

From the Rabbi

September 2021; Tishrey 5782

“Benefit of the Doubt”

Somehow, we fortunate Jews inherited not only the great laws and lore of the Torah, as well as the soaring poetry of the Siddur and the sprawling arguments of the Talmud, but also the pristinely logical good advice of Pirkey Avot.

Pirkey Avot is the so-called “sayings (or chapters) of the (founding) fathers” of the rabbinic tradition. It is found in the Mishnah, compiled at the end of the second century CE. Some of its advice is downright folksy, so much so that we could easily dismiss it as an amusing precursor to Ben Franklin’s Poor Richard.

Here is one *haimishe* tidbit from Pirkey Avot that I wish I could always live by. In fact, so many people in our immediate community live by it that it explains why we’ve navigated the pandemic so successfully, and why we will surely do so amidst the inevitable confusion of the High Holy Days now upon us.

In Pirkey Avot chapter 1 teaching 6, an early master named Joshua ben Perakhiah (who is not called “rabbi” because he predates that title) says: “Appoint yourself a teacher, acquire a companion (for study, but also for life), and judge everyone with the benefit of the doubt (literally, with the scale weighted in their favor).”

I know I speak for my fellow professionals at the synagogue, as well as the large contingent of tireless volunteer officers and *chevra* chairpersons, when I say that for the most part it is nothing but pleasant to do the work of our community. People tend to thank one another. They more than tolerate each other’s mistakes and miscalculations. They show gratitude for things they could not have done for themselves, and they try to volunteer their services in return. They practice “benefit of the doubt” at every turn.

They tend to understand the difference between minor inconveniences and major issues we should all be focusing our energy on. They know that world hunger and disease, widespread antisemitism, racial inequity, the politicization of vaccinations, the shrinking affiliation and commitment among our younger Jewish population, the search for spiritual meaning, the shocking rapidity of climate deterioration, and the general rise in anxiety and insecurity are worthy of our worry. Other things? Not so much.

During the coming holy days, those of us with children will be stuck in a segregated tent to accommodate the necessarily unvaccinated minors among us. It will be inconvenient for their accompanying adults who will have to play tag-team to attend the “adult” service across the way, heretofore decidedly not for adults only. And said adults will need to use color-coded tickets in order to take turns in the tent, so as not to overcrowd the space and endanger one another. It will feel totally antithetical to our community’s culture. We will instinctively feel the desire to complain and kvetch.

There will be confusion. People in charge will need to tell other people where to go and what to do, and where not to go and what not to do. Everyone will say again and again that they wish this whole damned thing would go away. And it will, but not this fall. Not for a while.

Meanwhile, everyone will be doing their best to provide an uplifting spiritual and cultural space for one another. I predict that everyone who attends, from seasoned veterans to newbies to guests in search of

a Jewish home will notice the confusion and frustration, count to ten in all the languages they speak, and simply say “thank you,” and “how may I help?” and other related phrases. They will give one another the benefit of the doubt, and there will be plenty of doubt to go around. But it will all go fine, because thoughtful and grateful people know the difference between what is important and what is less so.

I wish us all a new year filled with ever-improving conditions in the greater world as well as in our immediate lives. And because I, like you, have been around the block a few times, I will try to take each small sign of improvement as a *siman*, a good sign, and I will reach deep inside myself to give those who irk me the benefit of the doubt. And I will hope and pray that they will be kind to me in return, for God knows I will inadvertently irk them as well. And for this, I am grateful for their preemptive forgiveness.

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