Parshas Ha'azinu -- Erev Sukkos "Be Gentle in Your Judgment"

Earlier this week Dianne Hoffmeyer was at a Tim Horton's restaurant in Michigan. Ordering doughnut holes and a cup of coffee, Diane heard two middle-aged women behind her commenting on her appearance.

Oh look at her hair, it's nasty looking and the roots are coming through.

Oh she’s a whale, oh the whale needs to eat.

What the women who casually offered insults didn't know was that the doughnut holes Dianne purchased were for her 2-year-old daughter, Liliana, who'd been up all night teething. And the coffee was meant to be a pick-me-up after a long night with Liliana and an early morning doctor's appointment for the toddler.

They also didn't know that Diane, 41, recently had lost 177 pounds over 22 months after being diagnosed with congestive heart failure during her pregnancy. Diane said:

“I was really mad and I'm usually not quiet. I've got a big mouth. I instantly started to cry, because it hurts. I don’t know the women. I don’t know why they would choose to say something like that.”

What Diane Hoffmeyer did next was amazing - and it's something I'd like to soon share with you. But first I'd like to discuss how some people can be so critical and judgemental..

Chaim went to his local barber, Joe. Joe was one of those judgmental, critical people who was always finding fault with others. Chaim mentioned that he was taking his first trip ever to Israel.

"I hear Israel is overrated," the barber said. "The hotels are substandard and over-priced. The streets are a nightmare, and the drivers are terrible. Israelis are really so rude to Americans. You really won't like it."

Chaim protested, "From what I know of Israel and Israelis, they're wonderful. Also, I've been saving for years for this trip. Besides, there's a good chance I'll be able to meet the Chief Rabbi through a cousin."

Joe the barber gave him a skeptical look. "I wouldn't count on it if I were you," he said. "I'm sure the Chief Rabbi only meets with very important people."

A month later Chaim returned to the barber shop. "How was your trip?" Joe asked, coolly?

"Oh, it was great!" Chaim answered. "The Golan, Tiberias, Tel Aviv, the Kotel. The cities were beautiful, the hotels were fantastic, Israelis are so friendly, and I even got to meet the Chief Rabbi!"

Joe the barber couldn't believe it. "You got to see the Chief Rabbi? What was he like?"

Chaim said, "A very tall man, well over six feet tall."

Barber: "Wow, did he say anything?"

"Yes, he did," replied Chaim. "He looked down at my head and said, 'What a lousy haircut'!"

I can't count how many times I've heard Jews say, 'We are our own worst enemies.' Whether in Israel or America or our local Jewish communities, we too easily foster divisions and stereotypes. The easy road is always to label, classify and judge other Jews. We all stood at Mount Sinai – no labels, no denominations, no synagogues, and no country clubs – as one people with one heart.

At the end of his life Moses reminds the Jewish people,

See, you stand before me today, everyone before G-d as equals, the heads of tribes, the officers, and every person of Israel. Women, children and the stranger in your midst. From the wood chopper to the water carrier – you are all part of the holy covenant. (Deut. 29:11)

We may have real differences, be they political or ideological. However, in spite of those differences it is amazing what can be accomplished when when we're not critical and judgemental of others.

Multiple Torah sources instruct us to give people the benefit of the doubt. And understanding that there's 'another side of the story' is just common sense. But the 'judgemental gene' seems to be a deeply ingrained part of human nature.

One common form of judgmentalism is "playing the blame game."

Baseball fans recognize the name Leo Durocher. A regular, if unspectacular player in the '30s and '40s, Durocher made the All-Star game 3 times -- once, with the Cardinals. But Durocher really made his mark on baseball when he began to manage, and was later voted to the Hall of Fame.

As player-manager for the Brooklyn Dodgers, Durocher once put a rookie in center field. In two innings the rookie had misplayed three balls. Durocher wasn't known for his even temperament; his nickname was 'Leo the Lip.' Durocher yelled at the rookie, benched him, and went into center field to play the position himself. He proceeded to make two errors. When he came back into the dugout he threw his glove at the rookie in disgust, yelling at him,

You’ve (messed) up center field so bad no one can play it!

One of the more common causes of problems with shalom bayis - spouses not getting along -- is a tendency to blame each other.

Here are just a few symptoms of blame: See if any look familiar:

• My spouse repeatedly blames me for our marriage problems.

• My spouse repeatedly blames me for his/her unhappiness.

• My spouse won’t look at how he/she is contributing to our problems.

• My spouse blames me for the the way he/she thinks, talks, or behaves.

• Whenever I try to talk about our marriage with my spouse, I just end up getting blamed.

How easy it is to say, "It's your fault. You made me do it. It's because of you that things are so bad between us. You're the reason I feel so miserable."

A skewered sense of judgmentalism makes it much easier to blame others instead of looking at yourself and asking, "What's my part in creating the difficulties between us?"

A second expression of the 'judgmentalism gene' is not giving people the benefit of the doubt.

Are you a person who looks for the other side of the story?

Author Gary Jordan tells about a physician, Dr. Mike, who was at his son's baseball tournament. While enjoying the game, he was suddenly summoned to an adjacent field where a coach had collapsed. Dr. Mike had spent many years working in a hospital emergency room, but hadn't received updated CPR training in about five years. Upon arriving at the field, Dr. Mike found the man to have no pulse or respiration. On site, there was a woman who was trying to help doing rapid CPR chest compressions.

Dr. Mike opened the man’s airway, but there was something that bothered him: As he was working on the coach, the lady doing the compressions was singing ‘Staying alive, staying alive, aah, aah, aah, aah, staying alive.' Dr. Mike said, " I was thinking to myself ‘What a sick woman! This guy is dead and she’s singing Bee Gees songs.’"

The coach made it to the hospital, got a pacemaker, and was fine. Dr. Mike said,

When I started telling other medical people about the sicko singing “Staying Alive” during CPR, they told me that it’s the tempo for the compressions. Apparently, it was the new protocol since I had last taken CPR training. Thank G-d I didn't open my big mouth during the CPR.

How powerfully perception changes our view of a situation! With a little information, a shift of view occurred that completely altered how someone saw the efforts of the woman involved. One piece of knowledge moved her from being a ‘sicko’ to a courageous, well-informed helper.

The verse in Leviticus tells us You shall judge your fellow man with righteousness (19:15), obligating us to give someone the benefit of the doubt when we see him performing an action which could be interpreted in his favor.

And judgmentalism can be particularly vicious when people use their religious beliefs to hammer others.

Last month former U.S. President Jimmy Carter announced that he had inoperable brain cancer. Can one say that Carter -- who liberal Alan Dershowitz has no problem openly condemning as an anti-Semite - is getting his Divine 'just desserts'?

No.

Jimmy Carter is not the only one dying from cancer. People in many of our own families have been or are currently victims of terrible suffering of one form or another. We are certainly not prepared to say that most or all of those individuals are wicked people who are somehow 'deserving' of their suffering.

To pronounce such theological judgements arrogantly presumes that the one has G-d's telephone number; as if to say, "I've been gifted with the insight of prophecy. I have a hot-line to Hashem, and I know exactly what G-d is thinking."

Some perceiving themselves to be religious express judgementalism in ways more subtle. Believing you own the revealed word of G-d can lead to complacency and arrogance. The number one complaint I hear from non-observant Jews about their religious brethren is that they feel judged. For that reason, religious people have to work extra hard at being humble and non-judgemental.

I began my remarks with the story of Diane Hoffmeyer who, while standing in line at a restaurant, was insulted by two women standing in back of her.

What Diane did after hearing the insults is absolutely amazing.

In her story that she shared on Facebook, Diane said:

To the 2 mean bitter ladies that were standing in line .... behind me. I could hear you. I could hear the hurtful things you said about me. Sorry that my hair needs to be re-colored and the roots bothered you, but I have children that need to be taken care of. They come first. You both were right when you said I didn't need the (donuts) because I already looked… like a whale. Just so you know, they were not for me. But for my sick 22 month old daughter who has kept me up all night crying and teething. I thought they might make her happy ... I’ll have you know I’ve worked hard to lose 177 lbs in 22 months. I am proud of myself. You both should be ashamed of yourselves.

But to show that my mother raised me better .... I bought your coffees this morning.

Have you ever seen the phrase "objects in (the) mirror are closer than they appear" on your car side-view mirror? This safety warning is required because it's easy to misjudge the distance of objects seen in a slightly convex mirror.

Objects -- and people -- are easy to misjudge from a distance.

When opening day of the October 1965 World Series fell on Yom Kippur, the Dodgers, thanks to the pitching of Sandy Koufax, were ready. But instead of playing, he famously gave up his spot on the mound for a seat in the synagogue. Why? Was Koufax Orthodox? No. But he understood that Jews, regardless of their level of religiosity, simply don't work or play sports on Yom Kippur.

On the forthcoming holiday of Sukkot, we take the four agricultural species. Our rabbis teach that collectively the four species (minim) represent all Jews -- from the highest to lowest levels on the spectrum of Jewish observance and knowledge.

We all stood at Sinai. When it comes to our fellow Jews, let's be gentle in our judgement.