Giving the benefit of the doubt…when we should not

Yesterday we explained that giving the benefit of the doubt is one of the 613 commandments of the Tora. We also explored the benefits of judging others with kindness: achieving a state of inner peace; living in harmony with those around us, and knowing that, as our Sages assert, God judges me and will judge me using the same yardstick I used to judge others.

But, is giving the benefit of the doubt an absolute value?

The Tora teaches us that we must judge the average man as we would judge the man of absolute integrity: in an ambiguous situation, in a case where I don't have all the information at hand, I should give the average man some credit and judge him positively. However, the Tora also tells us that there are exceptions to this rule. In fact, the Tora states that we can not and should not judge the rasha' (the wicked), the person who has a negative immoral record, with the benefit of the doubt. That would be dangerous. If I give the benefit of the doubt to the rasha', instead of being a good person I will be crossing the line into being a naive, virtually reckless, person.

The example I will present to the reader has to do with international politics. Simply because I found it easier to explain this profound concept with such example. Besides, the reader will appreciate that the principles of the Tora, in this case the limitations of "the benefit of the doubt", are suitable and applicable also beyond our private lives.

Let us talk about Iran.

Iran wants to make a deal with the United States and a few other world powers. Iran declares that its nuclear plants will be used for peaceful purposes. The are some doubts about

Iran's real intentions. The question is whether the US should grant Iran the benefit of the doubt and trust that Iran will actually keep its word.

The Tora tells us unequivocally that we should not grant the benefit of the doubt to those who have a negative record.

Let us examine the case of Iran in light of this criteria.

1. Currently, Iran is anything but a peaceful country. At this time, as explained by the Israeli news agency Debka (see this), Iran is involved in four simultaneous wars, and none of them is a war of defense. These are all wars in which Iran chooses to get involved to extend its influence in the region. Iran is involved in the Lebanon war, in the war in Syria, in the war in Iraq, and most recently in the war in Yemen. All these wars have a very high cost in human lives!

2. As explained by the Prime Minister of Israel, Iran is behind numberless terrorist attacks, among them the bombing of the AMIA in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

3. Iran has stated on numerous occasions that it wants to wipe Israel off the map, and Iran never backed down from this threat.

We can give many more examples, but I think with this record it's sufficient to establish a pattern and to assert that giving Iran the benefit of the doubt would be reckless and dangerous. In cases like this the Tora tells me NOT to give the benefit of the doubt.

Now, is the wicked doomed forever to be judged unfavorably? Could we ever judge the bad guy in a favorable light? If an individual, or in this case a country, changes and improves, not only with words but mainly with deeds, then we should reconsider it.

Let's continue with the example of Iran:

Imagine Iran would declare today: “We want to use our nuclear plants for peaceful purposes.” And immediately gets rid of all nuclear weapons it has already accumulated. Then Iran ends its involvement in the wars with its neighbors. Not only that, Iran also admits its responsibility in the AMIA bombing, apologizes and offers a compensation to the families of the victims. And as if that were not enough, Iran retracts from its threats against Israel and offers to open its embassy in Jerusalem.

A series of actions in the right direction would change the status quo of a person, an institution or a country. But until that happens, giving the benefit of the doubt in a case like this is nothing but suicidal.

In conclusion: Judging the benefit of the doubt demands moral clarity. The clarity needed to identify evil, violence and injustice.

SHABBAT SHALOM

Candlelighting in NYC **7:32 pm**

Shabbat ends in NYC **8:33 pm**