

Azamra: Judging Others

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Know and Understand!

A person must judge everyone favorably. Even if someone is completely bad, it is necessary to search and find in him some modicum of good; the little bit of him that is not wicked. And by finding in him a drop of good and judging him favorably, one brings him to return to the true path of his Jewish soul.
—Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, Likutey Moharan, 282

Azamra, as Likutey Moharan 282 is known, is a foundational teaching of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, one so life-changing, that Breslovers learn it over and over again, often throughout their lives. But, you don't have to be an avowed Breslover to benefit from the incredible powerful message of this soul-stirring lesson.

Learning and inculcating the powerful lesson of Azamra is best done over time, as lasting change is built layer by layer. Perhaps this is one of the reasons Rebbe Nachman of Breslov reminds us: A little bit is also good. The way to grow is to not worry about perfection—simply start moving a little bit beyond where you were a moment ago.

In this new series, we'll explore Azamra bit by bit, and we'll include snippets of stimulating conversations from group classes as well as discussions with one-on-one learning-partners on the topic.

Know

Whenever Rebbe Nachman says “Da” (the first word of Azamra), which can be translated as know or understand, it's a signal for us to pay attention. Of course, it's generally a good idea to pay attention when learning something, but this little extra tidbit of a word is like a flashing light telling us: Now you're really going to hear something amazing. And, if you let it, it will open a door to a completely new understanding of yourself and move you closer to discovering and achieving your life mission.

Whenever I see the word “Da” I think to myself: Okay, buckle-up, the soul roller coaster is about to start.

Is It Okay To Pass Judgment On Others?

The Rebbe begins Azamra with a focus on other people, even though as the lesson progresses, we'll find a large part part of it is about focusing on yourself. But the Rebbe starts by introducing us to the Jewish way to think about others and uses the term *dan lchaf zchut*, which is commonly translated as giving someone “the benefit of the doubt.” A more literal and less passive translation is to judge others favorably, judge them on the side of merit.

Judging others favorably doesn't mean we should naively

suspend critical (clear) thinking, or give approval of others' harmful acts. What it does mean is that we should actively use our innate powers of judgment in order to *actually* see the good in someone, thereby rendering ourselves capable of giving an authentic (yet discerning) positive judgment.

What does it mean to judge? It means to weigh the evidence—which is why the iconic image for justice is a scale. The Rebbe tells us that even if we see someone do something pretty rotten (even if he does it to us), we must seek evidence of this person's good points, so we can judge him positively. That positive point must, in our eyes, outweigh the negative.

Questions

Shouldn't we trust our own senses: If we see clearly that someone is evil*, how can we pretend otherwise?

Doesn't Judaism teach us (and common sense tell us) that it's dangerous to ignore evil or give wickedness a pass, as this gives them permission to do even more evil?

Finally, what does it mean that when we judge someone favorably in our minds and hearts, we genuinely elevate him to the side of merit and cause him to mend his ways? How is this possible? How can our thoughts bring about such a huge change in reality?

We'll discuss the answers in the next Azamra post.

*We're not talking about an annoying boss or noisy neighbor here—although we will later on—we're talking about a person who really appears to embrace the dark side.