

Consistency is the name of the game

Category: Bereishis, Toldos

Rabbi A Schindler's visit to the Rebbe's Farbrengen.

The Reform Connection

This week, at the international conference of Chabad rabbis, Rabbi Levi Fogelman shared the following story about his father, Rabbi Herschel Fogelman, who was a legendary Chabad rabbi in Worcester, Massachusetts for many years.

In 1984, Rabbi Fogelman received a call from the Rebbe's secretary, Rabbi Krinsky. Word had reached Chabad that the Reform movement planned on issuing an official denouncement of Chabad, and Rabbi Krinsky wanted to know if there was something he could do about it.

Rabbi Krinsky had reached out to Rabbi Fogelman because of the warm relationship Rabbi Fogelman shared with Rabbi Alexander Schindler, who was, at the time, the head of the Reform movement. Before Schindler had been appointed to his leadership position, he had been the rabbi of the Reform temple in Worcester, Massachusetts (1950's), and Rabbi Fogelman had developed a warm personal relationship with him. This was somewhat unique in that era; Reform rabbis often harbored very negative views of Chabad, and it was rare for a Chabad and Reform rabbi to develop a personal relationship. The Rebbe was aware of this unique connection, and therefore asked Rabbi Krinsky to reach out to him.

Rabbi Fogelman reached out to Rabbi Schindler, and sure enough, he had the matter removed from the agenda. No such statement was released, in the end.

As a result of that interaction, Rabbi Fogelman decided to invite Rabbi Schindler — remember, he was the head of the Reform movement — to the Rebbe's Yud Beis Tammuz farbrengen (in 1984). To his surprise, Schindler accepted the invitation.

Rabbi Schindler's son, Josh, attended alongside his father, and he was interviewed for the Kinus as well. He shared that all their misgivings dissipated the moment they walked through the door. As soon as they entered 770's large cavernous hall packed with thousands of Chassidim, they felt welcome. They felt like they were a part of it.

The Rebbe's Farbrengens would last several hours; the Rebbe would address the crowd, and his talks would be punctuated by chasidic songs during which people would have the opportunity to raise a cup of wine for l'chaim and share a toast with the Rebbe.

Josh related that when he held up his cup and the Rebbe nodded at him, one person among thousands, it was a moment when he felt the Rebbe's love and concern for him and to every Jew. It was a very memorable evening for them; on the video of the event, you can see Schindler, who understood yiddish well, listening closely throughout the entire 4 1/2 hours, and enthusiastically participating in the songs.

Rabbi Schindler knew exactly what he represented, and he knew Chabad's views as well. When he was welcomed at that farbrengen, he felt embraced — simply because he was a fellow Jew.

After the farbrengen, as the Rebbe headed home, he smiled at Rabbi Fogelman and said, "*nayeh birurim*", i.e., "a new breakthrough."

Throughout the following year, Rabbi Fogelman maintained a correspondence with Rabbi Schindler. They discussed a number of theological issues, but in one letter, dated December, 1984, Rabbi Schindler suggested that they avoid such topics going forward. Although he appreciated their personal friendship, he explained, he couldn't possibly come to terms with the fact that Chabad views him as something less of a Jew.

Rabbi Fogelman sent a copy of the letter to the Rebbe, and he soon received a phone call from Rabbi Groner. The Rebbe was surprised that a close friend of Rabbi Fogelman could still harbor the incorrect perception that Chabad viewed him as anything less than a full Jew. After all, the Rebbe always emphasized that every Jew is equally valuable in the eyes of G-d. The Rebbe asked that "he do something about it," i.e., not only correct Schindler's misperception, but also work to correct this misperception in the public square.

Rabbi Fogelman decided to set the record straight in the Jewish press. He collected the names and addresses of 100 Jewish newspapers throughout America, and sent them all a letter to the editor, delineating Chabad's true stance about every Jew. The letter was edited by the Rebbe himself.

There was one final element to the story. A different Chabad rabbi, the dean of a day school, had written to the Rebbe that he found his role far too difficult. In response, the Rebbe made note of Schindler's participation in the farbrengen. If he was able — the Rebbe said — to attend the farbrengen to show his goodwill and bring the Rebbe some *nachas*, it would certainly be appropriate for a full fledged chassid to attempt to do the same.

The Secret

During this time of year, when the International Conference is held, there is often discussion about Chabad's success. What, indeed, is the secret?

The Midrash makes a fascinating point about Isaac, the second of the 3 forefathers who is the center of attention in this week's Torah portion. Isaac's father and son, Abraham and Jacob, were both given new names by G-d. Abraham had originally been named Abram, and when he was 99 years old, G-d added the letter Hei. Jacob only had one name — Jacob — but after he fought with an angel on his way back into Canaan, he received the name Israel as well. But Isaac was only Isaac. His name always remained the same.

The Midrash says that it is related to Isaac's occupation with digging wells.

This week's Torah portion relates that when a famine set into the land of Canaan, Isaac traveled to Gerar, where he settled and began engaging in commerce — with great success. Abraham, his father, had also lived in the same area for some time and had dug a number of wells, which was an immense undertaking at the time. When Isaac returned to that area, he discovered that the Philistines had destroyed all the wells by filling them with dirt. He wasn't discouraged, and he decided to dig them once again — giving them the same names that his father had given. (Toldos 26:18)

The Midrash concludes: "Normally, a person purchases a home and gives it a name, but when his son makes a new addition, he gives it a new name. But Isaac

didn't do so. Despite the fact that the Philistines had filled in all the wells that Abraham had dug and named, Isaac didn't rename them when he redug them; he re-established the same name as that his father had given. Why? Due to his humility, and due to his respect for his father... Therefore, his name was never changed either." (Midrash Hagadol)

What idea is the Midrash trying to convey? What is the meaning of digging wells?

The Zohar says that digging wells is a metaphor for Abraham's project of spreading a faith in one G-d. He didn't just dig in the earth and discover water, he dug in people's hearts and found a wellspring of faith.

After Abraham left the area, the Philistines filled in the wells, i.e., the people who had been influenced by Abraham reverted to idol worship. But Isaac, in the second generation, was not discouraged. He continued in his father's path, digging those wells again and spreading the message of G-dliness. He didn't invent anything new, and he didn't try to spread his own ideas. He used the same names that his father had used — he spread the same exact message and used the same exact techniques, and that was the key to his success.

This is the secret of Chabad. The Rebbe declared new Mitzvah initiatives over 50 and 60 years ago, and we continue to carry out the same initiatives. The Western Wall was liberated in 1967, and the tefillin stand was established there just a few days later. Until today, not a single weekday has gone by in which a Jew has not laid tefillin at that table. Success comes through consistency. When a couple moves to a new town, they are committed to remain there for the rest of their lives. When a Jew engages with a Chabad center, he can rest assured that it is a relationship that will be meaningful and long-term, and that he will be able to embark on a journey of engagement with Judaism that might last decades, and the community will always be there for him.

This secret is really the secret of the entire Jewish people. We don't give up and we don't allow ourselves to be discouraged. For thousands of years, Jews around the world have woken up in the morning and recited the same prayers. They've observed the same shabbat, and held the same Passover Seder. Whatever the challenge and whatever the hardship, we remain consistently committed.

The Talmud says that Isaac will be the central figure of the forefathers when Moshiach comes. "You are our father," the Jewish people will tell him, because

Isaac teaches us the power of consistency. He gave us the secret to our survival.