

## With righteousness shall you judge your fellow. (19:15)

We must be careful not to condemn. While a person may have acted inappropriately, we must give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps we are unaware of what actually occurred or of the extenuating circumstances that quite possibly played a role in the individual's decision to act as he did. There is no question that it is, at times, difficult to give a person the benefit of the doubt – especially when we have no doubt. He was wrong; there are no two ways about it. Yet, the Torah enjoins us to judge him righteously. It becomes increasingly difficult when one is not just merely a spectator, but the individual who took the hit, who was adversely affected and hurt by the action of the other party.

I came across an explanation rendered by the **Baal Shem Tov HaKadosh** that illuminates this *mitzvah*. *Chazal* teach, *Al tadin es chaveircha ad she'tagia limekomo*, "Do not judge your fellow/friend until you have reached his place" or, the more popular, "Do not judge a person until you have walked in his shoes." Simply, we are being told to take into consideration that a person might be going through a lot, that he is under intense pressure, and this is why he might be acting out of character. The fellow who snaps at you might have just received bad news. His plate of troubles is overflowing, and you just happen to be the hapless person who has crossed his path, etc.

The *Baal Shem Tov* renders this *Chazal* homiletically. One should know that what he sees in his friend is a reflection of himself. In other words, what one accuses his friend of doing is actually a representation of something of which he himself is guilty. The judgment that he passes over his friend is the judgment that Hashem will pass over him. In other words, although a person has acted inappropriately, he might be unaware, because people never notice their personal faults – only those of others. Prior to passing judgment on your actions, Hashem wants to see how you will adjudicate the actions of your friend who did the same thing. For some reason, your actions slipped by your perusal – your friend's did not. Hashem is reminding you. If you judge him righteously – you will receive the same Heavenly verdict. If you find him guilty, you now know what to expect. Your ability to judge him came as a result of your having already reached *mekomo* – his place.

The next time that we find it difficult to judge our fellow favorably, we should take into consideration that it is not him whom we are judging; we are simultaneously judging ourselves.