

If You Judge - Judge Favorably

Reish Lakish and Rabbi Yochanan had different takes on Noach's righteousness. What does their background tell us about their interpretation? Should we be a Reish Lakish or Rabbi Yochanan?

The Judgment of Noach

Are you an objective person? Could a human being really be objective about anything? What makes a person take a particular position. What causes you to decide for or against something? No doubt, a person's education and environment both play a big part in his opinions and positions. But what are the main causes for a person's choosing one view over another?

Let's look into the Torah for an answer.

The beginning of this week's Torah portion is clearly judgmental.

The very first verse states: "Noach ... was perfect in his generation."

Rashi explains, "Some of our Sages interpret this verse favorably, saying, 'If he would have lived in a generation of righteous people, he would have been even more righteous.'" (This is the opinion of Reish Lakish in the Talmud.) "'Others

interpret it derogatorily saying that he was righteous only in comparison to his own generation; in Abraham's generation, he would not have been considered of any importance." (This is the opinion of Rabbi Yochanan in the Talmud.)

In other words, these two sages chose to pass judgment on Noach. One judged him favorably, saying that he was truly righteous, while the other judged him unfavorably and maintained that his righteousness was only relative to his generation; had he been in Abraham's generation he would have been a 'nobody.'

The History of a Judgment - Reish Lakish

What caused each of these great sages to rule as they did? What do we know about their respective backgrounds that could help us understand their conclusions?

The first was Reish Lakish, who judges Noach favorably.

As a youngster, Reish Lakish sold himself to the Ludiim, gladiators who would wrestle with wild beasts as entertainment for the lowly masses. Due to his extraordinary strength, Reish Lakish was able to succeed in the arena. After a while he escaped from the Ludiim, and this led to the moment that changed his life.

Rabbi Yochanan was a childhood friend of Reish Lakish. One day, Rabbi Yochanan was bathing in the Jordan River when Reish Lakish noticed him. In a tremendous show of strength, he vaulted over into the river where Rabbi Yochanan was bathing. Rabbi Yochanan told him, "Your strength should be for Torah,"

meaning that he should dedicate his tremendous strength for the study of Torah. Reish Lakish fired right back, “Your beauty should be for women,” for Rabbi Yochanan was an exceedingly handsome, beautiful person.

Rabbi Yochanan proposed a deal: “If you will return to Torah, you can marry my sister – who is even more beautiful than me.” Reish Lakish agreed to the deal and Rabbi Yochanan began to teach him Torah. Reish Lakish soon became one of the Torah giants of the day, becoming equal almost to Rabbi Yochanan himself. In fact, he was the one to coin the famous phrase, “Torah study only remains with one who is ready to sacrifice his life for it.”

Understanding Reish Lakish’s history gives us a better understanding of his complimentary judgment on Noach.

When Reish Lakish sees the word “generations” in the verse, his heart told him that the Torah is indicating something that relates to other generations. He knew about Noach’s struggle and he was able to relate to it through his own experience. He knew the real world and its temptations.

He therefore concluded that if Noach remained righteous in that wicked generation, when stealing, killing and immorality were the norm, he must have had tremendous control over himself. Reish Lakish was convinced that if Noach had lived in a better generation he would have been a great Tzaddik.

The History of a Judgment - Rabbi Yochanan

But as to Rabbi Yochanan:

Rabbi Yochanan was born a Tzaddik. The Talmud says that Rabbi Yehuda, the leader of the generation, foresaw a glorious future for him while he was still in his mother's womb. His parents, whom he lost at a very young age, left him an inheritance of several estates in the district of Tiberius. As he grew, his thirst for Torah study was so great that he was willing to sacrifice everything for it. He sold the estates for cash to be able to study Torah peacefully for the rest of his life.

The Midrash relates that Rabbi Yochanan was walking together with his student Rabbi Chiya when they passed large fields and vineyards. Rabbi Yochanan said, "You see these fields and vineyards? They were once mine, but I sold them because I desired to learn Torah."

Rabbi Yochanan also suffered personal tragedies, yet he devoted his entire life to Torah.

His interpersonal conduct was also exceptional. He had a huge heart. Master or slave, Jew or non-Jew, he treated every person with love and respect. He had a non-Jewish servant whom he treated like his own son. Whatever Rabbi Yochanan had he would share with his servant. This was Rabbi Yochanan's way. He attracted many people to a Torah lifestyle through respect and love.

A righteous person as Rabbi Yochanan - having been born pure, never having tasted sin - did not consider Noach as extraordinary. In his eyes, Noach behaved exactly as any normal person would have behaved. Therefore, Rabbi Yochanan is led to the conclusion that had Noach lived in any other

generation he wouldn't have been considered special.

Be A Reish Lakish

What does this tell us?

When we judge another person, we are not passing judgment on the other. By pointing fingers at another, we are actually revealing what we think about ourselves. Neither of these great sages could possibly have known Noach's true situation. Each judged Noach in view of their own experiences. Rabbi Yochanan was pure from birth, so he didn't see Noach as extraordinary at all. Reish Lakish on the other hand, who, for a time, had been less than righteous and had returned to the righteous path, knew well the hardships the real world presents. He was therefore able to give Noach the benefit of the doubt.

Before we pass judgment on another person, we must stop and remind ourselves that in doing so we will really be exposing our true selves.

Here is a powerful lesson for our generation. Each of us in this shul wants to do better.

Some of us were born to observant parents for whom doing mitzvahs is almost second nature. We sometimes allow ourselves the right to pass a little judgment on those who are not yet as observant we are.

But we are unaware of just how hard it is for someone who does not come from a religious family. We don't realize how difficult it is to take off days of work for Shabbos and Yom Tov. It takes a bit of understanding and a little experience for one to truly be

able to appreciate the sacrifice of these precious Jews who slowly but steadily advance in their Yiddishkeit one step at a time.

The Jewish people have had enough of being judged critically. We must now take special care to only speak complimentarily of another Jew. It is the mission of our generation to be like Reish Lakish; if you must judge; judge favorably.