

THE KEY TO CLEMENCY

by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden

We are now in the midst of the most awesome and anxious time of the year, the days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, when our divine judgment hangs in the balance. As adroitly stated in the High Holiday liturgy, G-d determines who is to live and who is not, who is to prosper and who will be impoverished. It is a period when we reflect upon and contemplate our deeds, recharting paths taken in error and bolstering our strengths. We are in the midst of the Ten Days of Repentance.

The Talmud (Tractate Shabbos 133b) expounds on the verse in The Song at the Sea, "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him" (Shemos/Exodus 15:2) that glorification refers to emulating the "character traits" of G-d: just as G-d is compassionate and merciful so, too, should you be compassionate and merciful. In turn, G-d treats us in a fashion commensurate with our treatment of our fellow human beings. If we are forgiving then G-d overlooks our blunders. If we judge people favorably then G-d gives us a second chance. This concept is emphasized in another Talmudic selection in Tractate Shabbos (127b). The Talmud states that one who gives his friend the benefit of the doubt is given the benefit of the doubt when he is judged by G-d. This is perplexing! The all knowing G-d cannot have any doubts, so how can he give us "the benefit of the doubt"?

Rabbi Yissocher Frand, of the Ner Israel Rabbinical College in Baltimore, in a lecture about the mitzvah of judging our fellow Jew favorably and giving the benefit of the doubt, explains this as an issue of "partial credit". When a student takes a written exam, a teacher who is an easy grader looks to see if there are parts of a wrong answer which are correct and gives partial credit on that basis; a strict grader gives no credit if the answer is not completely correct. This is how G-d's "benefit of the doubt" is manifest. When we perform the mitzvos, there are many mitzvos that we do not fulfill as completely as we wish. We may rush through our prayers, not giving them our full concentration and contemplation. Are all of our acts of kindness for wholly selfless reasons? G-d is grading our performance over the past year...we can dictate how we are "marked". If we are generous in our treatment and judgment of others, G-d will give us partial credit; if we are strict in our judgment of others, we may be shocked to find out that many of our mitzvos are graded as "no credit".

And there are times that the impact of the generosity of spirit is felt immediately. During the 1967 Six Day War, much of Jerusalem served as a battleground. An air-raid siren went off in the Bais Yisrael neighborhood and the students of the Mir Yeshiva, which was located a short two blocks from the green line with Jordan, scuttled down to the basement bomb shelter along with many other residents of the neighborhood. The Mir Yeshiva was the only Talmudical academy of pre-World War

Il Europe to survive intact, traveling from Lithuania to Japan, continuing after the War across the Pacific Ocean to the United States, across the United States to New York, and eventually across the Atlantic to Jerusalem. Now, the Yeshiva was once again threatened. The atmosphere was intense. The low murmur of prayer provided the background for occasional cries of panicked inhabitants and muffled explosions of nearby artillery. Amidst the chaos, a woman, abandoned by her husband twenty years earlier without the benefit of receiving her divorce, stood up, looked heavenward and proclaimed, "Dear G-d, I wholeheartedly forgive my husband; please forgive your nation!"

At that moment, shock waves permeated the building. Screams were heard as people were thrown about. The building took a direct hit from a large mortar shell...but it did not detonate. It left a gaping hole in the wall of the edifice, but the structure remained solid. Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, Dean of the Seminary, who led them from the ashes of Europe to the glory of Jerusalem, declared, "This institution was not saved in the merit of our countless hours of Torah study; it was not saved in the merit of our sincere prayers. We were saved because of the strength of character of this elderly woman, who after 20 years of anguish and grief found the fortitude for her selfless act of forgiveness." According to Rabbi Shmulevitz, a man who had a keen understanding of the inherent value of every mitzvah, she was the heroine who saved their lives.

As we approach Yom Kippur we contemplate our past year and seek divine clemency. We have the power to write our own pardon. What have our friends and colleagues done to us? How were we wronged by our relatives? We must find the strength to forgive, to forget, to look away. It is our belief that G-d will, in kind, give us a new chance and bless us with a year of happiness, success and peace.

Have good Shabbos, and let us all be sealed for a year rich with G-d's blessings of life, sustenance and peace.

G'mar Chasima Tova.

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