



## Kol Nidre 5779: Judgment Day

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“Mommy.” My five-year-old son sighed deeply and looked at the box of applesauce cups on the counter. He grabbed both my hands as I tried to make school lunches before work. “My have an idea.” This was always his opening gambit. “I know you need to go to work to make people die, but I really want to go [for ice cream] today.” He smiled and nodded. “So?”

“...Wait wait wait!” I said.

He smiled a kindergarten smile, all gums and no teeth, and kept nodding his head.

“Back up. What do you think I do at work?”

“Make people die so they can go to Heaven,” he said matter-of-factly. “But you can do that tomorrow and today we can go [for ice cream]? Right?”

“For the record,” says Kerry Egan, who is a palliative care chaplain, “I don’t make people die.”<sup>1</sup>

For the record, neither do I. I promise you that if you’re ever sick and I come to see you, I’m not the angel of death. It’s a strange feeling, when you walk in for a friendly visit or to say a prayer, and people recoil as if, instead of a kippa, I’m wearing the grim reaper’s hood. I try not to take it personally.

But, like Egan, when I do get in the room, I often hear the stories of people’s lives. She tells us about one woman she met named Cynthia, and I want to share her story with you:

“I know I’m supposed to hate my body,” Cynthia said... [S]he pushed away her lunch, a brown lump and pile of orange. Her daughter spent a lot of money to have low-fat, no-sodium, no-sugar, low-calorie meals prepared and delivered to the house while she was at work and Cynthia was home alone. They looked like piles of wet rocks.

“I really could die happy if I was allowed just one more bite of caramel cake,” she said with a sigh. “I don’t suppose you have any?”

“No, sorry.” But why are you supposed to hate your body?”

“Well, Kerry!” She looked incredulous that I even asked. Then she laughed. “Because I’m fat!”

Cynthia ran her soft hands over her ponderous breasts and her mounding, cancer-ridden belly. She spilled over the sides of her recliner. “I’ve known that since I was little... Everyone told me – my family, my school, my church. When I got older, magazines and salesgirls and boyfriends... The world’s been telling me for seventy-five

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<sup>1</sup> Kerry Egan, *On Living* (New York, 2016), pp.10-11.



years that my body is bad. First for being female, then for being fat, and then for being sick. I know they think it's terrible." She looked up, and this time tears trembled along her bottom eyelids. "But the one thing I never did understand is, why does everyone else want me to hate my body? Why does it matter to them?"<sup>2</sup>

Tonight, I want to talk about judgment. How often, and how harshly, we judge others. How we hate to be judged ourselves.

*Al tadin et chavercha ad shetagiya limkomo, the rabbis teach us – Do not judge your fellow until you stand in his place.*<sup>3</sup>

The commentators go on to say that this means that no one can really judge anyone else ever, because it is impossible to know how they feel. To live in someone else's body; to know what has shaped them; to see the world through their eyes.

And yet we judge. We judge others when we feel badly about ourselves, because if we're hard on ourselves, why shouldn't we be hard on others too? And we judge others when we feel good about ourselves, because if we're fabulous, if we've made it, what's everybody else's excuse?<sup>4</sup>

*We are so quick to judge.*

The Talmud tells this story of the great sage, Rabbi Elazar:

Once, Rabbi Elazar, son of Rabbi Shimon, came from his rabbi's house, riding on a donkey along the bank of the river. He was very happy, and his head was swollen with pride because he had studied much Torah.

He happened upon an exceedingly ugly person, who said to him: "Greetings to you, my rabbi," but Rabbi Elazar did not return his greeting. Instead, Rabbi Elazar said: "Worthless person, how ugly is that man. Are all the people of your city as ugly as you?" The man replied: "I don't know, but you should go and say to the Craftsman Who made me: How ugly is the vessel You made."

Realizing he had sinned, Rabbi Elazar came down from his donkey and bowed low before the man, saying: "I have sinned against you; forgive me." The man replied: "I will not forgive you until you go to the Craftsman Who made me and say: How ugly is the vessel You made."

Rabbi Elazar walked behind the man, until they reached his city. The people of his city came out to greet Rabbi Elazar, saying: "Greetings to you, my rabbi, my rabbi!" The man

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp.55-56.

<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:4.

<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to Rabbi Lauren Berkun for her teachings on humility, and the impact of our self-perception on our treatment of others. As Kerry Egan notes: "If I am supposed to hate my body, am I supposed to hate yours too? ...What we believe about our bodies affects how we treat other bodies, and how we treat one another's bodies is how we treat one another" (p.60).



said to them: “Who are you calling rabbi?” They said to him: “This man, walking behind you.” He said to them: “If this man is a rabbi, may there not be many like him among the Jewish people.” [They asked him why, and he told them his story.] They said to him: “Even so, forgive him, as he is a great Torah scholar.” He replied: “For your sakes I forgive him, but only if he gets out of the habit of acting in this way.”<sup>5</sup>

Each and every person in the world is made by God and in the image of God. It’s such a profound teaching. Yet how hard it is to learn. We are supposed to wake up every morning and thank God for a body that works and a soul that is pure – and to see others in the same light. It is not that we are perfect. It is that we are worthy nonetheless.

And so I look back to our haftarah reading on Rosh Hashanah, when Eli the priest derides Hannah for being drunk when she’s really just pouring her heart out in prayer, and I think, we are so quick to judge. I look ahead to tomorrow afternoon’s haftarah, with the prophet Jonah and how he doesn’t think the people of Nineveh are worth saving and I think, we are so quick to judge. I read about how, just this past July in Saskatchewan, a First Nations man was pulled over and handcuffed in front of his teenage son, because he had stopped his car to let his son, who has Down Syndrome, pee by the side of the road, and they were called in by a farmer and accused of breaking and entering, and I think, we are so quick to judge.<sup>6</sup> I think about how, in the Jewish community, we simultaneously worry about our shrinking numbers, and yet spend time insulting or invalidating other Jews, and I think, we are so quick to judge. I remember Rabbi Rachel Cowan, a great leader and teacher in the Jewish world who died just before Rosh Hashanah, a Jew-by-choice who was constantly educating others. When someone would say to her, “You don’t look Jewish,” she responded, with barely a pause: “Funny how Jewish looks these days, isn’t it?”<sup>7</sup> And I think, we are so quick to judge. And then I think about the snap judgments I make when I’m walking down my street or someone walks into my office, and I realize, I am so quick to judge.

Alan Morinis, a great teacher of Mussar, Jewish character development, reflects on his own tendency to jump to conclusions. “It wouldn’t be so bad,” he writes, “if only I weren’t wrong so much of the time.”

He gives a series of everyday examples:

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<sup>5</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 20a-b. Notice that the people of the town want to let Rabbi Elazar off the hook – he’s a great scholar, a great leader, they don’t want to give him a hard time. But the ugly man stands his ground. He will only forgive Rabbi Elazar if he commits himself not just to apologizing, but to changing how he acts. There are wonderful insights on this passage in Melinda Jones, “The “Ugly Man’s” Perspective on Judaism and Disability,” *The Times of Israel*, July 17, 2018. <https://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-ugly-mans-perspective-on-judaism-and-disability/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/father-son-pulled-over-bathroom-break-sask-rural-road-1.4733672>

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Jeff Salkin, “The secret wisdom of Rabbi Rachel Cowan,” September 4, 2018. <https://religionnews.com/2018/09/04/rabbi-rachel-cowan/>



You send an e-mail or leave a voicemail asking someone to get back to you, and days go by without a reply. Don't people have family emergencies that take precedence over emails?

Your friend keeps kosher, and you see him coming out of a non-kosher restaurant wiping his hands. Isn't the need for a bathroom sometimes urgent?

You confide in someone and watch as she goes directly to talk to the one person you'd especially like not to know what you just said. Don't people talk about all sorts of things, not necessarily your secrets?"<sup>8</sup>

"But Rabbi," I hear you say. "That's all well and good, but don't we sometimes need to be judged? Not for who we are, not for how we look, but for what we say and do? Isn't the ugly man right to judge Rabbi Elazar, and call him to account? Don't people sometimes neglect getting back to us; break their promises; betray our trust? On this day of all days, don't we need to judge and be judged?"

Hundreds of years ago, our rabbis taught that the world requires both justice and mercy. With only one or the other, we simply could not endure.<sup>9</sup> With only mercy? We would have anarchy. But with only strict justice? We wouldn't be able to stand. In our High Holy Day prayers, we call God our Judge, presiding over the court in which our deeds are told: *This is the Day of Judgment!* But then, we call God our Creator: *You have created us and know who we are, we are but flesh and blood.* The heart of the High Holy Days, as our ancestors imagined it, is in trying to move God from the seat of justice to the seat of mercy.

Now, I read a study this year which suggests that even though most Jews believe in God, very few believe in God as Judge.<sup>10</sup> But I wonder if we are getting it wrong, if we are too quick to judge? If we are too quick to see God like Zeus throwing thunderbolts? What if God is more like the Judge who listens, and tempers judgment with mercy, to help us get back on track? What if, whatever you believe or don't believe about God, we could take that as a model for ourselves?

"The need for apologies and repair is a singularly human one..." Harriet Lerner, family therapist, writes: "We are hardwired to seek justice and fairness... We are also imperfect... We take turns at being the offender and the offended until our very last breath."<sup>11</sup> So yes, we judge; we ask and hope for apologies, and we try to build a just world. But we also need mercy; we have our own apologies to give.

So what can we do?

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<sup>8</sup> Alan Morinis, *With Heart in Mind* (Boston, 2014), p.206.

<sup>9</sup> Genesis Rabbah 12:15.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/most-us-jews-believe-in-god-but-dont-think-he-judges-them/>

<sup>11</sup> Harriet Lerner, *Why Won't You Apologize?* (New York, 2017), p.11.



*Havey dan at kol ha'adam lechaf zechut – Judge every person on the side of merit,*<sup>12</sup> our sages teach. Tilt the balance to assume the good.

Not, “don’t judge at all,” but “judge on the side of merit” or “judge with favour” – give the benefit of the doubt. Back to the Talmud:

Once... someone came down from the Upper Galilee [in the north] and was hired to work for a homeowner in the south for three years. On the eve of Yom Kippur, he said to the homeowner: “Please give me my wages, and I will go feed my wife and children.” The homeowner said to him: “I have no money.” He said to him: “In that case, give me my wages in the form of produce.” He said to him: “I have none.” The worker said: “Give me my wages in the form of land.” The homeowner said: “I have none.” The worker said: “Give me my wages in the form of animals.” He said: “I have none.” The worker said: “Give me cushions and blankets.” He said: “I have none.” The worker slung his tools over his shoulder behind him, and went home, his spirit crushed.

A week later, after Sukkot, the homeowner took the worker’s wages in his hand, along with three donkeys, one carrying food, one carrying drink, and one carrying sweets, and went to the worker’s home. They ate and drank, and the homeowner gave him his wages.<sup>13</sup>

“What did you think of me,” the homeowner asks his worker, “when I told you I couldn’t pay you?” For each refusal, the worker finds a reason, giving the homeowner the benefit of the doubt. As it turns out, each and every one is true – and as soon as those impediments were removed, the homeowner had gone immediately to pay his worker. The story ends with the homeowner saying: “And you, just as you judged with favour, so may God judge you with favour.”

There is another story with the same message, but very short and sweet:

A little girl was holding two apples. Her mother came in and asked her daughter: “Could you please give me one of your apples?” The girl looked up at her mother and quickly took a bite out of each apple. The mother had one of those moments – Did my kid really just do that? But before she could say anything, the little girl handed one of the bitten apples to her mother and said, “I wanted to be sure to give the sweeter one to you.”<sup>14</sup>

How different our lives would look, if we gave each other the benefit of the doubt. Now, of course we need to be careful – there are plenty of employers who short-change their workers, and there certainly are families in which people take advantage. But the stories I shared with

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<sup>12</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:6.

<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 127b.

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from Munira Dhamani, *The Thank You Bell*. Cited in <https://philipchircop.wordpress.com/2016/12/28/the-sweeter-apple/>.



you are ideals, to inspire us to be careful with our judgment – not to judge too quickly, and to give the benefit of the doubt. Just as we would want for ourselves.

Alan Morinis suggests that we keep something in our pocket which is easy to reach for with our hand; something as simple as a pebble or a coin. “When you become aware that judgment is coming into your mind, reach into your pocket to touch what you have placed there. Let that remind you to give the benefit of the doubt.”<sup>15</sup> Whether or not you use an actual pebble, the idea is worth trying. Even if we pause, just for a moment, before passing judgment – even if we take that time to ask ourselves: Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind?<sup>16</sup>

“Things are never only as they appear,” Egan says. “[T]here are always layers to people’s lives, unseen memories under every face, every decision, every movement or lack of movement. There is always gray between the black and white.”<sup>17</sup>

So what sins do I confess, tonight? I confess the sin of judging when I shouldn’t, of thinking I know someone else’s story, before they tell it themselves. I confess the sin of judging harshly, of not extending the benefit of the doubt. The sin of not extending enough kindness, to others and to myself. The sin of not seeing the gray.

I suspect I’m not alone. So this year, let us take these stories with us. This year, let us keep those pebbles in our pockets. May we judge each other with favour, and may God judge us with favour. To this we say: Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Morinis, p.209.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.philpercs.com/2015/05/the-three-gates-of-speech.html> for a discussion of the origins of these questions.

<sup>17</sup> Egan, p.85.