

MERITS, MIDDLES AND MAJORITIES

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

"Three books are opened on Rosh HaShana: one for completely wicked people, one for completely righteous people, and one for those in the middle. The completely righteous people are immediately inscribed and sealed for life; the completely wicked people are immediately inscribed and sealed for death. Those in the middle have their judgment suspended until Yom Kippur. If they merit it, they are written for life; if not, they are written for death."

So states the Talmud (Rosh HaShana 16b) regarding the judgment process that occurs on the High Holidays. However, the Rambam describes the process regarding "those in the middle" somewhat differently. He writes (Hil. Teshuva 3:3) that "those in the middle have their judgment suspended until Yom Kippur. If they repent, they are sealed for life, and if not, they are sealed for death." The Rambam specifies the "merit" to which the Talmud refers: repentance.

The difference between the Talmud and the Rambam is not mere semantics. The Rambam is highlighting an important lesson about who we are and how we are viewed by Hashem. To better understand this lesson, however, a basic premise in these passages needs to be explained. The traditional analogy used to describe the judging process (which is in fact employed by the Rambam in his preface to the above cited statement) is the weighing of sins against merits on a scale. Those whose merits outweigh their sins are righteous; those whose sins outweigh their merits are wicked. The "person in the middle," therefore, is the individual who has both sides of his scale equally weighed down, having the same amount of merits and sins. This analogy, if accurate, results in a situation which Rav Itzele M'Petersberg posits should in actuality never occur. If a person exists who actually has the same number of merits and sins, one would think that if Hashem scrutinized the record hard enough, some merit could be found to tip the scale. How does the case of the "person in the middle" exist?

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explains that there is more to the term "person in the middle" than meets the eye. If the judgment scale weighed solely the quantity of merits versus sins, the scale would be in a constant state of flux. With the performance of one mere mitzvah, the scale would tip one way. A moment later, the person could sin, and the balance would shift once again. As Rav Itzele said, the scenario of the "person in the middle" appears highly unlikely. Clearly, there is more being weighed on this scale than pure quantity of merits and transgressions.

The quality, not solely quantity, of the merits and sins are factored into the judgment equation. In fact, Rav Hutner writes, the description of an individual as a person who has "merits in the majority" is

not just a reflection of a balance on a scale; it is a characterization of the type of person being judged. It is at the essence of his being. He is the sort of individual who, as a general rule, performs Mitzvos. He is so dedicated to that way of life that he is termed "a person with merits in the majority." Yet, just as it is possible for someone renowned for his patient, calm demeanor to burst out in a fit of anger, so too it is possible for a "person with merits in the majority" to in actuality have more sins than merits. Obviously, the same is true in reverse for the individual with sins in the majority. Hashem knows the true measure of man, and these factors are balanced on the judgment scale accordingly. Hence, Rav Itzele's "person in the middle" can indeed exist.

So just who is this "person in the middle?" As we now know, he is a person with no attachment to either good or bad. His absence of commitment leaves us lacking a good description for his character. Living life in such a state, while better than being committed to evil, is not what Hashem wants. Hashem can only write people who are "merits in the majority" people in the Book of Life. The mere performance of a mitzvah or two cannot tip the scale, as Hashem is judging the person as a whole, not based solely on numbers of Mitzvos performed. How does this person merit being written for life for the coming year? As the Rambam explicitly states, he must repent. In order to merit being inscribed for a year of life, he needs to change from being a "person in the middle" to a person with merits in the majority. This transformation comes solely through repentance. And with repentance, as the Rambam writes, comes life.

Together with my family, I wish you and yours a G'mar Chasima Tova - May you all be inscribed and sealed for a good year!

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