

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

In expounding on this *pasuk*, *Rashi* cites the famous dictum of *Chazal* in *Pirkei Avos*, "Judge all men in a favorable, meritorious light." This axiom is more than good advice, it should be the accepted manner in which a Jew interacts with his fellow man. The *Sfas Emes* interprets the words "*kol adam*," not as "everyman," but as the "whole man."

If one wishes to find some merit in a person, he should judge him as a whole. He should not focus only upon his faults. Rather, he should look at the whole individual, and he will surely find some commendable achievement, some redeeming feature, some laudable character trait. We may add that when one views a particular flaw in the context of a whole person, he might find a basis for this fault. Perhaps there is something in the person's background or some special circumstances that have led to this particular failing. The limitation inherent in our justice system is that we judge only the act -- not the man or the circumstances from which this act has emanated. Rarely are the defendant's good deeds or difficult circumstances taken into consideration. *Chazal* implore us to temper our judgment of our fellowman with the perspective which comes from viewing the total personality in all of its facets.

The question that confronts us, however, is simple: Why should we judge someone favorably if we know that his actions are not above reproach or that his intentions are highly questionable? The *Baal Shem Tov* explains this by citing a basic principle that is accepted throughout *Chazal*. This principle asserts that the same criterion which an individual uses in judging others will be used by Heaven to judge him: "By the yardstick that a man uses to measure -- by that he will be measured." Hence, he who refuses to overlook another's iniquity or denies forgiveness to others who insult him can not expect Hashem to deal otherwise regarding with his own transgression. Likewise, he who judges his fellow man meritoriously will also be graciously accepted by Hashem.

The *Baal Shem Tov* expands on this idea. Prior to passing Divine sentence upon an individual, Hashem questions everyone, even the defendant himself concerning whether he is in agreement with His decree. How is this accomplished? Obviously, the defendant will not acquiesce to being punished for his transgression. Consequently, Hashem presents a hypothetical situation which is similar to the defendant's circumstances, but had occurred in the life of someone else. The manner in which he renders his decision and the actual decision are applied to his own fate. For this reason, one should never utter a harsh statement regarding another Jew, for one may not be aware that this statement might generate and seal his own doom.

In sum, there is no greater merit than to view all Jews in a favorable manner. As we seek to justify our own irrational and sometimes unforgivable behavior, we should do the same for others. We would be remiss not to add a profound insight from *Reb Aharon Karliner, z.l.*, who remarked, "As we are urged to view others in a favorable light, how much more so should we judge the Almighty favorably and not question His ways and actions." Many things happen that are hard for us to accept. We have difficulty understanding the rationale behind much of our fate. We must learn to

"trust" in Hashem and realize that whatever He does is inherently good. It is our lack of vision that prevents us from seeing the ultimate benefit in His every action.