

A Shabbat message from Rabbi Rheins  
*Shabbat Vayeira 5781*

## **Making Excuses . . .for Others**

The Baal Shem Tov (Besht, 1700-1760) taught, “Don’t judge someone else, because you may have the same fault in yourself. Learn to judge other people favorably, since loving your neighbor as yourself is a great principle of the Torah and the basis for all spiritual perfection. How can you love another person when you are judging him? So when you see someone sinning or acting wrongly, or hear people talking about another person’s sin or wickedness, consider it as certain that there is at least a trace of that same sin in you!”

An aphorism, even one from a great teacher, can leave us nodding and agreeing and then forgetting and fleeing. What are we to do with such wisdom? We can dismiss it as cliché or a lame platitude. Or, especially in a time of tumult, we take the time to consider it a bit more closely. So, let’s follow what the Besht was saying a bit further:

*“When you see someone acting in a lowly way or committing a serious sin, try to find an excuse for him. Tell yourself that he did what he did because of the coarseness of what he’s made of; or because of the evil inclination burning within him, overpowering him, or perhaps that he really didn’t understand the seriousness of the sin.*

*If you want to achieve spiritual greatness, instead of justifying yourself, learn to admit your own sins and only justify the sins of others!"*

Of course, it is one thing to judge favorably and even to make excuses for the behavior of a friend, loved one or someone you admire. It is quite another to stand up in defense of those you dislike or oppose. In this week's Torah portion, *Vayeira* (Genesis 18:1- 22:24), our ancestor Abraham rose in defense of the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham knew firsthand the brutality and cruelty of those cities. And yet, he bravely fought to defend Sodom and Gomorrah against the united forces of four Kings from the east (Genesis 14). Abraham knew from his nephew Lot how hateful and inhospitable were the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah, and yet he argued passionately to God in order to save them:

*<sup>23</sup> Abraham came forward and said, "Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? <sup>24</sup> What if there should be fifty innocents within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? <sup>25</sup> Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" (Gen 18:23-25)*

As we are wobbling from the most contentious and divisive election campaign in memory, still uncertain as to who will be the next President of the United States, it won't be easy to stop the finger pointing, blaming and shaming. But stop it we must.

It will certainly not be easy to heal this nation and our relationships that have been strained under the stress of the election, the COVID pandemic, the isolation and the shaky economy. Thankfully, our patriarch Abraham and the beloved Baal Shem Tov have provided templates for healing. Instead of harshly judging others, we need to make heroic efforts to better understand those with whom we disagree. Instead of condemning as a lost cause whole regions of this country, we need to stand up in their defense in order to build a stronger, more perfect union.

Yes, there are those so filled with hate and rage on the extreme right and left of society that have no interest in reconciliation. But for the vast majority of us, now is the time to reassert the common decency and values of tolerance and mutual respect that are the bedrocks of our nation.

May this Shabbat be a day of rest, recovery, renewal, and a reclamation of the goodness that unites all people, regardless of their faith, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

*Shabbat Shalom,*

*Rick*

Rabbi Rick Rheins

P.S.

After the *Erev Shabbat* services on Friday evenings, we have been meeting for a few minutes on virtual Zoom *oneg* to greet one another and schmooze. It's a wonderful way to renew friendships, meet new people and overcome the isolation forced on us by this pandemic. I hope to see you soon!

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