



## RABBI AARON GOLDSCHIEDER

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# Out of Sight But Not Out of Mind

The Jewish people are known for not withholding criticism from our greatest leaders, and even Moshe does not escape criticism. At the burning bush, Moshe responded to God's charge to help free the Jews enslaved in Egypt by saying, "But they will not put faith in me, they will not heed my voice" (Exodus 4:1). The Sages say that Moshe baselessly imputed a lack of faith to the Jewish people and "suspected the upright without cause." He should have judged them favorably. According to the Talmud, God rejoins by affirming that "the Jewish people are the faithful progeny of faithful forbears"<sup>1</sup> (בְּנֵי מֵאֲמִינִים בְּנֵי מֵאֲמִינִים).

Moshe might have been able to see the future or even behold God, in a manner of speaking, through the highest level of prophecy, but his spiritual sight failed him when it came to penetrating the Jewish heart. Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook explained that within every Jew there

is a deep well of pure faith. Its waters are still, so it is indiscernible to others, and we ourselves do not know how deep it goes. Faith is our élan vital, and it comes to us from our ancestors Avraham and Sarah. As the Torah tells us about Avraham, "He had faith in the Lord" (וְהֵאֱמַן בַּה') (Genesis 15:6).<sup>2</sup>

After the exchange between Moshe and God described in the Talmud, Moshe is given signs to perform so that his mission will be believed. But if their purpose is to convince his brethren of the truth of his message, why must he perform them now without an audience? Apparently, the signs are for Moshe, to teach him a lesson about judging others favorably. The first sign of turning the snake into a serpent is meant to evoke the cautionary tale of the primordial serpent who misused the gift of speech in the Garden of Eden.<sup>3</sup> The next sign is a skin



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affliction called *tzara'at*, which according to the Sages afflicts a person for, among other things, *leshon ha-ra*, speaking ill of others.<sup>4</sup> According to Rav Kook, a dermatological condition is by definition only skin deep and does not reflect a deeper malady within, say, the heart. Moshe's hand is afflicted miraculously to demonstrate

2. *Ein Ayah, Shabbat*, 11:12.

3. *Exodus Rabbah*, 3:12.

4. See *Arachin* 15b, and *Exodus Rabbah*, 3:13.

that the part of the body most involved in navigating the physical, external world can be sullied or sick without it telling us anything about the pure waters of faith within. Moshe was wrong about the faith of the Jewish people because he judged them by their cover. God has him perform these signs now because in order to succeed as a leader, he has to understand whom exactly he will be leading.<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlop, a confidant and disciple of Rav Kook, added to his teacher's insight. When God instructs Moshe to bring his afflicted arm back to his bosom, not only is it healed, but there is no evidence that it was ever afflicted. Since those afflicted with *tzara'at* had to leave the camp, this symbolized for Moshe—as well as for us—that we must draw into our embrace those who have grown distant. By holding them close, they are healed and any rift is sealed.<sup>6</sup>

Judging others favorably is about more than being a *mensch*. According to the Rambam, it is a positive commandment from the Torah. It is part of the larger mitzvah to treat litigants fairly and apply Torah law to disputes, which is derived from “judge your fellow justly” (Leviticus 19:15). As he puts it, “One should interpret his actions and deeds only for good.”<sup>7</sup>

The Mishnah juxtaposes this directive alongside two others: “Make for yourself a rabbi, acquire a friend, and judge every person favorably.”<sup>8</sup> The Lubavitcher Rebbe wondered how the first two phrases

connect to the third. He reasoned that when we see a Jew not behaving in accordance with the Torah, our mind immediately jumps to conclusions. The Rebbe said that we should pause and consider these two points: “Did he have a rabbi to teach him Torah? Did he have a close friend whose behavior he could emulate?” The moment we realize that these powerful role models are missing from this person's life, we cannot but judge them favorably. In the absence of those figures from that person's life, it falls upon us to befriend them and teach them Torah.

In *Pirkei Avot* we are further taught the ethical principle, “Do not judge your fellow until you are in his place,”<sup>9</sup> which means we should always consider the pressures, influences, and extenuating circumstances shaping the conduct, speech, and thought of others. When we choose to shine a light on the good in our fellow man, we promote peace and harmony:

The mitzvah to “judge your fellow justly,” which requires judging everyone favorably... is a foundational principle of ethical living and of fear [of Heaven], which leads to wholeness in everything.<sup>10</sup>

We are to be compassionate and view others with a generous eye, thereby fulfilling one of the most vital teachings and mitzvot of the Torah: “love your fellow like yourself” (וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרֵעֶךָ כָּמוֹךָ) (Leviticus 19:18). ■

9. Ibid., 2:5.

10. *Ein Ayah, Berakhot*, 3:24.

5. *Ein Ayah, Shabbat*, 11:16.

6. *Mei Marom, Nimukei Mikra'ot*, 108.

7. *Sefer ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseih* §177.

8. *Pirkei Avot*, 1:7.

**Rabbi Goldscheider** is the author of the newly published book 'Torah United' (OU Press), featuring divrei Torah on the weekly parasha from Rav Kook, Rabbi Solovetichik, and the Chassidic Masters.