

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

by Rabbi Label Lam

"Therefore the moshlim (poets/rulers) say, "Come to Cheshbon (calculation)..." (Bamidbar 21:27)

Moshlim: These are those that rule over their inclinations (the righteous). Come to Cheshbon: Come and evaluate the calculation of the world: The cost of a Mitzvah compared to its reward and the benefit of a violation in comparison to its cost. (Tractate Baba Basra 78B)

Why do the righteous invite us to make the "cost-benefit" analysis of life? Isn't it self-evident for any sober observer?

The Path of the Just explains, "Only those that have exited from this prison can see the truth clearly enough to give advice to others. This is comparable to a garden maze which was planted for entertainment... In this kind of garden the hedges are arranged like walls and amongst them are numerous confusing and interconnected paths. The goal is to reach the gazebo in the center of the garden. Some paths lead directly to the gazebo and some deceptively lead a person further away. One who walks along these paths is not able to see or know if he is taking the right or the mistaken path since they all look the same.... One who stands on the gazebo sees all the paths discerning the correct ones from the false ones. He is able to warn those who are walking through them... One who follows his own eyes will remain lost."

He further explains that there are two types of mistakes that people make blundering through the spiritual darkness of this world. In one case a person is completely blind and perceives no danger until it is too late. In another situation the person is partially sighted. He perceives shadows. The second one, like a drunk driver, is more dangerous because he believes he sees reality clearly.

Years back I visited an old friend. He had become a public high school principal in a cosmopolitan city. Upon entering he attacked before any exchange of greetings, "I'm trying to do something for the world! What are you doing?"

I calmly asked him what he was doing. He explained how he shows movies for the purpose of sensitivity training to groups of students from a variety of cultural and racial backgrounds so that each could see how the other feels when they are insulted. I was touched. I asked him if he taught the students that man crawled out of some dark amoebic soup and by the rhythm of pure chance came to be or had G-d breathed a purposeful breath of life into the chest of every human? He said "The former." I asked if he would be more careful pulling out of a tight parking place if he was driving a brand new Infiniti or some old beaten up jalopy. He admitted that he would be more careful if the

car was new. I then wondered aloud how it was possible for one student to have a deeper respect for someone more than he has for himself. If he is some insignificant piece of garbage then how can he have great regard for another who is an accidental swirling mass of electrons? This is the application of the principle, "Love your neighbor as yourself!" He complimented me on my scholarship and the phone rang.

In the pause I espied a charcoal portrait on the wall. It was a Chinese looking face, extremely familiar and from three angles. When he returned I asked who that was on his wall. He told me it was Andy Warhol's trilogy of Mao. I reminded him that Chairman Mao was the greatest mass murderer of all time far beyond Hitler and Stalin. Mao had killed somewhere between 70 and 100 million Chinese.

I told him, "I also have a charcoal portrait on my wall and it depicts Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan the Chofetz Chaim. He dedicated his life to educating about the importance of not speaking or listening to gossip, because that would be tantamount to murder. That's who my children look at and that's who your children view - in triplicate." Pointing to Mao, he declared smugly, "But he made a social revolution!" Only later did the after-shock of that statement hit, and it came from the same intelligent tongue of the one who said, "I'm doing something for the world! What are you doing?" Text Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).