

To come to teshuvah.

This is why the psalmist says:

“Just a little bit more and there will be no wicked one;

You will look at his place and he will not be there” (Ps 37:10).

He tells us to judge one and all so generously,

So much on the good side.

Even if we think they're as sinful as can be.

By looking for that “little bit,”

The place, however small, within them where there is no sin

(and everyone, after all, has such a place)

And by telling them, showing them, that that's who they are,

We can help them change their lives.

Even the person you think (and he agrees!) is completely rotten—

How is it possible that at some time in his life

He has not done some good deed, some mitzvah?

Your job is just to help him look for it, to seek it out,

And then to judge him that way.

Then indeed you will “look at his place”

And find that the wicked one is no longer there—

Not because she has died or disappeared—
But because, with your help, she will no longer be
In the place where you first saw her.
By seeking out that bit of goodness
You allowed her to change,
You helped teshuvah to take its course.

So now, my clever friend,
Now that you know how to treat the wicked
And find some bit of good in them—
Now go do it for yourself as well!
You know what I have taught you:
“Take great care: be happy always!
Stay far, far away from sadness and depression.”
I’ve said it to you more than once.
I know what happens when you start examining yourself.
“No goodness at all,” you find. “Just full of sin.”
Watch out for Old Man Gloom, my friend,
The one who wants to push you down.
This is one of his best tricks.
That’s why I said:
“Now go do it for yourself as well.”
You too must have done some good
For someone, sometime.
Now go look for it!

But you find it and discover that it too is full of holes.
You know yourself too well to be fooled:
“Even the good things I did,” you say,
“Were all for the wrong reasons.
Impure motives! Lousy deeds!”

Then keep digging, I tell you,
Keep digging,
Because somewhere inside that now tarnished-looking mitzvah,
Somewhere within it there was indeed
A little bit of good.
That's all you need to find:
Just the smallest bit: a dot of goodness.
That should be enough to give you back your life,
To bring you back to joy.
By seeking out that little bit
Even in yourself
And judging yourself that way,
You show yourself that that is who you are.
You can change your whole life this way
And bring yourself to teshuvah.
It's that first little dot of goodness
That's the hardest one to find
(Or the hardest to admit you find!)
The next ones will come a little easier,
Each one following another.
And you know what?
These little dots of goodness in yourself—
After a while you will find that you can sing them!
Join them to one another
And they become your niggun, your wordless melody.
You fashion that niggun by rescuing your own good spirit
From all that darkness and depression.
The niggun brings you back to life
And then you can start to pray...

[Likkutei MoHaRaN 1:282, translated by Arthur Green in Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow (Jewish Lights, 2003)]