

# THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY

*Giving People the Benefit of the Doubt*

*Based on "The Other Side of the Story" by Mrs. Yehudis Samet, ArtScroll Series*

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*Judging favorably means finding excuses for questionable behavior, excuses which make sense to us and leave us with a positive feeling towards the person in question. When we find ourselves suspecting others, we must ask ourselves: Are there any redeeming factors? Did I miss something? Did I jump to the wrong conclusion? For instance, take the following four cases...*

## "THE FAUXTOGRAPHER"

It was late Tuesday night when the phone rang. It was my good friend J.P. "I'm making a wedding. Do you know a good photographer?" J.P. asked me. I gave him the name of an excellent photographer who is very reasonably priced.

"I've heard of him," said my friend, "but I also heard he's unreliable."

"What makes you say so?" I asked.

"Well, I'm told that he was recently hired for a bar mitzvah and he arrived after it was half over. He missed half the affair. There's no way I'd hire a person who is so irresponsible."

"Are you sure it's true?" I asked him.

"I'm positive," he said. "Yisrael was the head of the band that night, and he told it to me himself. I met someone else who attended that same affair and he verified the facts. It's 100% true."

"Maybe due to unforeseen circumstances he was delayed" I said, trying my best to judge favorably. "What makes you so sure it was a case of negligence or pure laziness?"

"Perhaps you're right," replied J.P. "But I just can't risk it. Besides, there is no reason in the world for coming late. He should have started out early enough so that even if his car broke down he could have taken a car service and made

it on time. There is absolutely no good excuse for a photographer to walk in after half the affair is over!"

He had a strong point. When I hung up the phone I found myself in a real quandary. Could I really recommend someone who is unreliable? Was it truly negligence on his part? I decided to check out the story on my own. I called the musician and he verified the whole story.

The very next day, I bumped into my good friend, the photographer. I brought up the subject of the bar mitzvah.

"Is it true that you arrived halfway through the bar mitzvah?" I asked.

"Yes, it certainly is," he said. "But why are you asking?"

"I just recommended you for a job, and the people refused to take you. They claimed you were unreliable because you didn't come on time."

He looked at me in disbelief, and then began telling me his story.

"The job was not mine at all," he began. "The photographer who had been hired for the job failed to show up. I received an emergency call in the middle of the affair to come down immediately. Despite being very busy at that moment, I dropped everything I was doing and raced down to the hall as quickly as possible."

With a hurt look on his face he added, "I only did it as a personal favor to them."

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*Hillel said... "Don't judge a friend until you reach his place." (Pirkei Avos 2:5)*

*One of the obstacles to judging people favorably is our certainty that if we would be in that person's place we would never behave that way:*

*"You'd never catch me doing that..."*

*"No one in my family would ever..."*

*"I simply don't understand how anyone could..."*

*Although we might feel our situation to be similar to that of another person, can we*

*ever be in **exactly** the same situation? Can we bring to it the exact same background, experience and disposition and circumstance?*

An aide of the Skulener Rebbe, Rabbi Eliezer Zusia Portugal, once related: Among the many people whom the Rebbe had rescued from Europe was a woman who had informed the Rumanian government of his religious activities, which led to his arrest and imprisonment. Why go to such effort and expense to save a person of her ilk?

"You have no idea how much she suffered beforehand, and how tempting the authorities make it to inform," the Rebbe said with tears in his eyes.

If we see someone stumble, we shouldn't judge him until we have been in the same situation and successfully passed that test. Until then, we have no right to judge.

Sometimes we feel we lack the tools to judge others favorably. We see no possible excuse for certain behavior.

We can challenge these thoughts and prove how talented we can be in inventing excuses for others by seeing how well we do it for ourselves. Take, for example, the case of ...

## THE PRACTICING DOCTOR AND HIS PRESCRIPTION SLIP

The telephone rang at our pharmacy. It was the doctor. He demanded to know why the pharmacist had dispensed medication different than the one he had prescribed. The pharmacist apologized, but the doctor continued with a lengthy speech as to how important it is to dispense what was prescribed, responsibility to the public, etc.

Afterwards, the pharmacist sifted through the pile of prescriptions to find the relevant prescription. To her surprise, she discovered she had indeed dispensed what had been prescribed! It was the doctor who had erred: He had written the wrong item by mistake. She rang the doctor and explained the situation.

"Oh, well, anyone can make a mistake," was his casual reply.

When we care about someone, it is surprising how easy it is to justify their behavior — or at least to reserve judgment. Suddenly we become very creative and imaginative. We tap intellectual and emotional strengths we didn't know were there.

Let's not waste these excuses! Let's notice the excuses we make for ourselves, and then use them to make others look good. That's real love, loving others *kamocho* — like yourself — caring about others the way you care about yourself.

In a mystery, we're always looking for the culprit. Sometimes, we don't have far to go. Let's examine the case of the woman who was...

## DRESSED TO KILL

I was at a wedding, standing with a group of friends. We were discussing clothing, shoes, bags and getting ready for a dressy occasions.

R. admitted, "It took me two hours to get ready for this wedding."

I piped up, "Two hours! I could never spend two hours to get ready."

"Well," commented R. "that's why I look like this and you look like that."

I turned and walked away, not knowing where to put myself or what to think. Why would she have said something like that? After replaying the conversation endless times in my mind, it suddenly dawned on me that R. must have felt insulted and lashed back at me for what she felt was an insensitive comment directed at her. Seeing her comment in the context of a response put it in an entirely different light.

A hurtful statement may have been a defensive response to what was perceived as a verbal push. In judging favorably it is helpful to recognize the part we play in triggering other people's responses. When people feel verbally attacked, they often strike back. We often don't see our comments as provocative until someone lets us know — in no uncertain terms — that they felt provoked. Others may perceive our words, tone of voice, or facial expressions as hostile or derisive, even though we didn't mean them as such.

The above is an example of finding a merit for a person which, although it does not completely clear the person, it does make the person look better. To completely exonerate the woman in the story, let's examine her words again, but this time let's interpret her words to mean the *exact opposite*: "That's why I look (bad) like this, and you look (good) like that (because you don't **need** to spend so much time getting ready, while I do)!"

Does this seem like a far-fetched interpretation of her words? Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky was once asked by his students: Everything Hashem created has a purpose. What is the purpose of creating "crooked" reasoning? His answer: "So we can use it to judge others favorably."

## DO YOU HAVE A STORY TO SHARE?

Were you in a situation where there was the potential to misjudge a person, but there really was a valid explanation? Has a friend or a relative ever told you how they were in such a situation?

Share your stories with us for inclusion in future columns of THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY.

To submit your story, send it to [info@ohr.org.il](mailto:info@ohr.org.il). (To insure proper handling, put "Other Side" in the subject line of your message).

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General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman  
Production Design: Lev Seltzer

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