

Can We Ever Really Know Anything or Anyone?

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September 10, 2018

A favorite topic of college philosophy courses is the existential question of how we know what we know. The term for this is epistemology. If you ever want to sound intelligent and impress others, just drop the word epistemology into a conversation at a dinner party, as in – “What do you think are the epistemological ramifications of that course of action?” Works every time, even if it makes no sense whatsoever.

A well-known example of epistemology comes from a 1976 article by Alvin Goldman, which goes like this -- Suppose Henry is driving through a Wisconsin town, admiring the scenery. He sees a barn and believes “there’s a barn.” But, unbeknownst to Henry, this Wisconsin town is full of papier-mâché barn facsimiles, which from the road, look like real barns. It just so happens that Henry is looking at one of the few real barns in the area, rendering his belief that he is seeing a barn true. Henry has no reason to believe that he is not seeing what he thinks he is seeing, since barns are common in this part of the state, and he has no way of knowing that he’s in a town populated mostly with replicas of barns. But in truth, he doesn’t really know that he is looking at an actual barn. What he believes to be true in this case is actually true. We know this, but he does not. For had he looked at any other time in his travels through the town, he probably would be looking at a fake barn and think it is real. Goldman concludes, that knowledge would seem to require that in order for it to be reliable, it should not be merely a matter of coincidence that one’s belief is true.

This is more than just an interesting exercise in verbal sophistry or a philosophical syllogism or tautology to debate and discuss at your Rosh Hashana lunch or dinner later today.

The story is about how we are dependent on our senses to empirically reveal reality to us, and how easily we can be deceived. The question of how we know what we know is far more significant and relevant than you may realize. Exploring this issue raises the question – Can we ever know all we need to know? Can we ever know everything we should know? Can we ever really know anything?

A New Yorker cartoon by Charles Boscotti portrays a group of men in business suits sitting around a conference table. With an air of authority the boss brusquely declares, “Nobody knows anything.” The cartoonist uses thought bubbles to let us know what each person sitting around the table thinks about the proposition expressed by the boss that nobody knows anything. The first guy thinks, what a relief. The bubble over the head of the next guy says, thank goodness. And the last guy in the cartoon breathes a sigh of relief as he thinks to himself, “I thought it was just me.”

Understanding the process of how we acquire knowledge, and recognizing the limited scope of our ability to do so is important because the decisions we make and the conclusions we draw are based on the information available to us.

I have been thinking about the subject of what we know and how we know it, and how these factors affect the judgments we make for a long time, but especially after I saw and read about what happened at a Chicago Cubs baseball game earlier this summer.

In case you missed the story -- in late July a fan at Wrigley Field grabbed a ball that was being tossed to a kid. The scene was captured on the jumbotron, and broadcast not just in the stadium, but on social media and news shows around the country. I saw the clip on the late-night news and heard the broadcasters condemn and shame the guy for taking a baseball intended for the kid in front of him. Based on what I saw, I concurred with the anchors and agreed that the guy who looked giddy and oblivious to what he had just done was obnoxious and cold-hearted.

Within 24 hours, the man was roundly condemned and blasted on social media for being selfish and inconsiderate. He was called a jerk and much worse. One headline from thesportsdaily.com read, "Terrible Cubs fan savagely steals foul ball away from young child." It ended its story: "What a piece of trash. He should be banned from attending games at Wrigley from here on out," it said.

As a fan sitting next to the man, Chuck Mycoff commented, "The whole world is calling this man the most evil guy in the world for being a ball thief."

The only problem is this is not the whole story. Here's what really transpired --

The mother of the intended recipient defended the guy, "There were many foul balls in our section that day and they were happily shared by everyone. What people didn't see is that our son already had a foul ball and he had already said that if he got another ball he would give it to the little boy behind him," which is exactly what the guy did.

It turns out, according to Mycoff, "The ball fell down under the seat, between my legs. The guy picked it up and the 12 seconds of video looks like he just callously gave it to his wife and ignored the kid. But the guy handed it to his wife -- who in turn handed to a kid next to her that she didn't know." He was vilified for being selfish and heartless, but it turns out -- he didn't even keep the ball. "He gave two balls to the kids next to them that they didn't even know, helped the kid in front of us get a ball, and he's being made out to be a villain. Television and social media read it the wrong way and made up a story... It's crazy."

Cubs' spokesman Julian Green issued an official statement on behalf of the club, clarified and confirmed that "the man did not steal the ball from the boy. Unfortunately, a video that was quickly posted and unverified has made a national villain out of an innocent man who was attending his first Cubs game to celebrate his wedding anniversary. In fact, the man gave several balls to children in the same section and his wife as an anniversary present. We hope this experience won't ruin his trip to Chicago and Wrigley Field and we invite him to come back soon."

I am certain that this is neither the first time, nor will it be the last time that social media gets a story wrong. And it most certainly is not the most serious offense I could cite. I am sure that each and every one of you can probably think of a myriad of other examples of the phenomenon I am describing.

On the surface, the story might not seem to have much to do with the High Holidays, but in many respects it has a lot to do with the issues we are asked to consider and reflect upon during the Yamim HaNoraim. It serves as an important backdrop and cautionary tale for our times and compels us to focus on themes connected to Rosh Hashana.

I am reminded of the joke about a defendant who was charged with the crime of doing his Christmas shopping early. The judge scolded the prosecutor for bringing such a frivolous case to the court and tells him, "You know, counsel, it's not illegal to shop early for Christmas." And the prosecutor replied, "It is if you are doing it before the store is open."

Taking what one sees at face value and passing judgment without context and not knowing what happened before, during or after the incident can lead to serious errors with potentially long-lasting adverse consequences.

And yes – the tendency to do this does have political implications.

And yes, I am referring to the information we receive and what you see and hear in the news.

I hasten to add that it applies to those on the both the left and the right, to liberals and conservatives, to those who watch Fox as well as to those who get their news from MSNBC or CNN.

But on this Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment, I am concerned not just with how this is manifested in the media and the impact it has on politics, but with how this tendency plays out in our personal lives.

How often do we make harsh, quick judgments about people and impugn their motives without seeing the whole picture, or looking at the whole person? How often do we rush to conclusions about strangers, people we have just met, or about those we do not even know based on false assumptions, first impressions or partial information? We do this all the time with public figures and celebrities who we are quick to put on a pedestal and even quicker to knock off over any indiscretion they commit. But even more importantly, there are times when we do this with friends, family, and sometimes, and perhaps even especially, with our spouses, loved ones, and those closest to us.

One of the names of the holiday of Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, because we believe our fate and the fate of the world is determined on this day. Surely we want whoever judges us to see and carefully review all the evidence, not to have a partial or distorted view. On Rosh Hashana our prayers constantly affirm that God knows all, sees all, and that God remembers all of our deeds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Before destroying the two cities, the Torah says that God exclaims, “*Arda-nah va’ereh ha’k’tzakatah ha’ba’ah elai asu cala ... I will go down now, and see whether they have done according to the cry which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know.*” (Genesis 18:21). Rashi and other commentators note that before deciding to destroy Sodom and Gomorah, the Bible explicitly states that God went down to see what was going on. He wanted to take a closer look for Himself, so as not to judge from afar, or base His assessment on a partial, incomplete picture.

God is teaching us mortals by His example that we should gather all the information before making a conclusion or judgment about people.

In the 21st century, when everyone who has a cell phone can chronicle and record just about anything and everything, we might think we have access to more information and greater transparency than previous generations. But as we learned from our story of the baseball game, seeing a snippet does not suffice to let us know or see the whole picture. Too often society and individuals make judgments based on select, sometimes edited, inconclusive excerpts. Too often we come to snap conclusions based on a single act and overlook the whole worth of an individual. As a result, lives can be destroyed instantly. Reputations sullied. Careers ruined. Relationships hurt. Friendships shattered.

A classic Yiddish short story by the beloved Yiddish writer, Y.L. Peretz which I have always loved called "If Not Higher" in certain respects, bears a resemblance to our baseball story.

Set in a shtetl, a small village in 19th century-Europe, the story is about a rabbi who during the days prior to the High Holidays, would disappear, vanish. While the rest of the members of the congregation would gather for Selichot prayers early in the morning, they would pray on their own, for their rabbi was nowhere to be found. And if anyone ever asked where the rabbi was, or why he wasn't there at this most holy of times, the people in the village would say, "Our rabbi is in heaven."

One day a Litvak came to town and asked where the rabbi is, he was told by the simple townspeople, what they always told everyone, "Our rabbi is in heaven." They believed that he was pleading the cause on behalf of his people before the throne of the Holy One Blessed be He.

This after all, is the season of judgment, the time when the actions of each and every member of the community is reviewed and their fate for the coming year is determined.

It is difficult for a Litvak to accept on face value what he is told, especially something as irrational as the preposterous notion that the rabbi had gone to heaven, and just before the holidays, no less! And so since he was a cynic who did not believe the *bubbe meisa* he had been told, the visitor decided to take it upon himself to expose the ruse and find out what the rabbi was really up to. That night, in the cover of darkness he snuck into the rabbi's modest home, slid under the rabbi's bed and waited to see where the rabbi really went.

The next morning, he peeked from under the bed, and saw the rabbi get dressed – only he was dressed not like a rabbi, nor even in traditional Jewish garb, but like a Russian peasant, a lumberjack to be more precise. Instead of heading towards the beit midrash, the prayer hall or the house of study, the rabbi entered the forest, took out his ax and started to chop down a tree, bundle the wood, and carry it out on his back.

He then went and knocked on the door of a woman with a very frail voice who asked who was at the door. The rabbi responded in the gruff voice and accent of a Russian peasant that he is Ivan who has come to sell her wood very cheap. The woman who is sickly and can barely get out of bed, objects and says, "I am a poor widow. I cannot afford to pay you for the wood, even if it is just a few kopeks."

The rabbi in the guise of a Russian peasant says to her, "Don't worry, I trust you." And when she asks, "but who will kindle the fire for me?" The rabbi answers, "Don't worry. I will kindle it for you."

And listening closely, the Litvak realizes that the rabbi is not just groaning from exertion as he bends down to place the wood on the stove and to light the fire, but is mumbling the morning prayers, the shaharit and selichot prayers, as he is kindling the fire. He sees the rabbi continue to do this for other poor indigent widows along the way.

And so, from that day on, whenever the Litvak heard people would say at the time of the morning prayers that their rabbi had ascended to heaven, he would quietly add, "...*Im lo lema'leh mezeh*,... If not higher."

The beautiful poignant short story shows that what we see in others and what we think about others often reveals more about us than about them. I think one reason the story is associated with the

High Holiday season is not just because of when it takes place, but because ultimately the skeptic in the story realizes that he was being too harsh – and changes his perception.

One of the reasons the High Holidays are so special is that it is a time of new beginnings and second chances. We are given the opportunity to start anew. We are called upon to change our ways, not an easy task. While we should strive to do so, the truth is we may not be able to change ourselves and set aside our habits. But we do have control over how we view and process what we see, the conclusions we come to, and how we judge others.

Our perception of reality is too often seen through the prism of our own perceptions. And the filter of personal perspective can distort what we see. As the old saying goes, “to a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

In today’s Torah reading, after Hagar is cast away and is all alone in the wilderness the text tells us that an angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and reassures her: “*Al tiri. Kee shma Elohim el kol ha na’ar asher hu sham.* And God heard the voice of the lad... and the angel of God said unto Hagar, “Do not be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.” (Genesis 21:17)

The commentators pick up on the unusual language and say it comes to teach us that God sees each of us where we are and for who and what we are. The commentator Maharal says only God is able to judge because only God can see the whole person.

So what about mortals?

What about us?

Can any of us see everything?

Returning to the proposition I raised at the outset: How do we know what we know? How do we form our judgments? And are we too quick to jump to conclusions?

A teaching in Pirke Avot, the popular tractate of the Talmud known as “The Sayings of the Sages” attributed to the sage Hillel offers sound advice. It teaches: “*Al tadin et chavercha ad she’ tag’ia lim’komo.* Do not judge your fellow until you have been in his place.”

Precisely because we are not God and are not all-knowing, we should be guided by this, as well as the corollary taught by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Perachaya in the preceding chapter, “*Ve’hevi dan et kol adam le’caf zechut.* When you assess or judge people, always tip the balance in their favor,” meaning - Judge people favorably. Give them the benefit of the doubt.

At this time of year, when the Book of Life is open, and our deeds are weighed, considered and judged, let us appreciate that the judge is a God who sees all. Although God who sees the child where he is and who as we say in our prayers, recalls and knows all our deeds, we, however, are incapable of such total knowledge. As a result, since none of us can ever see and know everything, I suggest on this Rosh Hashanah, let us recognize our inadequacies and shortcomings – as well as those of our loved ones. As Kohelet, the Book of Ecclesiastes teaches, “*Ein tzadik ba’arets asher ya’aseh tov ve’lo yechtah.* There is none so righteous on this earth who does good and never sins.” No one is perfect.

Human beings are complex with contradictory layers defying the temptation to simply categorize people as good or bad. Oskar Schindler, a womanizer who was arrested several times for public drunkenness was a member of the Nazi party and yet he went on to be recognized as a Righteous Gentile by Yad VaShem in Israel for his extraordinary courage in risking his own life to save 1200 Jews by employing them in his factory in Poland, reminding us of the importance of looking at the whole person, the whole picture.

Let us resolve in the coming year to keep this in mind, to be less hasty in our judgments, to give people the benefit of the doubt, to be more understanding, more loving, and more forgiving, especially of our loved ones.

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Rosh Hashana 5779
September 10, 2018
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