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“RABBI’S MUSINGS (& AMUSINGS)”

*Erev Shabbos Kodesh Parshas Balak*

*13 Tamuz 5777/ July 8, 2017 - Avos Perek 6*

A few months ago, I went to purchase a new mirror for my tefillin from the Dollar Store. Halacha dictates that one's tefillin shel rosh must be high enough upon one's head that the front of the tefillin is below his hairline, or where his hairline once was.[[1]](#footnote-1) The tefillin must also be placed directly above the space which is "between his eyes".

In order to ensure proper placement of their tefillin, many have a small "tefillin mirror" in their tefillin bag which they use after donning their tefillin, to check that the tefillin shel rosh are in their proper place.

The next morning after purchasing the little mirror, when I took it out to check my tefillin, I realized that it was a magnifying mirror. That basically defeated the whole purpose of the mirror, because now I couldn't see my head and my tefillin at the same time. I had to purchase another mirror a few days later.

The truth is that we all use different types of mirrors in our outlook on life. When we view our own merits and virtues, we hold up 'magnifying mirrors'. When we reflect upon our faults and deficiencies however, we utilize a 'minimizing mirror'. The opposite is true when we look at others. We seem to magnify their faults, but minimize their virtues.

It's not easy to use 'honest mirrors'; it's not easy to get past our natural defense mechanisms to see reality as it truly is. We are quick and good at giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt, but have a hard time doing so towards others.

A few years ago, a fellow teacher mentioned to me a situation with the family of a student that I had not previously been aware of. I expressed my surprise at not having known about the situation, and noted that I now looked at the student with a very different perspective.

The teacher remarked to me that when we look at other people, all we are really seeing is the tip of the iceberg. As gargantuan as the iceberg appears, the majority of it remains below the surface, obscured from view. When we view the situation of others, all we are seeing is what penetrates the surface. Simple, yet incredibly profound!

We think we know all the facts and, therefore, have the right to assess other people's situations. We feel we have the right to critique how the other person is dealing with his life. We need to remember however, that for whatever we see, the bulk of the other person's motivation, fears, life-experience, and general 'baggage' remains hidden from us. How often do we think we know someone, and only later find out that their life situation is far much more complicated and challenging than we could ever have dreamed?

The mishna in Avos (1:4) states that we should always give people the benefit of the doubt, by judging them favorably.

Rav Avigdor Nebenzhal shlita notes that, at times, it can be very challenging to judge another favorably. Our knowledge of the other person's situation, or personality, may make it challenging for us not to believe the other person’s culpability. How can we bring ourselves to judge him favorably in such a situation?

Rav Nebenzhal's answer is brief, yet incredibly poignant: Who said we have to judge at all?! Why don't we leave the judging to Hashem?!

Our society is quick to meddle in other people's affairs and to pass judgement. This is especially true in our connected and close-knit community. We hold up proverbial mirrors to our neighbors, family, and friends, and have all the answers for how they should be living their lives.

But maybe we need to step back and have the humility to believe that we don't always know what's best for others. What's more, we don't really know what's truly going on in their lives.

Bila'am was enamored that the doorways of our tents weren't aligned with each other, and we, therefore, did not peer into each other's tents. In other words, Bila'am couldn't get over the extent of how much our ancestors minded their own business. That didn't preclude the chesed and love they performed for each other. But they did so without passing judgement.

This week we observe the fast of Shiva Asar B’Tamuz. Although there are five reasons for the fast, the reason repeated in the refrain recited during Selichos is that it is “the day that the enemy overpowered, and breached the city.”

Perhaps, one way to rebuild the breached walls of Yerushalayim, is by respecting the walls that people maintain around their own private lives. There is plenty we can do to help each other without being self-appointed judges and adjudicators.

If we hold up mirrors to ourselves and not to others we will have a far easier time loving and respecting each other, without being so judgmental. Then we will merit the fulfillment of our prayers, “Rebuild the walls of Yerushalayim, because in You we believe.” We believe You – G-d to be the judge, and we can step back and feel secure in Your handling of Your world.

Shabbat Shalom & Good Shabbos,

 R’ Dani and Chani Staum

1. (Sadly, it is not uncommon to see people whose tefillin are too low, causing them to unwittingly not fulfill their mitzvah of tefillin and to be reciting a beracha levatala upon donning their tefillin each morning.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)