

## **BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT**

The very first verse of this week's Parsha tells us that "These are the words which Moshe spoke to all of Israel..." The Torah then relates how Moshe (in a very subtle and non-offensive manner) reminded the Jewish people of their various failings throughout the years in the desert. The Torah specifically relates that he spoke of these failings "to all of Israel". When Moshe spoke to G-d, however, he related only the positive traits and virtues of the Jewish people. He argued on their behalf, no matter what they did wrong. He always sought to justify their actions, however difficult it was to do so.

We can learn a lot about good middos (character traits) from these events. Often we find ourselves in a situation of hearing something about somebody else and being in a position to say something that might change things for the better. However it is all too easy to remain silent. Moshe teaches us that this is not so. If absolutely necessary, we may find an appropriate moment to mention something that we feel needs attention to a close friend or acquaintance. This only applies to our relationship with that person and to our private communications with that person. When speaking to others about that person, or hearing that person discussed by others, we must always seek to be 'melamed zechus', to give the benefit of the doubt, to advocate on their behalf however unlikely the scenario. Taking this one step further, the ideal would be for us to advocate on that person's behalf in our own mind and not just with other people. Just as I will always have a good excuse and justification when it comes to my own actions and inadequacies, if I truly cherish and respect my colleague, I will apply the same generosity when it comes to their apparent failings.

After all, when it comes to ourselves and 'our own' we always see things differently! I recently read the story of the lady who overheard to ladies in the local supermarket lamenting the behavior of a certain teenage girl. As the lady overheard more and more of the conversation, she became increasingly irritated by the bad behavior she was hearing about and found herself wondering what kind of parents could be so bad and irresponsible as to allow the situation she was hearing about continue. Subsequently, one of the ladies mentioned the name of the girl in question and she realized, to her horror, that they were discussing her own daughter! Of course at that point, she realized how differently she would have judged the situation had she known.

Chassidic tradition takes this idea even further and teaches that when it comes to myself I should be very critical, always looking to improve my behavior and never being satisfied with weak excuses. When it comes to somebody else, I should go to the opposite extreme and seek to ascribe positive motives or good justifications to their actions, however far-fetched this may seem.

As mentioned in the past few weeks, we are in a time of the Jewish

calendar which mourns the destruction of the Second Temple as a result of 'baseless hatred'. The only antidote to baseless hatred is unconditional love. A good start is to be "melamed zechus" on others, to give them the benefit of the doubt and to always judge favorably. May all of us find favor with each other and with G-d and may we merit peace and harmony in our days.