

# JUDGING FAIRLY PART 3

*by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen*

We have thus far discussed three of the four categories of people with regard to the command to judge fairly. The first three were the righteous man, the average man, and the unrighteous man. The fourth category is the stranger, a person whom we do not know and therefore cannot ascertain his level of righteousness. Because we do not know him there is no logical way of judging his actions. Consequently there is no obligation to judge his actions favorably. Nonetheless it is commendable to give him the benefit of the doubt when he does a dubious act. It is always praiseworthy to look for a positive interpretation of the actions of others. Moreover, doing so constitutes a fulfillment of the command to love thy neighbor as yourself: This commandment tells us that we should treat and view others in the same way that we would like to be treated ourselves. We would surely want onlookers to judge our actions in a favorable light.

Last week we mentioned that there are two aspects to judging people - one is to ascertain whether they did a certain action or not. The second is to judge their motives for doing such an action. This applies just as much to a person that we do not know as to a close acquaintance. With regards to the first category we have seen how we are not expected to be naïve and presume everyone is righteous. However, with regard to the second we are expected to avoid passing judgment on the person for what they have done and assume that we are better than them.

This concept is found throughout Jewish thought - we can never be sure who is a better person in the eyes of Hashem. Why is this? The answer is that each person is judged according to the amount of effort he exerts at becoming a better person. One person may have been brought up in a home of righteous people and been given every opportunity to become a righteous person - for him it may be very easy to go through the motions without much effort and attain a high level of righteousness. However, if he has not exerted himself much then he does not receive a great deal of credit for his actions.

In contrast a person who was born in into a family of murderers, for example, will face a much greater challenge to attain any level of righteousness - for him to refrain from killing people is a great test and if he overcomes it then he may be deserving of more reward than his righteous fellow.

Based on this concept it is clear that we can never pass judgment on the behavior of others even if we know that they have committed incorrect actions.

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