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## Mikvahs, Saunas And The Role of Leadership

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Michael J. Salamon

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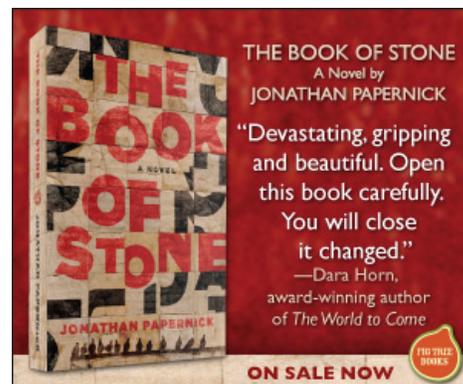
Daniel Kahneman, in his book, “Thinking Fast and Slow,” pointed out that self-control requires attentiveness and determination. Most individuals, however, react promptly, even impulsively without taking the time to perform a clear analysis. Decisions made in haste are often made according to cognitive delusions we all have, two of them are among the most prominent: The Halo Effect and Cognitive Dissonance.

In the 1920’s psychologist, Edward Thorndike found that certain individuals were rated as more effective than others simply based on one of their characteristics. If a person was rated as more handsome than his peers he would also likely be seen as smarter. This type of bias in ratings served to create a halo for the individual. Thorndike’s findings have been reproduced over the decades and remain an enduring piece of the puzzle that explains how we perceive and behave. If you are tall, or well dressed or more articulate than another person is, you are likely to be rated as nicer, smarter, calmer, more considerate, even less likely to commit a crime.

Leon Festinger, another psychologist, found that there is another notion that often misguides our ability to make a correct evaluation. If an individual holds a principle, value, or religious conviction and is confronted by a differing perspective, the discord caused by the new information creates a dissonance in the individual. This cognitive dissonance, as Festinger phrased it, may cause us to flatly reject the new information despite its relevance. If we believe that our neighbor is an upstanding member of society we will have a very difficult time accepting the fact that he may have committed a felony.

A good example of how both the Halo Effect and Cognitive Dissonance impact our daily lives can be best described by a situation in which I was recently involved. I was asked to take part in a meeting of a synagogue’s board regarding the possible expulsion of a member about whom there were rumors of inappropriate behaviors. This sort of consultation is not uncommon for me, and incidents like the one I am about to describe are far too common in general.

At this particular meeting the discussion focused on an individual who was seen making overtures to young children in the synagogue; overtures that were viewed by other adults as “strange,” “weird” and “unacceptable.” The consensus of the board was that the member was not acting in a way that allowed the executives to feel comfortable with him in their synagogue. One of the board members even said that he would not allow the person into his home because there are always young children playing there. Yet, the same board member said that he would vouch for this individual because he is so well spoken, a good attendee at lectures and, “as a neighbor he is a nice person.”



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The board of this synagogue decided not to act, thus allowing this person of questionable integrity unfettered access to the temple, including areas that children were most likely to frequent. The Halo Effect, portraying him as a person who is a good neighbor and so forth, combined with the difficult notion that he might be a potential abuser, created cognitive dissonance that prevented this board from taking action.

It seems that we are in the midst of a series of terribly difficult situations with rabbis, memberships of their synagogues and synagogue boards. Some of the rabbinic behavioral lapses seem more evident than others. The problem with all of these transgressions, however, remains. They are dealt with in what amounts to as an impulsive fashion. In virtually all situations there are supporters of those who have transgressed the bounds of acceptable behaviors. Based on the Halo Effect and Cognitive Dissonance, that is to be expected. But the decisions made as to how to deal with possible offenders should be handled in a more judicious manner. Attempts by the Rabbinical Council of America and Yeshiva University fall short of this and are, in part, also based on Halo and Dissonance. For the sake of proper decision-making, and the most reasonable outcome, situations should be evaluated not just by an immediate board who think they know the alleged offender but also by well-trained objective outsiders who are not distracted by a halo or feelings of dissonance. Until this becomes protocol, messy situations will remain muddled.

*Dr. Salamon is a fellow of the American Psychological Association and author of "Abuse in the Jewish Community."*

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