

Parashat Shoftim: How to Be Judgmental

Rabbi Jon Spira-Savett, Temple Beth Abraham

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On my first Rosh Hashanah here, I recounted a small vignette that happened to me, that happened *in* me, when we were living in an apartment in Queens more than ten years ago. I was walking out the basement exit, near the laundry room, and I bumped into a friend. Not a close friend, but part of a couple I really found interesting. The two of them were creative people, a playwright/director and a dancer. I officiated at their wedding, and we had had many many long and deep conversations about life.

Anyway, I bumped into the playwright outside the building, and he was smoking a cigarette. It was a good place to smoke for an apartment dweller. I didn't realize he ever smoked – and I was kind of flustered, and said hi quickly, and walked along fast. And as soon as I was out of sight, these thoughts went running through my head: I can't believe this; he has a new baby and doesn't he know it's not good for the baby and he should really take care of himself; I thought I knew him and he was a smart guy; and he's younger than me and maybe not as mature and wise as I thought he was....

And then I stopped myself and thought: Wow, am I judgmental!

Today we read from the Torah *Parashat Shoftim* – *shoftim* means judges. And these are the weeks leading us to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year that is also known as *Yom Hadin*, the Day of Judgment. So I want to help us get oriented to this theme of judgment.

There is a dominating image from the liturgy of the High Holy Days about the Day of Judgment. God is depicted sitting like a judge on a high seat, reading a book that contains all of our actions from the whole year – written in our own handwriting and witnessed by the Divine, God's-self. And on the basis of that record our fate for the coming year is decided – “who shall live and who shall die, who shall be tranquil and who shall be tormented.”

Now first of all, for the record I want to say that I don't believe that's how God works or how our destiny is worked out. I don't believe we are judged that way, and I don't believe in a God like that (which is a whole other topic).

But I do very much want to hold onto some of the imagery. The prayer itself is called *Unetaneh Tokef*, which means “we acknowledge the power” – the power of the day of judging. I love the idea that all our actions, good and bad, no matter how big or small, are significant. I believe that the decisions we make can affect life and death – whether it's how we drive or how we vote. And I believe our actions affect how we and others experience life – whether someone is more tranquil or more troubled because of me, because of us. I love the idea that we need to get focused on all this – that we need times of judgment.

Now, “judgmental” is a bad word. We often say that we're supposed to be nonjudgmental and accepting, so we don't drive people in our lives away. We shouldn't impose our own outlook on someone else. Look at the example of myself that I described: the torrent of negative judgments, just pouring out, almost out of my control. And there are a lot of places where judging goes wrong. It's really hard to do a good workplace performance assessment, or to get grades that really describe what kind of student you've been in a class. It's almost like we are programmed for negative judgments, and for inaccurate judgments. So we should just stop being so judgmental, no?

But we have this *Yom Hadin*, this Day of Judgment, and I don't want to let go of the possibility of judging – even judging each other and inviting judgment toward ourselves. The first line of the Torah reading today points us toward a couple of guidelines, when it says that we are to appoint judges *lishvatecha* – “for our tribes”, *v'shaftu et ha-am mishpat tzedek* -- “they should judge the people with just judgment.”

Judging is the most stinging when it's in our tribes – in our families, in our small social groups. That's the stuff that really eats at us. And it's also where it feels the best when we're judged to be good, from people who are close enough to see. We forget that we need that. When someone describes some way we are good, worth praising, it's easy to shrug it off, but it means something when it comes from inside our tribe. From the same people who are also critical and judgmental.

The second point is in the last words of the verse – “just judgment.” There is bad judging and good judging, and we want to get just the good judging.

The natural thing is that it's all mixed up together; careful judgment and being judgmental in a bad way. Thinking about myself outside the laundry room that day, there was this cascade of negative judgments

about my friend the secret smoker. And, all of that was battling against my very good and positive judgments of this person, built up over a period of time. And there was a real issue in there and some concern for him and his family – I was thinking about a possibly unhealthy behavior in someone I cared about. So, bad judgmental and good judgmental, all in a bundle.

Can we get ourselves to extract from this kind of mixture the good judgmental, the *mishpat tzedek*?

We need a practice for this, to start working on for this time of year. The Baal Shem Tov suggests one: that every time we are judging another person, we should stop and imagine that we are judging ourselves. We should look to find the same flaw or the same habit in ourselves. If we can understand it, we will have more compassion for the other person. If we deny it, or we can't understand it – well, then we'll also have more compassion for the other person, who maybe can't understand it or is in denial. If it's something we can fix it in ourselves, we can figure out if it's something we can help the other person fix. Or maybe it was so hard for me to fix that I realize I can't really help the other person, and it's time to stop being so judgmental and upset.

Well, I have never been a smoker. But I can tell you that during the time when I discovered my friend outside smoking, I with my own small children was having an extra ice cream soda late at night while I was washing the dishes. It took me a long time to work on that.

And the Baal Shem Tov says that God never declares a judgment against us until we have made the judgment first. There is really no harsher judge than ourselves. We shouldn't be worrying about God's judgment, and we don't have to worry even about the judging eyes of others. They only matter when we realize we are judging ourselves.

The Baal Shem Tov is really reminding us that judging is dynamic. It's looking at good things and bad, it's looking at other people and ourselves. It's overshooting and then noticing that. It's thinking about our standards and what in our makeup and habits contribute to our better and our worse. For some small number of people in our lives, we can be really good judges. We should want those kinds of judges to judge us.

And when I'm the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, this is how I plan to use the image of God judging us on *Yom Hadin*. For each thing written down in the book of a person's life that's not great, I will think

of God asking – why did he do this, is this within her power to learn, what can I as God do to teach her or teach him. How might this one help another one be more alive next year, more tranquil and less troubled. And what should I, God, be less judgmental about in human beings... because even God hasn't figured out how to get everything right in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.