

I'm pretty sure that most of us are familiar with what we might call "the theory of automotive relativity."

You know this: this is the phenomenon where anyone who is driving slower than me is an idiot, and anyone driving faster than me is a maniac.

[Are you familiar with this? Yes. I thought so.]

I was so pleased with myself when I came up with that. I thought I was such a clever line; until my brother told me that George Carlin came up with it years ago. Which, I guess, just goes to show that great minds are not the **only** ones that think alike.

But the reason why George Carlin and I can both, independently, come up with an idea like this, and why we laugh at it, is because we know how true it is. We've been there before. Behind that person turning the corner at 2 miles an hour, and we're screaming: "Go! Go!" Or we've been in front of the maniac who comes speeding up behind us, zooming around.

Of course when we are the one driving annoyingly slow, we want all the understanding in the world. "What's-a-matter. Get off my tail, I've got a birthday cake in the car," or whatever it is.

Or, when we're running late – for a meeting; picking the kids up from school; why does everyone have to go so slow? "Come-on, come-on, come-on, let's go! I'm late!"

Isn't that's the way it works. It's how our minds instinctively react to situations. And even if you have never driven a car before, you can relate. When we are in a situation, we want the people around us to automatically understand our circumstances, our exigencies, the things that explain why we are behaving the way we are.

Whatever it is that we are doing, whether we're driving too fast, or too slow, or we're late with project at work or at school, or we're slow returning a phone call, whatever it is, our tendency is to want the people around us to assume that there is a good reason for it. "I'm overwhelmed with work." "My e-mail's been down." "I've been dealing with an emergency." We want for people to understand these things without having to explain them.

We tend to want people to give us a break proactively. If we are doing something that's a problem, or failing to do something, our tendency is that we want people to assume that there is a good reason. Without having to ask for it, we want the benefit of the doubt.

Now, in Hebrew, we call this idea of giving the benefit of the doubt, *dan l'chafz'chut*, judging in the balance of merit. And the Talmud instructs us, *hevei dan et chavercha l'chafz'chut*, we should judge those around us in the balance of merit. And this comes from a Torah commandment: *be-tzedek tishpot et amitecha*, in *tzedeq*, "in righteousness shall you judge your people." Giving people the benefit of the doubt is a *mitzvah*, a religious obligation.

Now, of course, it's natural to be annoyed when people do annoying things. But the reality is, sometimes we are the annoying person. Sometimes we are the one who is late to a meeting, or who hasn't quite finished a project, or who isn't quite as cheerful as we could be, or whatever it is. The shoe is on the other foot then, isn't it?

When we are the ones whose behavior is having a negative effect on others; that is exactly when we want to be given the benefit of the doubt – without having to ask for it.

But how readily to do we do that for others? Is our typical first reaction to someone's frustrating behavior to think, "well, there must be a good reason he's doing that."

Now, we may cut someone some slack – if we're asked to; or once we understand why they're doing what they're doing. But judging someone *b'chafz'chut*, in the balance of merit, is not typically the first place our minds go when things aren't the way we want them to be.

Instead, we often have the tendency to send our minds down the road of a cynical interpretation of things. Cynicism is all about seeing the worst possibilities in people, presuming the worst of intentions. In cynicism, we imagine that people are driven only by selfishness and laziness and indulged in their worst motivations. Cynicism so often becomes the practice of cultivating disdain for the people who frustrate us or disappoint us.

...And when we are in that cynical mode, don't we just love to treat it like a gift we want to spread around? Don't we just love to recruit other people to hear about what idiots everyone else is being?

It is so easy to build up a little clutch of co-conspirators, commiserate-ors: "You are not going to believe what so-and-so did," or "can you believe that they're doing this to me?" We just draw around us a nice little negative-feedback circle.

And when someone else invites us into their negative-feedback circle, well it's natural for us to respond sympathetically, by validating their cynicism, by adding some of our cynicism. After all, we don't want to be outside the circle; we want to be in. Because everyone outside of the circle – is an idiot. That's the whole point of sharing the wealth of our cynicism, commiserating about what idiots the other people are.

Now, I don't want to speak for anyone else here, but it's been my experience that we don't typically walk away from one of these little group binges of cynicism and negativity feeling real happy and optimistic about things; full of love for our fellow human beings....

In fact, the corrosive result of our cynicism, whether it's with other people or by ourselves, is that we end up training ourselves to see the worst in people and in situations. We put ourselves into the habit of looking for evidence to support our cynicism. And while it may temporarily make us feel close and connected to our commiserate-ors, ultimately it does make us miserable. We may get a little boost each time we "ding" someone with our cynicism, like a little self-administered dose of superiority. For a few moments we may feel better about ourselves by feeling better **than** that other person. But ultimately, allowing the habits and thought patterns of cynicism to run-on unchecked, to become normative for us, ultimately it is an alienating and unhappy experience.

The fact of the matter is – it's pretty hard to be happy, when we think the people around us are jerks.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We can break ourselves of our habits of cynicism. We can train ourselves to cut short the thought-paths of our cynical assumptions before they become full-blown.

Now, believe me, it's not easy. I know because I've been working on it for the last few weeks while I've been writing this sermon. Learning how to reign-in our cynicism, how to control our annoyance at annoying situations takes effort and a lot of self-awareness – because we do it so instinctively, without even realizing we're doing it.

...Just last week, I went into a restaurant to have a bite to eat while working on this sermon. The waitress took my drink order, and then disappeared into the kitchen. After a while, I'm sitting there, and I'm ready to order, she's nowhere to be found, and I start thinking, "what's the deal here. I'm ready. What's she doing? Taking a break?"

And that's when I looked down and saw what I was working on.

Here I am, preparing this message, and giving the waitress anything but the benefit of the doubt.

It is a really hard thing to do; to give people a break without being asked. It's difficult because it does go against our nature. But if Jewish ethics have any consistent themes, then surely one of them is that we should try to raise ourselves up above what comes naturally for us. We should push ourselves beyond our natural inclinations to develop in ourselves the habits of a *yetzer tov*, an inclination toward the good. And what that means in this case is that when someone's behavior has a negative impact on us, rather than assuming the worst, we should assume a reason.

Now, if we want to do this; if we want to cultivate in ourselves the habit of giving people the benefit of the doubt, then we have to learn how to spot our cynical voice, a how to respond to it with suggestions of *chafz'chut*, that balance of merit. We have to train ourselves to imagine possible reasons why a person is doing what they are doing. Maybe they're driving slowly because they have something delicate in their car. Maybe a person didn't finish a project because they've got ten other projects that are also emergencies on their plate. Maybe so-and-so didn't say hello to us, not because they're rude, but because they didn't see us.

It's not so difficult, and yet, it's incredibly difficult. We are all capable of giving people the benefit of the doubt, of cutting them some slack without having to be asked for it. But actually doing it - that's the hard part. Learning how to get our voice of cynicism under control, that takes determination. We have to decide that we want to do it. We have to stop ourselves when the cynical voice has gone on long enough. And then we have to replace it with the voice of *chafz'chut*.

I'm not saying that we have to get rid of the voice of cynicism altogether. First of all, that's just not possible. It'd be like removing the sense of smell from our noses. And second of all, it's not desirable.

Sometimes we do need to question people's motives. Sometimes people do behave badly, or inappropriately, or are trying to take advantage. And the last thing that we need to do is be naïve fools in situations like that. If something bad is happening it is our obligation to do something about it. So it is worthwhile to maintain our ability to smell something fishy if there is something fishy going on.

And sometimes, a little dose of cynicism feels good. We don't need to be oppressively sunny all the time. It can feel good to go-off on something that is annoying us. It can make us feel better to indulge that cynical itch by blowing off a little steam sometimes.

But cynicism... cynicism, I think, is like garlic. Just the right amount can give a dish a delicious and interesting flavor. But too much... too much spoils the entire meal, and leaves us with indigestion. Too much garlic... and we end up taking its stink with us wherever we go. Just like our cynicism.

We don't have to be angels. We don't have to be saints. A little indulgence in our natural cynicism is not so bad. But once we have indulged that little bit, we need to be able, figuratively speaking, to pop a breath mint; to get that stink of cynicism out of our mouths.

Once the cynical voice in our head has had its little say, we get to decide to shut it down; to give the benefit of the doubt instead.

Now, it may be, sometimes, that the benefit of the doubt that we give to people is not deserved. We may discover that the explanations for their behavior that we imagined are wrong. But better to assume an excuse and be wrong, than the other way around. As Rabbi Zelig Pliskin puts it, "By judging someone favorably, even if your assumption is wrong, you still fulfill a Torah commandment."

Not only is it a mitzvah to give the benefit of the doubt, but it's a mitzvah that yields its own reward. When we begin to look for the good, we begin to see the good. When we push ourselves to keep imagine an explanation, another perspective, then we get to cut short those cynical scripts that run in our heads and develop the positive ones. But we should be careful - there is the possibility that we might actually become happier people if we start to do this.

So not only is it a mitzvah to give people the benefit of the doubt, and not only do we stand the potential to increase our happiness by doing so, but there is also certain equity to it; a certain fairness: we should give to others the benefit of the doubt that we would want for ourselves. Don't we want for others to assume the best about us; to cut us some slack without having to ask for it?

It's Yom Kippur, and these Days of Repentance are all about judging our actions. What have we done right? What have we done wrong?

So imagine, where would each of us be if all of our deeds, good and bad were placed on the scales of judgment, and then, added to the balance is all the *chaf z'chut*, all the benefit of the doubt that we gave - or failed to give - to others. It's a little notion of poetic justice from the Talmud.

I don't know if that's really the way things work up there. But I do know, that if there is any sense of what-goes-around-comes-around in this world or a next one, that I've got some catching-up to do on my *chaf z'chut* account.

So I'm going to work on that this year. I want to cultivate in myself this habit, this practice of assuming an explanation, of giving other people the benefit of the doubt.

Even if they are driving like an idiot.

May they too be inscribed in the book of life.

*Shanah tovah, and gamar chatimah tovah.*