

Going Crazy: Getting the Message Across

Category: Beshalach, Shemos

Why do other organizations fail to copy Chabad's model? Because they don't know the lesson of the splitting of the sea.

Who is Really Crazy?

[Ask your crowd:] Meshugener: is it a Hebrew word or Yiddish word?

Most of us may think it's Yiddish. But, for your information, the word meshugeh is Hebrew, and it appears in Tanach at least five or six times.

But the real news is just who is referred to as meshugeh in Tanach. Who does the Tanach call meshugeh, crazy? You might not believe it, but the Jewish nation at various times referred to prophets as "meshugeh."

There are at least three places in Tanach where the prophet at hand is described as "meshugeh." One verse, Melachim II, Chapter 9, verse 11, states, "Why has this meshugeh [person] come to you?" Medieval commentator Rabbi Dovid Cordovero (known by the acronym Radak) explains: "Prophets were referred to as meshugeh."

And that's not the only place. The Book of Yirmiyahu (9:26) states, "for every man who is crazy and who prophesizes," and the Radak again explains: "Prophets were disparagingly referred to as meshugeh."

Additionally, the Book of Hoshea (9:7) states, "Eveel the Prophet, the crazy one, the man of spirit," and medieval French commentator Rabbi Yosef Kra (known as the Mahari Kra) explains: "When he would prophesy to them, they would say he was crazy."

Now, how is it possible to call a prophet of G-d crazy?! It's almost unbelievable!

Finding the Secret

A decade ago, Rabbi Eric Yoffe, the leader of the American Reform movement, wrote about the Chabad movement. In his article, he praised Chabad and wrote that the Reform movement needs to learn from Chabad and to try to duplicate Chabad's success. The Conservative movement began asking the same question: How can they emulate Chabad's success? Even the Orthodox—everyone is saying “we need to learn from Chabad”; everyone is saying, “We can also do it—let's learn from them and do the same thing.”

But what exactly is it that they want to learn from Chabad? And is it possible to duplicate Chabad's success?

The secret lies in this week's Torah portion.

A Strange Detour

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the Splitting of the Red Sea—the greatest miracle thus far in history. G-d split the sea and the Jews “crossed on dry land in the middle of the sea.”

The entire world trembled at the power of the miracle. The Torah tells us, “The nations heard and shook; fear seized the inhabitants of Philistine...dread and panic fell upon them.”

Forty years later, they were still trembling because of the miracle. The Book of Yehoshua tells us that Rachav said to Yehoshua's spies, “We heard how G-d dried the waters of the Red Sea before you... we heard and our hearts melted and no more spirit remained in a single man before you” (Yehoshua 2:10).

But what really happened at the Splitting of the Sea? You will be shocked to learn that the Jews didn't actually cross the sea from one side to the other. In short, what happened is that the Jews walked into the sea and traveled in a half-circle arc, emerging on the same shore where they had entered. As Ibn Ezra explains: “Israel did not cross the width of the sea but rather, penetrated its length and emerged into the Shur Desert, where they had started off from” (Ibn Ezra, Shmos 14:29).

Why did the Jews even need this miracle? If G-d wanted to take them out of Egypt, let Him simply take them out of Egypt in a straightforward manner! If he wanted to kill the Egyptians, then (as our Sages tell us) “G-d has many methods”— and just as the Egyptians died in their beds at the Death of the Firstborn, here too He could have done the same thing. Even if one wants to argue that this was a case of measure for measure, meaning that G-d drowned the Egyptians in the sea because they had drowned Jewish babies in the Nile, then let Him drown them in the Nile! Why did G-d need to split the sea—especially when the Jews didn’t need to cross the sea? It wasn’t part of their itinerary—so why did G-d split the sea? After all, our Sages tell us, “G-d doesn’t do miracles for in vain.”

Memory Fail

I recently heard the story of two friends who grew up in the same town. When they reached adulthood, they went their separate ways. One went to the big city where he did quite well while the other stayed in their little village, their shtetl, and remained what we call in Yiddish a shlepper, a ne’er-do-well, with a huge family to boot.

Time passed, and our man in the shtetl needed to marry off his kids, but money was nowhere to be found. In his great despair, he decided to visit his old good friend—maybe he’d help him.

When he got to the big city, he sought out his friend’s office. When he finally found it, he bounced from secretary to secretary, telling each that he was the boss’ best friend. When he finally got into his old friend’s office, he practically jumped on him, hugging and kissing him.

For his part, the rich man immediately understood that he had come to ask for money, and he wasn’t interested in helping him. So he acted as if he didn’t recognize him and didn’t remember such a friend at all. He looked at him as if he were some eccentric who had invented friends who never existed. As much as the friend tried to remind him of things they had done together, names of teachers whose classes they had been in, nothing helped. The businessman insisted that he had never had such a friend.

Suddenly the villager burst out to the rich man: “Oy vey! You’re going to die in three days!” and with that, he got up and quickly left. Upon hearing those words,

the rich man was shaken. He ran after his “friend” and caught him at the train station. “Tell me,” he asked him, “how do you know I’ll die in three days? How do you know such things?”

The friend replied, “You surely remember how we once learned from the book Maavar Yabok together with our teacher in cheder. Maavar Yaabok deals with matters of death and mourning, and it says that three days before one dies, he can no longer identify people. When I saw that you couldn’t identify me, I suddenly realized that this is it.”

Suddenly, the wealthy man’s memory “returned”, and he “recognized” his best friend.

The moral of this story is that when we want to capture a person’s full attention, sometimes we have to do wild and slightly nutty things. Only then can we successfully captivate them.

This is seen in today’s media advertisements. Every ad is crazier than the next. Every firm tries to grab the attention of the viewer, and there is an entire industry whose purpose is to churn out wacky ideas to captivate the public.

This, my friends, is the meaning and purpose of the Splitting of the Red Sea. G-d wanted to wake up the entire universe and remind it that there is a G-d—so He needed to do “crazy” things like splitting the sea to shake up the whole world. If He would have quietly smuggled the Jews out of Egypt, He would not have succeeded in shaking up the world and possibly not even the Jewish world. But when He came along and split the sea, then “the chiefs of Edom were shocked.” Ten plagues were not enough to shake up the world—only the wildest thing succeeded in touching everyone.

In like manner, the prophets could not reach people with their prophecies if they only heard their words. Who would listen to them? People would just say, “Here comes that nudge again with his prophecies.” That’s why they needed to do crazy things to shake everyone up.

We find this with the prophet Eliyahu, who only succeeded in bringing the Jewish nation back to true faith in the One G-d by creating major drama. Only then were they moved. Or, in the case of the prophet Shmuel, who turned the skies to rain and thunder in the middle of late spring, causing “all the people to greatly fear G-

d and Shmuel,” as the verse tells us. Only the prophet brought rain and thunder down on their heads after the harvest period, then they understood that he meant business.

Perhaps this is why the prophet was referred to as “crazy”—since he did bizarre, wild things to get the Jews “back into business.”

We find a very similar notion with the Rebbe. Everything the Rebbe did was unconventional—for example, the Mitzvah Tank. It was a completely crazy thing to do: to take an RV, put a PA system on it, and call out in the middle of Manhattan, “Who wants to step up and put on tefillin?” It was a wild idea that shook up all of New York and from there, the entire world. The same with the giant menorahs in city centers—it was a revolutionary idea that no one even dared to dream of. The Rebbe did things that “normal” people would never do.

This is what the Rebbe taught his Chasidim: to succeed in motivating another Jew, one sometimes needs to do crazy, wild things, and only then is it possible to succeed.

This is secret of Chabad’s magic. Just like the prophet was called “crazy,” the Rebbe’s shlichim are also a little “crazy”—meaning, a bit eccentric. The shliach is prepared to do crazy things, and this “success” cannot be duplicated by other organizations because they are comprised of “normal,” dignified people.

The lesson here for everyone is that if you want your children to have Jewish memories, you sometimes need to do “crazy” things connected with Judaism. Specifically, what would that be? That’s something each individual needs to determine on his or her own. But one thing is for certain: when it’s crazy and fun, your kids are sure to remember them forever.