

Seeing Through Others

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

Why is it that when we think badly of others, we are convinced of our smarts? How often have I spoken to someone who has interpreted another's actions in a negative light, and when I urge them to consider the positive possibilities, I am answered by an indignant, "Rabbi, do you think I'm stupid?" Somehow believing the worst about another is taken as a sign of intellect; judging others the way the Mishna advises — that is, favorably — is thought gullible and weak minded.

Curiously that rule does not apply to our own motivations. We are resourceful in discovering why our behavior is excusable or admirable, despite having offended or hurt another. Nobody considers that putting a positive spin on his own behavior makes him stupid.

It generally requires much more imagination and empathy to put oneself in another's shoes and try to figure out why they did what they did. It is easy and slipshod to assume they must be cruel or corrupt. Too many confuse derision with insight. Cynicism is a cheap way of seeming smart; understanding costs time, work, focus, ingenuity, and genuine concern. Come to think of it, those are the qualities that comprise intelligence.