



## Week 1 דן לכף זכות

This guided learning sheet explores the *middah* of *Dan L'kaf Zechut*—judging others favorably. Each source is accompanied by commentary and discussion questions to facilitate personal reflection and group dialogue.

In addition to the main questions included with each source, you will find two sets of extra questions in the boxes below. The first set of questions are general questions about participants' experience of working on *middot* and stay the same from week to week. These questions are a helpful tool to check in and reflect on growth over time in a consistent manner. Even though the questions remain the same, the answers will naturally change depending on which *middah* is being explored. You may choose to start or end your learning session with these questions. The second set of questions are specifically related to *Dan L'kaf Zechut* and can be used at the beginning, interspersed throughout, or at the end of the session to deepen the learning.

### **General questions when reflecting on the middah of the week:**

General questions remain the same from week to week and are helpful tools to reflect on growth over time. The answers will vastly change depending on the *middah* of the week.

1. What did I learn about myself this week?
2. What felt difficult when working on this *middah*?
3. What felt natural or easy when working on this *middah*?
4. How has practicing this *middah* improved your life or how does it have the potential to impact your life?
5. Does anyone in the group have a story of how this *middah* came up in a real situation (this week or beyond)? How did you respond?
6. Does anyone in the group have insights, advice or tips to keep in mind when working on this *middah* going forward?

### **Specific questions for discussion about *Dan L'Kaf Zechut*:**

1. How can we avoid the negative side effects of personal growth? Specifically, how can we use our personal growth as a tool for deeper compassion, rather than letting it create distance or judgment—especially when we're proud of how far we've come and tempted to measure others by our own standards?
2. How does one "look away" when one sees a flaw in a family member whom they are responsible for?
3. How can we counter the nature of being judgemental of those who are not in our "inner circle" (i.e. other friend groups, families, schools, hashkafot, communities, cultures, nationalities)?
4. How can we avoid thinking negatively once we have already noticed a flaw in someone else and are bothered by it?
5. Is criticism always coming from a weakness in oneself? Aren't we supposed to be discerning, protective, perceptive and vigilant? Is it fair to say criticism is always about the critic? What if it comes from a place of insight or responsibility?

### **Source 1**

*Among the many Mitzvot in Parshat Kedoshim are a number of mitzvot connected to judgement that give us insight into the idea of judging another.*

**ויקרא י"ט:ט"ו**

לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂוּ עֹלָל בְּמִשְׁפָּט לֹא־תִשָּׂא פָנֶי־דָל וְלֹא תִהְיֶה רֵבִי גָדוֹל בְּצִדְקַת תִּשְׁפֹּט עַמִּיתְךָ:

You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your fellow fairly.

***Takeaway:*** *Justice must be impartial. It requires discipline and awareness of bias. This source serves as a starting point in understanding the imperative to judge others favorably, in all areas of our lives.*

#### **Discuss:**

1. What challenges might arise in striving for impartiality and avoiding bias?
2. What kinds of bias might make us judge others harshly or leniently?

## Source 2

### שבועות ל' ע"א

תנו רבנן: "בצדק תשפט עמיתך" – שלא יהא אחד יושב ואחד עומד, אחד מדבר כל צרכו ואחד אומר לו: "קצר דבריה". דבר אחר: "בצדק תשפט עמיתך" – הוי דן את חבירך לכף זכות.

The Sages taught: The verse states: "But in righteousness shall you judge your colleague" (Leviticus 19:15), from which it is derived: The court must ensure that there will not be a situation where one litigant is sitting and one litigant is standing, or a situation where one litigant says everything that he needs to say to present his case and one litigant, the judge says to him: Curtail your statement. Alternatively, it is derived from the verse: "But in righteousness shall you judge your colleague," that you should judge another favorably, and seek to find justification for his actions, even if when interpreted differently his actions could be judged unfavorably.

**Takeaway:** *We are all judges in the courtrooms of our lives. We need to judge things and people when making decisions. We are discerning when it comes to who we let into our inner circle and who we do not. We are judges when we make choices about the friends, schools, communities etc., that we associate with.*

**Discuss:** If we are all tasked to be judges in some capacity, what constructive need is there for judgement in our lives?

## Source 3

*The next source shifts us from judgement in the courtroom to relationship dynamics.*

### משנה אבות א'ו'

יהושע בן פרחיה ונמאי הארבלית קבלו מהם. יהושע בן פרחיה אומר, עשה לך רב, וקנה לך חביר, והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות:

Yehoshuah ben Perahiah and Nittai the Arbelite received [the oral tradition] from them. Yehoshuah ben Perahiah used to say: appoint for thyself a teacher, and acquire for thyself a companion and judge each person favorably.

**Takeaway:** *There is a connection between how we judge people and interactions with those close to us, like teachers and friends.*

**Discuss:** How might judging favorably be connected to sustaining relationships?

The following sources explain the Mishnah's connection of judging favorably, acquiring a friend and having a teacher.

#### Source 4

##### ישמח משה

"והוי דן את כל איש לכף זכות". החשדון, צר העין, המוכן תמיד לחשוב שהאנשים שהוא בא במגע איתם עושים את מעשיהם מתוך כוונות רעות ואנוכיות, ירחיק במחשבות כאלה את רבו ממנו וגם חברו לא ירצה להישאר עוד ידידו.

"And judge every person favorably." The suspicious person, the narrow-minded one, who is always ready to assume that the people he interacts with act out of bad or selfish intentions, will distance his teacher from him with such thoughts, and even his friend will no longer wish to remain his companion.

**Takeaway:** *There is a real cost of suspicion and judgmentalism, impacting even our closest relationships.*

##### **Discuss:**

1. How does judgmental thinking erode trust and connection?
2. Can you recall a time when suspicion or judgement pushed someone away?

#### Source 5

##### רב הירש

"רב וחבר" – הם התארים הרמים ביותר שנכתיר בהם אנשים יקרים לנו. ואמנם, בדרך כלל, יחידים הם האנשים הנלווים אלינו בדרכי החיים, שבדין יזכו האותם התארים. אך למרות שרק מעטים הם, הרי מכל מקום: והוי דן את כל האדם לכף זכות. נישמר מאוד, שלא לחרוץ דין קשה על מי שלא יהיה. אנו חייבים לנצור בליבנו דעה חיובית – ככל שרק אפשר – על כל אדם ואדם. ואפילו במקום שמעשה הזולת יעורר חשדות, ועשוי להתפרש להרבה פנים שונים – מצוה עלינו לדון לכף זכות.

"Teacher and friend" — these are the loftiest titles we bestow upon those dear to us. Indeed, in most cases, there are only a few individuals who accompany us on life's journey who truly deserve such titles. But even though they are few, nonetheless: *"And judge every person favorably."* We must be extremely careful not to pass harsh judgment on anyone. We are obligated to guard a positive outlook in our hearts — as much as possible—toward every single person. Even in situations where another's actions arouse suspicion, and could be interpreted in many different ways — it is a mitzvah (a moral and spiritual obligation) to judge them favorably.

**Takeaway:** *Being dan l'kaf zechut and maintaining a favorable perspective is an obligation, not just a nice suggestion — it is a spiritual discipline that builds compassion. Further, it is an obligation to judge **all** people favorably, not just those in our inner circle.*

##### **Discuss:**

1. Do you see favorable judgment as a choice or a mitzvah?
2. What challenges arise in maintaining a positive outlook toward others?

## Source 6

### באר אבות

והנה טבע התנאים הללו גורם להיות קנאה ובקורת מעוררת מצד האדם אל רבו ואל חבר שכזה ולבקר אחרי מעשיהם ואחרי מנהגייהם. והקנאה מעוררת נטיה למצות את עומק הדין עליהם ולראות את הצד הגרוע, משום כך הזהיר ואמר "דן את כל האדם – גם אלה הקודמים – לכף זכות".

Indeed, the very nature of these relationships — between a person and their teacher or close companion — can naturally give rise to jealousy and criticism. A person may find themselves scrutinizing the actions and behaviors of such individuals. Jealousy stirs a tendency to apply strict judgment toward them and to focus on their shortcomings. Therefore, the teaching comes to warn us: "Judge every person — even those held in the highest regard — favorably." Even those who came before you, even those in positions of greatness, are included in this command. Resist the pull to judge harshly; strive to see their actions in a favorable light.

**Takeaway:** *The closeness of relationships (like a teacher or friend) invites jealousy and criticism — which must be guarded against. Sometimes we judge harshly not because we dislike someone — but because we admire them or feel insecure.*

### Discuss:

1. Have you ever found yourself judging someone more harshly *because* of your closeness to them?
2. Why do you think we may judge those closest to us more?
3. In thinking about sources 4, 5, and 6, do you find yourself more critical of those close to you (inner circle) or those not close to you (outer circle)? Why do you think that is?

## Source 7

### הרב ידעיה הפניני

הרי"ז ז"ל לאדם לדון את חברו לזכות כעניין במה שנראה לו שהוא ע"כ פק ידיעתו לזכות באפשר רחוק הוא יקנה טוב וחוזר ונמצא וירין את הכף הכבדה, וידון עליו אחריו לדון לזכות על דרך המתחייבים בהם. (מי שמביאה ראייה מן הפנים של הנאשם או מן הראיות שמסביב שאין בזה פסול רק שלא השיג עדיין לזכות כראוי). וכן כל אדם חייב לדון את חברו לזכות על דרך זה אם לא ניכר שהוא רשע גמור, ובלבד שלא יתברר אח"כ למפרע קל וחומר.

A person must judge their fellow favorably—even in a case where the favorable interpretation appears to be far-fetched or unlikely, as long as it remains even remotely possible. By doing so, the person acquires merit—for in seeking to tip the scale toward innocence, they may end up arriving at the truth and ultimately reinforce the weightier, more generous side of the scale. This is akin to someone who builds a case for innocence—whether based on the demeanor of the accused or on surrounding evidence—not because there is clear proof of righteousness, but because the individual has not yet been shown to be truly deserving of guilt. Even drawing on expressions or circumstantial evidence that suggest the action is not inherently wrong—just misunderstood or not yet seen in a positive light. And so it is with every person: One must judge their fellow

favorably in this way, unless it becomes clear that the person is an outright evildoer. And certainly, if it is later clarified retroactively that the person was innocent—how much more so must one have judged them favorably from the start.

**Takeaway:** *Even when favorable judgement seems unlikely—lean into it. Favorable interpretation is about seeking out the good, even in the shadow of doubt.*

**Discuss:**

1. What inner qualities do we strengthen when we stretch ourselves to judge positively, even when it's hard?
2. Has there ever been a time when you assumed the worst about someone, only to find out you misunderstood or misjudged the situation?

**Source 8**

*The following source from the Talmud gives us powerful insight into human behavior. Namely, that judgement may reveal more about our own inner struggles than about the person we're judging.*

**קידושין ע"א:י"א**

וכך הפוסל – פסול. ואינו מדבר בשבחא לעולם, ואמר שמואל: במימו פוסל.

And anyone who disqualifies others [by stating that their lineage is flawed], that is a sign that he himself is of flawed [lineage]. Another indication that one's lineage is flawed is that he never speaks in praise of others. And Shmuel says: If one habitually claims that others are flawed, he disqualifies himself with his own flaw. The flaw he accuses them of having is in fact the one that he has.

**Takeaway:** *Keep in mind the potential for inner projection when it comes to judgment. Criticism or judgement of others may reflect more about the critic than the subject of our criticism.*

**Discuss:**

Have you noticed moments where your harsh judgment of others actually came from insecurity within yourself or a deep rooted self-criticism?

## Source 9

*The portions about a woman who is sotah (a married woman who secluded herself with another man) and a nazir (a person who abstains from wine and cutting their hair to attain higher levels of holiness) are put next to each other in the Torah. The following source explores the connection between these seemingly unrelated concepts.*

### **סוטה ב: א'**

רבי אומר: למה נסמכה פרשת נזיר לפרשת סוטה, לומר לך: שכל הרוצה סוטה בקלקולה — נזיר עצמו מן היין.

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi says: Why is the portion of a nazirite placed adjacent to the portion of a *sota*? This was done to tell you that anyone who sees a *sota* in her disgrace as she undergoes the rite of the bitter water should renounce wine, as wine is one of the causes of immodest transgression, as it loosens inhibitions. For the same reason that the Torah teaches these passages one after the other.

**Takeaway:** *Instead of condemning the sotah, the Gemara implies we should be introspective. Her fall is a mirror—not a spectacle. The lesson: When we see someone fall, it's not an invitation to judge, but a prompt to check our own vulnerabilities, even if they are only minutely related and show up differently or subtly in ourselves. This source encourages a personal response to someone else's downfall. Not gossip or shame, but growth. It doesn't say, "condemn the sotah," rather, "reflect and take action in **your own** behavior."*

### **Discuss:**

When I notice someone's flaws or mistakes what is my first reaction—judgment or growth and introspection?

**Now that you have learned these sources, you can use the questions from the question boxes at the beginning of the learning packet for further discussion and reflection.**