

Working With Difficult People

Friends and Colleagues;

A colleague raised some crucial issues for all of us. They had to do with what do you do when you have to work/counsel/officiate with people you don't like. Or are called upon to do weddings where you are fond of one of the parties but not the other. The specific details don't really matter. In its variations it's something we all face. What follows is my response.

It's true there are some people you just can't stand, but that is often something that has to do with you and not them.

One good antidote for being angry with one or another person in a relationship problem you have to deal with, is to think of the relationship as a dance. And yourself as an observer of a dance. One thing you know about dancing is that "it takes two to tango". One can't do it gracefully without the other. When it's not graceful, but painful, no one is sure as to who is out of step with the music, who is stepping on whose toes, who is leading and who is following. All you know is that something is awry, both are participants in what is happening, and the pain is equal, though it may be experienced differently. No one is to blame; neither is one more responsible for what goes on than the other, even if it is a threesome. If you take a stance that no one is to blame, it will ease your work significantly. And you will realize that your hallucination about the "guilty" one and the "innocent" party is just that-a hallucination. He couldn't do it without her, and she couldn't do it without him. A useful neon sign to keep bright and flashing, inside your head, is that no matter what you think you're seeing or hearing, it's always 50 percent. As a teacher of mine, John Kildahl taught me years ago. "There are no innocent victims of interpersonal difficulties except for very small children."

Still, though the above helps, there are still people you can't stand. That happens. That's especially tough in the rabbinate where the shepherd is supposed to love all the sheep. If nothing else helps, focusing on the Tzelem Elohim that is the core of the person you are with, may well provide you with a different view. And knowing that each human being is not a self, that each of us is the relationship between our many "selves" will help. What you are being shown by the person you are working with is just one side of that self/relation. Look for and go after the hidden part. It will make your work easier.

If even that doesn't work, attending to the Tzelem within yourself and how you are alienated from it, would be useful. And where you are alienated from your own Tzelem, do your best to get back in relationship with it.

And if all else doesn't help, remind yourself that as a rabbi you are both a symbolic exemplar and more human than anything else. It is a [both/and] - not an [Either/Or] proposition.