View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When I was a teenager growing up in Seattle, our family was affiliated with Congregation Ezra Bessaroth. Our rabbi was Rabbi William Greenberg, of blessed memory.

I still recall vividly a conversation/confrontation I had with Rabbi Greenberg. He taught me a lesson which I've never forgotten.

One Shabbat morning, a member of our congregation came to services. Rabbi Greenberg gave him a big smile. The gentleman was given the honor of being called to the Torah, and Rabbi Greenberg welcomed him warmly during his sermon.
What was my grievance with Rabbi Greenberg? The man whom he greeted so nicely was a convicted criminal who had just spent several years in the state penitentiary! Everyone in the synagogue knew that this man had done shameful things. Wasn't it terribly inappropriate to show honor in the synagogue to such a scoundrel? Wasn't it an affront to our sense of decency and righteousness to receive this man in synagogue as though he were an upright citizen?

After services, I spoke privately with Rabbi Greenberg and poured out my youthful indignation at what had transpired. Rabbi Greenberg said: "you are entirely right, although you are entirely wrong!" "How am I wrong?" I protested.

Rabbi Greenberg replied calmly: "Try to imagine what went through this man's mind this morning. He must have anguished about whether to show his face in synagogue. He knew that everyone knew he had just been released from prison. How would people greet him? Would he be so ashamed that he would never step foot in synagogue again? The man did illegal things and he was punished by the court. He spent years in prison. Does that mean he has forfeited the right to ever come to synagogue, to rehabilitate himself, to start again with a clean slate? Shouldn't we sympathize with his anguish and shame? Shouldn't we be aware of the tremendous courage he showed in deciding to come to synagogue in spite of the embarrassment he might suffer? Shouldn't we let him know that he is still a member of our community and that we want him to reclaim his place among us, in honesty and full repentance?"

I was entirely right. The man was a criminal and should not be shown honor. I was entirely wrong. I did not have Rabbi Greenberg's wisdom to see the whole picture.

By reaching out to this man, Rabbi Greenberg helped our community accept him back into the fold, and encouraged him to go on to live a responsible, happy and honest life—a credit to himself, his family, and community.

In this week's Torah portion, we read that the high priest was to wear a breastplate that held the names of the tribes of Israel. The high priest symbolized the religious ideals of Israel; he was the one who was highest on the spiritual rung of service to the Almighty. Because he had such a lofty spiritual relationship with God, he might have lost touch with the needs of the people; he might have judged things from the perspective of pure justice. The breastplate, therefore, served as a vital reminder: you represent the people of Israel, you must focus on their needs, on their humanity; you must blend justice with compassion.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880-1953) described the balance that one needs in rendering judgment: "The fundamental teaching of the laws of justice is that one may not show compassion in justice, but should uphold the law whatever the consequences. On the other hand, we are taught to do that which is good and upright.…The question stands in all its strength: how can we blend these two opposites? The short but profoundly poignant answer is: The Lord is with the judge; the holy presence of the God of justice hovers above the head of the judge as he sits in judgment, filled with fear and trembling…" (Mishpetei Uziel, 5700, Introduction).

Rabbi Uziel understood that it requires tremendous sensitivity and divine guidance to render proper decisions. One must be faithful to the strictures of justice…but one must also be compassionate.

Unless one can blend these two tendencies, one can be entirely right and yet be entirely wrong.

Angel for Shabbat