

Staying Excited About Judaism

How can we stay excited about something we do on a regular basis?

Moshe's Shining Face

Charisma. What exactly is it?

During every election cycle, the question of charisma returns. There are always qualified candidates who run for office, but charisma is a more difficult question—either they have it, or they don't. And often, it could make it or break it for their campaign.

In this week's Torah portion, we read how Moshe descended Mt. Sinai with the second Luchos, the tablets containing the Ten Commandments, on Yom Kippur, after G-d had forgiven the Jewish People. He then suddenly had a unique form of charisma. The Torah tells us: *"...Ki koran ohr pnei Moshe...the skin of Moshe's face had gone radiant."*

At this moment in history, when Moshe had returned from Mt. Sinai, his face shone with a light so special and great that everyone was "afraid to approach him." They now had such awe for Moshe that not only did no one dare argue with him as they did when they were in Egypt, but they were actually scared to physically get near him.

This phenomenon of radiating faces began with Moshe Rabbeinu, and Moshe extended it to the Prophets who came after him, as well as to the Jewish greats who came after them.

Rabbi Eliezer's Story

We find a similar idea in the Talmud in one of the great Tana'im.

Shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple, a wealthy Jew named Hyrcanus lived in the Jerusalem area. He was one of the richest people of his time. He had several sons, one of which was named Eliezer. All of his boys worked on the family property, and like his brothers, Eliezer didn't go to school and knew nothing. But he wanted very much to study the Torah. His heart drew him to Jerusalem where the yeshivos for Torah scholars were found. But his father absolutely forbade him to leave home.

One day, at the age of 22, he literally fled his home and traveled to Jerusalem. He arrived at the yeshivah of Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai, the leader of the generation in that period, and Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai immediately recognized his great gifts and accepted him to his yeshivah.

He frequently would go without food, to the extent that Rabbi Yochanan once detected bad breath coming from his mouth. So he asked him, "Eliezer, my son— have you not eaten today?" Eliezer was silent. So Rabbi Yochanan spoke to Eliezer's host and asked whether he ate by him regularly. The host answered that he thought Eliezer ate at the yeshivah—while at the yeshivah they thought he ate at his host! In the meantime, Eliezer had been going hungry. Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai

immediately took Eliezer under his care and handled all his needs.

As days passed, Eliezer's brothers said to their father, Hyrcanus, "Look at how we're working here and helping you with everything while Eliezer has run away and doesn't invest anything in the business! But after you die, he'll show up and demand his part of the inheritance. It's not fair!" Hyrcanus thus immediately decided to cut his son Eliezer out of his will—and to ensure that the will would remain legally valid, he decided to go to the distinguished court of Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai in Jerusalem, and there, before the court, he would sign the will in which his son Eliezer would have no part.

So one day, Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai was notified that the wealthy Hyrcanus had arrived in Jerusalem for this express purpose. It was Friday afternoon, and Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai organized an elegant banquet to which he invited all the dignitaries and rich men of Jerusalem. He notified the ushers that as soon as he arrived, Hyrcanus was to be seated in the front row next to the three richest men of Jerusalem: Kalba Savua, Nakdimon Ben-Gurion, and Ben-Tzitzis Hakesess.

The Midrash tells us that Hyrcanus "sat among them and was shaking" due to the fact that he was sitting with Israel's biggest movers and shakers. At that point, Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai rose and asked his disciple Eliezer to deliver a discourse. At first, the young Eliezer humbly refused, but eventually was overpowered by his master's request. The Midrash describes the ensuing scene as follows: "Rabbi Eliezer sat and expounded, his face shining like the light of the sun and his rays coming

forth like the rays of Moshe Rabbeinu.”

So here we also find a Jewish great whose face shone like the face of Moshe Rabbeinu. At that point, Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai went and kissed Eliezer on the head and said, “Happy are you, Avraham, Yitzchok and Yaakov, that this came forth from you.”

When Hyrcanus saw the monumental status of his son, he rose and said in front of everyone: “I came here to remove my son Eliezer from my inheritance and drop him from the will completely—but now I give him all my assets, including the portions of his brothers.” But Eliezer refused to accept the portions belonging to his brothers.

Rekindle the Passion

Now, what really happened here? Hyrcanus didn’t necessarily understand his son Eliezer’s entire discourse; it’s reasonable to say he didn’t. But when he saw how all the rich men of Jerusalem were praising it, and how Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai hugged and kissed his son, his healthy business sense told him that if it was good for them, it certainly is good for him. So he got swept up in everyone else’s great excitement and understood that he had merited having a very special son. That’s why he completely changed his mind and promised him all his assets.

Sometimes people who have been praying and keeping mitzvos for years complain how in the beginning, when it was all brand-new, it was all very exciting: the prayers were with great concentration and every mitzvah was done with happiness—but

today, however, the “wellsprings have dried up” to nothing; everything is done robotically.

It’s similar to a couple getting married. At first they are very excited about each other, but after a few years go by, the passion fades. But sometimes an opportunity knocks—one of the two sees how other people praise and value his or her spouse, saying how smart or successful he or she is.

We are married to the Torah. At first there is passion and progress. But the more time goes on, routine does its part. So how do we rekindle the flames of love between the Jew and the Torah?

The best advice is to work with Jews who until now have been farther from Judaism than yourself. When you see their passion and their excitement when they start keeping mitzvos they never previously kept, then what happened to Hyrcanus will happen to you—you’ll be swept up too and you’ll remember how lucky you are to be born a Jew with the opportunity to do mitzvos. That will bring you back to the passion you find early in a marriage, as the verse states, to “renew our days as of old.”