PIRQE ABOT: Giving the benefit of the doubt, unlimited

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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.*“

Giving others the benefit of the doubt is a Mitsva of the Tora. Where does this Mitzva appear? In the book of Vayiqra 19:15 it says: betsedeq tishpot ‘ amitekha, “With righteousness you shall judge your neighbor.”
This is how our Hakhamim explained this Mitsva:

There are 3 categories of people: the righteous man, the evil man and the average man.
The righteous or tsadiq is the person with an impeccable record of good deeds. Those who are more angels than human. Not many. Perhaps, they are 5% of the population. perhaps less. On the other extreme we have the *resha’im*, or wicked, selfish individuals with a record of immoral deeds. Perhaps they are 5% of the total population (the book “The sociopath next door,” says that sociopaths are 4% of the population) perhaps more. And then we have the average guy, people like you and me. Individuals who usually have noble intentions. People who do good things, but also wrong things. Sometimes act selfishly and sometimes altruistically. This is 90% of the population.

The Torah says three things:

1. You have to judge the righteous man, the tsadiq , indulgently. Even when you perceive a suspicious situation, while not having all the incriminatory evidence before you, you shall judge the righteous man with the benefit of the doubt.

2. The bad guy o rasha' . This is the person with a proven record of acting immoraly and in bad faith You can not give this person the benefit of the doubt while he does not repent or improves his deeds. You must be suspicious, even when it seems he wants to do something noble (more on this point, BH tomorrow).

3. And what about the average man? The incredible novelty of the Tora is that it tells you: JUDGE THE AVERAGE PERSON ASYOU JUDGE THE TSADIQ,, THE RIGHTEOUS PERSON. Give the average person the benefit of the doubt, unless otherwise proven. In other words, this Mitsva, "with justice you shall judge your neighbor" could be read as saying: "judge your neighbor (=the average man) as you would judge the righteous man (the tsadiq)". Thus, according to the Torah, we must judge leniently virtually everyone!

Giving the benefit of the doubt has its great benefits.

Here's why.

LESHON HARA: When we speak ill of others (leshon hara'), many times we just echo what we have heard about other people, without even knowing if that is true or false. If we learn to judge others with the benefit of the doubt, we will avoid repeating these type of gossip, or even better, we will not give credit to the negative things we hear about that person. If we internalize this principle we will avoid many types of leshon hara'.
BAMIDDA SHEADAM MODED … "With the same yardstick that we judge others, we will be judged by Heaven." How do we want to be judged by God, after 120 years? Do we expect Him to judge us

harshly or leniently? Surely we want the Heavenly Court to find mitigating factors that will excuse our many mistakes. We want to be judged with kindness and understanding. Well, I have good news! The Hakhamim explain that God will judge us using the same yardstick we use to judge others. If we learn to judge others with kindness and benevolence, so will God judge us. I should add that not only God judges us as we judge others: usually our gestures and attitudes are reflected and imitated by the people around us, our co-workers, friends, and family. If you want to be judged by other with indulgence, if you do not want people to rush and condemn you before having all the information at hand, then learn to give others the benefit of the doubt.

The way we are judged by people, mirrors the way we judge them.

(*To be continued …*)