

The Secret of (Chabad) Success

Category: Bereishis, Vayeshev

Once and for all, what is our secret to success?

Good Shabbos!

One year at the Shluchim Convention, among the participants was the leader of the Reform movement, Rabbi Rick Jacobs. Rabbi Jacobs came away very moved by what he saw, but when they tried to interview him, he demurred.

At that time, Rabbi Jacobs had only been appointed to his position a half-year prior. But then, in an interview with the Israeli print media, he said that we need to learn from Chabad on how to bring Jews close. He said, “If only we were open and accepting of the other like Chabad.” He added that he wanted to adopt the Chabad approach: “Don’t sit and wait for Jews—go out to bring them in.”

The rabbi who had led before him, Rabbi Eric Yoffe, had been interviewed upon stepping down with regards to Chabad. He, too, said that he had much respect for the shluchim of Chabad—and were it only that they, the Reform movement, had such devoted people. Obviously, he had his differences with Chabad, but even he said that Reform needed to learn from Chabad on how to work.

In general, many people ask, “What is the secret of Chabad’s success?”

To preface, allow me to remind you that we are now marking the days of Yud-Tes and Chof Kislev, the 19th and 20th days of Kislev—the days on which Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the “Alter Rebbe,” was freed from prison in Czarist Russia. Rabbi Shneur Zalman had been imprisoned due to the slander of those who were fiercely opposed to the Chasidic movement.

When we look at the history of the Chasidic movement, and at the story that we read today in the Torah about Yosef HaTzadik, we discover some very similar things.

Before Imprisonment

This week, we read about the sale of Yosef, which resulted from the hatred his brothers had for him, to the point that their first plan was, “Let us go and kill him” (Bereishis 32:20). Only at the end were they convinced to “only” sell him as a slave.

What caused such a fearsome hatred that brothers were so willing to rid of their own brothers?

We all know the reasons mentioned explicitly in the Torah: They saw that Yaakov loved him more than them, etc. But at the beginning of the Parshah, there are several words that illuminate and explain another reason for their hatred.

The Torah states: “He was a lad to the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah,” on which Rashi comments: “This means to say that he was a regular at the sons of Bilhah because his [other] brothers would belittle them and he would draw them close” (Bereishis 37:2).

Among the sons of Yaakov you had two contingents. You had the “matriarchy,” meaning the eight sons of Rachel and Leah—six of Leah’s and two of Rochel’s. Then you had the “maidservantry,” the four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Rashi tells us that the sons of Leah would “belittle the sons of the maidservants, calling them slaves and treating them accordingly.”

Yosef could not bear it. Why so? Because when Rachel, his own mother, passed away, Yosef was a little boy of seven—and it was Bilhah “who raised him like his mother” (Rashi, 37:10). So Yosef looked at all his brothers as equals, and certainly not down at them—so he decided that he would not be silent. He went and told Yaakov that his brothers were disparaging the sons of the maidservants—and for that the sons of Leah hated him so much. They could not bear the fact that he had negated the barrier that separated the brothers—he had stolen their elitism from them.

Over 300 years ago in Eastern Europe, most Jews were very simple folk who did not know how to read and write. They were good and wholesome people, but they had never studied in school. On the other extreme, you had a small contingent of Torah scholars, and those scholars formed a sort of elite contingent within the

Jewish Nation—they prayed in separate synagogues, they ate separately, so much so that a simple Jew would not dare to even approach a Torah scholar. Conversely, if a scholar would approach a simple Jew and ask some favor of him, that Jew would feel like he had just won the lottery—so great was the distance between these two groups.

But then came the Baal Shem Tov and, after him, the Alter Rebbe as well. They said that these simple Jews were as precious to G-d at least as much as the Torah scholars—and perhaps even more so. In saying so, they tore down the barrier that separated between the elite contingent of Torah scholars and the “Amcha” Jews, the ordinary folk.

The Baal Shem Tov drew close the simple Jews. He talked to them. He told them stories from the Torah. They sat next to him at the table as equals, together with his students who were outstanding geniuses.

And so, the religious elite didn’t forgive him, and that led to the slandering and imprisonment of the Alter Rebbe. We see from that that for the same reason that Yosef was sold into slavery, slander was brought against the Alter Rebbe.

Imprisonment

When Yosef was sold as a slave, the Torah says: “And his master saw that G-d was with him, and all that he would do, G-d would cause to succeed in his hand” (Bereishis 39:3). Yosef’s master, Potiphar, saw that G-d was with his strange Hebrew servant.

So the Rebbe asks: How did Potiphar, a man who worshiped idols and who lived in a country where everyone worshiped idols, suddenly come to the conclusion that G-d was with Yosef? How did he ever even *hear* of G-d?

The Rebbe answers that this was caused by Yosef himself—since Yosef mentioned G-d in every conversation that he had with his master. Every time we hear Yosef’s voice, we hear mention of G-d. Even when he was arguing with Potiphar’s wife, who wanted to carry on with him, Yosef says, “And I shall have sinned to G-d” (Bereishis 39:9). When he convinces the chief bartender and chief baker to tell them their dreams, he says, “Does G-d not have answers? Please tell me” (Bereishis 40:8). Not only that, but in the Torah portion of Mikeitz, when Yosef

finds himself standing before the Pharaoh, the most powerful leader in the world at the time, the Pharaoh addresses him and says, “I heard about you that you can listen to a dream to interpret it” (Bereishis 41:15)—to which Yosef responds, “G-d will answer the Pharaoh’s peace.” Thus, even in speaking to the Pharaoh, “who made himself into a god” (Shmos 7:15, Rashi), Yosef was totally dependent on his kindness, but still, he was not afraid to declare that he believed in G-d. As Rashi sums it up, “the name of Heaven was secure in his mouth (Beraishis 39:3) (Hisvaduyos 5745 Vol. II, pg. 917).

Now the Baal Shem Tov, before he went public, had the custom of visiting shtetlach, little Jewish villages, where Jews would gather around and he would ask them how they were doing. He would approach a Jew and ask him, “How are you?” just to hear the response, “Baruch Hashem!” (“Thank G d!”) He would then approach another Jew and ask him, “How are your children?” just to hear, “Thank G-d, the kids are healthy!” and so on. The Baal Shem Tov said that G-d derived a mighty pleasure from Jews mentioning and praising Him. It’s as if G-d was sustained by Jews praising him, and that it aroused in Him the will to give all good things to even more to those who praise and acknowledge Him.

We therefore might even say that the first person to follow the Baal Shem Tov’s path was Yosef HaTzadik, in whom “the name of Heaven was secure in his mouth.”

Post Imprisonment

The end of Yosef’s saga is the most exciting part.

After he becomes the viceroy, the second in command to the Pharaoh himself, and he encounters his brothers, he reveals himself and says the famous words, “I am Yosef! Is my father still alive?”

But then, the first thing he says to them is that he forgives them: “And now, don’t be dejected... that you sold me, because for sustenance did G-d send me [here]” (Beraishis 45:5). Then he warns them further, “Don’t get angry on the way!” on which Rashi says, “He was worried that maybe they would fight on the way over the matter of his sale and argue with one another, saying, ‘You sold him!’ ” (Beraishis 45:24).

And again, at the end of the Book of Bereishis, quite literally in the last few verses, when the brothers ask him to forgive him, he bursts into tears and promises them, “I will sustain you and your children” (Bereishis 50:21). On this, the Alter Rebbe writes at the end of Chap. 12 of Tanya that one should “repay offenders with favors... to learn from Yosef and his brothers,” for Yosef paid “good instead of evil”—they wanted to kill him and he saved their lives during the famine years.

As a matter of fact, we find the same behavior with the Alter Rebbe upon his release from prison. At that time, he wrote a letter to all his Chasidim which starts with, “I have been made humble by all of the favors,” by which he acknowledges “the many favors that G-d did for us.” His conclusion was that “let their hearts never rise above their brothers [who betrayed them] and not to open their mouths upon them; be silent from mentioning anything or shouting at them, G-d forbid... they should just lower their spirits and hearts... with a low spirit” (Igeress HaKodesh Chap. 2.)

He warned his Chasidim that they should not act, G-d forbid, victoriously—to say, “Aha! You see? We won!” Instead, they were to do the opposite—to act with humility and love, just like Yosef did. So if you want to know what the secret is of Chabad success, perhaps we can sum it up with the following three rules: One, every Jew is equal before G-d and none are worth more; two, everything that happens is the Will of G-d and that we are to live by that belief; and three, above all, to repay good for evil.

Anyone who adopts these three rules is guaranteed to succeed.