PIRQE ABOT: Understanding the concept of benefit of the doubt

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“Yehoshua ben Perahia used to say, make for yourself a teacher, invest in a friend, *and judge others with the benefit of the doubt.*“

Judging with the benefit of the doubt is, first of all, one of the 613 commandments of the Tora. And it can also be considered as one of the most important elements of Jewish morality.

This principle should be analyzed in depth and with patience. Therefore, we will devote to it more than one entry, to explore it and understand it well.

First, we will define this concept as reflected in PIRQUE ABOT and give some examples of it. Second, B’H tomorrow, we will see where and how it appears in the Tora. And third, we will explore the exceptions to the rule, that is, under what circumstances we should not give the benefit of the doubt.

Giving the benefit of the doubt means that when I do not know the whole scenario, or all the circumstances surrounding an action that seems to be wrong, I should not rush to judge that act or the person involved in it, negatively. Rather, I should try to find in my mind mitigating factors, possible or hypothetical reasons or scenarios that would justify this action that seems to be wrong.

Example: I have a date or a meeting with someone, and he or she is late. There are two possible ways to react to this event, before knowing the facts. One, I judge this person

negatively and think of him or her as careless, negligent and irresponsible. The second option is thinking within myself that most probably he is late because of something beyond his control. Probably, he was stuck in traffic, or she cannot find parking, etc. This is to judge giving the benefit of the doubt.

At this point, we don't really care what the real reason for that person's delay was. We are not in a fact-finding mission. We are now analyzing my initial reaction, my character, to determine if I judge others in a critical way, or with the benefit of the doubt.

Unfortunately, we are not "programmed" to give the benefit of the doubt. In general, we tend to judge others by their actions, while we judge ourselves by our intentions. It seems that our western culture educated us to be rather suspicious. The Tora, however, invites us to change this attitude, to "re-program ourselves" and judge others with indulgence.

Another example: I'm giving a speech and at the end of the hall I see a familiar face talking nonstop with another person, probably a guest. At the end of my speech I approach my friend to reproach him for his bad behavior, but before I could utter a word he says, "Hi rabbi, I want to introduce you to my cousin Gerard, from Paris. I was translating to him your speech, and he loved it" .

From my pulpit and from my judging standpoint, I only saw two people talking, undermining my lecture, and the first thing that crossed my mind is that these were two inconsiderate individuals… I did not judge them with the benefit of the doubt.

Judging with the benefit of the doubt, in Hebrew □□□ □□□□□ □□□□, is the ability to develop a positive, trusting disposition towards people. It is NOT a method to find the

truth, but a Mitsva and an attitude to achieve and maintain inner peace.

(*To be continued ...*)