

One of the other names for Rosh Hashanah is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgment, because during these 10 days we stand ready to be judged by God, by Dayan HaEmet, the ultimate judge.

The process actually began 40 days ago, at the beginning of the last month of the Hebrew year which is called Elul.

And just as our ancestors at Sinai took 40 days and 40 nights to begin a new relationship with God, when Moses received the second set of tablets, so do we request from God, a favorable judgment after 40 days and nights of prayer and repentance.

The Torah hints that Elul is when the process of judgment begins, by the Torah reading we always read on the first Shabbat in the month of Elul.

Do you know the name of that Torah portion?

Shoftim, which is another word that means judges.

Listen to the opening phrase of that Torah portion –

Shoftim v'Shotrim titen Lecha b'chol shearecha - judges and magistrates you shall place, lecha, for yourself, in all of your gates.

The rabbis are intrigued by what appears to be a superfluous word in this verse – the word “lecha – for you.”

What does this apparently superfluous word teach us – because of course, there are no superfluous words in the Torah?

Since the rabbis designated this Torah portion to always be the first Torah portion after the beginning of the last month of the year, they used this opportunity to start teaching, what is known as "musar," an ethical teaching, to help us prepare for the high holy days.

But before I share with you what our sages teach from this extra word, "lecha," let me review the television show I recommended you might watch in preparation for my sermon tonight.

The name of the Netflix series is "Black Mirror."

Some people compare this series to the well-known television show, "Twilight Zone."

Many of the episodes are somewhat eerie and just about all of them present situations set 10 to 15 years in the future.

The episodes imagine how certain advancements in technology might affect us, change us, transform us as human beings, not always for the better.

Our daughter Ariella recommended this television series to us, and continues to be very pleased whenever her recommendations elicit a sermon from me.

Episode called Nosedive – Plot synopsis from Wikipedia –

The episode is set in a world where people use their smartphones to rate each other from one to five stars for every interaction they have, and where one's rating will impact one's entire life.

It tells the story of Lacie, a young woman overly obsessed with her ratings, who is chosen by her popular childhood friend as the maid of honor for her wedding, and sees it as an opportunity to improve her ratings and achieve her dreams.

However, on her journey to the wedding Lacie gets angry at a customer service worker, beginning the rapid reduction of her rating from 4.2 to 0.

You can only imagine how Lacie reacts to this new rating.

Well, either you will imagine, or you will have to watch the episode if you have not already done so.

Imagine being engaged in a system which requires you to numerically measure every one of your interactions.

And that every interaction influences your overall total score.

If we stop to think about it, we will realize that this happens more frequently than we might otherwise admit.

Isn't it the case that just about after every purchase of an item online, you receive another e-mail to numerically measure and rate the interaction.

Supposedly this helps with customer satisfaction for the future.

Even when you go to the store, in person, you are very often requested to go online after the purchase to fill out a customer survey form to evaluate, to judge, your salesperson.

You are induced to do so with a promise of some reward.

But imagine if every interpersonal reaction, every conversation, every interaction of any kind, was measured, and your status in society was public and dependent upon your score.

Imagine if my rating as a Rabbi and as a human being, was dependent upon your satisfaction with the way I greet you every Shabbat.

I don't want to imagine what it would be like to actually have scores posted on how much you measure and appreciate the sincerity of my Shabbat Shalom to you, week after week.

And I don't know if you want to imagine what I think about every interaction I have with you as well.

Because in this system, as displayed on the television show, it works both ways, all the time.

The truth is that within our interior lives, we all, all the time, do exactly, what Lacie and her cohorts, do throughout the episode called Nosedive.

We judge one another, at least subconsciously after every one of our interactions with each another.

Should the interaction be more meaningful or emotional or joyous or upsetting, then the judgment rises to a greater level of consciousness.

That's who we all are, and I can't imagine anyone who internally, privately, one might even say secretly, lives without making these judgments.

Thank God, most of us are smart enough to keep these judgments private.

We learn, that continuously sharing what we think about other people can often get us into much trouble.

We learn, that our personal judgment of every interaction is not usually required or even welcome.

And while we usually can't help ourselves internally, privately, secretly, we can learn to be less vocal and public about the judgments of the people with whom we interact.

So now let's get back to what the rabbis do with that extra word "lecha-for you" in the opening verse of that Torah portion we read several weeks ago at the beginning of Elul –

Shoftim v'Shotrim titen Lecha b'chol shearecha - judges and magistrates you shall place, lecha, for yourself, in all of your gates.

The rabbis teach us that the word "lecha"– for you, individually, not lachem (plural), teaches us that yes judgment is inevitable, unavoidable, one might say even indispensable.

But the judgment that is indispensable is self judgment, judgment by you, for you.

Shoftim v'Shotrim titen Lecha - judges and magistrates you shall place, lecha, for yourself, but not on other people.

The really important judgment, the judgment that each of us must perform individually, is judgment that focuses on and polices ourselves.

What we should be worrying about tonight and especially at this time of the year, if not all the time, is self policing.

The judgment and the policing of other people are best left to those who have been appointed or hired to perform that task within society.

And, our tradition believes the better we are at self policing, the less heavy-handed will those charged with judging and policing us, need to be.

It is so easy to always judge others.

But that is not what this night is about.

Rather we are tonight obligated to look inward, not around the room, not at me, not at each other, but straight inside.

In our day and age especially, so much of what we do is look outward at others, at the world.

News of other places and other events is brought to our attention instantaneously.

We depend upon that sense of outward connection so much, that when we lose what is called "power," we feel disconnected.

It's as if we are uncomfortable spending a little bit of time just being alone, just being by ourselves, really looking inward and judging ourselves.

We feel not only physically, but spiritually, in the dark, if we're not able to see everything and everybody else.

Perhaps looking inward, looking at ourselves, judging and policing ourselves, is too uncomfortable.

But our tradition says now is the time that we must do this.

We must judge ourselves and we must leave the ultimate judgment to God.

What is the bracha - the blessing, we recite when we hear about the death of someone we know, especially someone who is a relative or with whom we are very close?

“Baruch ... Dayan HaEmet.”

We say this because as much as we want to try to judge the situation, we can't.

Sometimes we're too close – it's too difficult – so we say, let's leave the judgment up to the ultimate Judge of the world and humanity – let's leave this judgment up to God – Dayan HaEmet.

Let me share with you a story about a personal judgment that led me to misinterpret a conversation.

I think you'll find this story interesting.

I think it will also mildly, but clearly demonstrate how judgment of others, especially pre-judgment of others, can get us into trouble.

First just a bit of background - right after the end of Sukkot we observe a holiday called Shemini Atzeret.

One of the main features of this holiday is a special prayer we recite for rain in recognition that the season of rain has begun in Israel.

This prayer is chanted to a special melody and is called, appropriately, Geshem, which means rain.

Several years ago, shortly after this holiday, I attended a service at the Orthodox synagogue in Olney.

A few of us were talking about the recently ended holiday season.

A very nice young man, who had nearly completed his orthodox rabbinic studies asked me the following question:

Do you do Geshem at your shul?

Whereupon I responded, somewhat incredulously, "of course we do Geshem at our shul."

I became defensive because I thought his question implied that we might not be traditional enough.

But as soon as I offered my reply, about three other people, all at the same time, said to me - you don't understand Rabbi Pohl, he was asking whether **you** do geshem at your shul.

Now I admit, that had he posed the question by saying, "do you lead geshem at your shul" there would not have been a misunderstanding.

But, at least part of the reason why I heard his question as I did, was because I was judging him, prejudging him, in his attitude about me, my synagogue, and Conservative Judaism.

They weren't appropriate at that moment.

I should have replied, "what do you mean, when you ask, do you do geshem at you shul?"

The 20th century journalist, Sydney J. Harris once noted, "only the thinnest line divides the righteous from the self-righteous; the pure from the priggish; the holy from the holier than thou; the virtuous from the repressed – and only God knows where the line is drawn.

In a few moments we will begin our confessional prayers aloud, publicly, for the first time on this day of judgment.

One of the sins to which we will confess states – “Al Chayt shechatanu l’fanecha biflilut - we have sinned against you by rashly judging others.

Judgment is necessary and it is part of who we are.

But we are wise not to rush to judgment, or to judge rashly.

Not every interaction requires a public reaction.

Scorecards of judgment are best left to God, because only God has the ability and mechanisms to measure us as complete human beings.

I barely understand the whole story about myself, so how can I understand the whole story about you.

After reviewing all of our interactions with one another, we pray and hope and trust that God will judge us not just with numbers and scores, but with kindness, mercy and compassion.

And in so doing, God will probably be hoping and depending upon us, to do the same with one another.

Amen!