

A Chassidic Principal in NY Public School

How a Chassidic principal turned around the worst school in NYC, and what we can learn from him—and the parshah.

The Incredible Principal

Good Shabbos!

A number of years ago, a profile ran on a Chabadnik from Brooklyn on the cover page of *The New York Times*.

Now, I don't need to tell you that it's not too common for a photo of a Chasidic rabbi to appear on the front page of the most prominent paper in the world, and for a positive reason.

So let me tell you a bit about this Chabadnik.

Shimon Waronker was born in South America to nonreligious parents. In his youth, his parents moved across several countries in Latin America. At the age of 11, his father passed away, and his mother moved to the United States. As time progressed, he grew up and eventually joined the U.S. Army, where he served as an officer in military intelligence. After his military duty, he went to college, where he was attracted to Judaism by Chabad. So he eventually ended up studying Judaism in the Chabad yeshivah in Morristown, New Jersey, got married, started a family in Crown Heights, and got a job teaching in the city public-school system.

But then one day, the mayor of New York set up a special course to train principals for a new model of public schools. Mr. Waronker joined the course, and in 2004, he completed it with high honors.

All the course's graduates were then sent off to serve as principals in various schools across the city. But with Shimon Waronker, the city wasn't in a terrible rush to get him a school. They said that he'd fail to connect with the students. They told him, "You're different than them with your beard and black hat. It's not going to work."

So they suggested that he might consider shaving off his beard so as to help him connect with the crowd. Mr. Waronker, obviously, rejected that out of hand. They then asked him, "What will you do on your Shabbos when your school has all kinds of weekend activities?" He replied that this is why you have an assistant principal—and that the assistant principal will be there on Shabbos. But they continued with all kinds of excuses as to why it would be impossible for him to be appointed as a New York City public school principal.

Now in New York City, the country's largest city, you also have the country's largest public education system. There are about 1,700 public schools across New York, educating over one million students. Among these schools, 12 of them account for 60 percent of total crimes committed on New York City public school property. And among them was P.S. 22 Middle School of the South Bronx, which accounted for 20 of that 60 percent.

And that's where they sent Shimon Waronker.

In the two years before his arrival, the school had been through no less than six principals. Mr. Waronker was the seventh.

The first thing to greet him when he first arrived at the school was not a happy sight. He saw a school police officer arresting a student, a huge 18-year-old, for attacking a teacher. But the cop couldn't control the kid, and he called for backup to take control of the situation.

When the teachers met him, they thought that somebody at the Department of Education had gone crazy. You send a Chasidic rabbi here?! What is this? A yeshivah?! They shot him one glance and gave him a maximum of 60 days before he'd flee in failure.

But Mr. Waronker was only getting started.

One of the first things he did was to check the number of students actually registered at the school—only to discover that the total number of registered students was exactly 770. Upon hearing that, Mr. Waronker immediately saw a sign that this was his place.

But the situation in the school was very serious. In one class of 20 registered students, only five were showing up for school. And the school was dominated by six different gangs, with each one's members wearing different colors.

One of the reasons for the high crime rates in New York's Middle Schools is because the city has a law that says that a youth age 16 or under who gets arrested for selling drugs is treated like a juvenile and is immediately released. So obviously, this age is

an easy target for the drug dealers, who recruit these kids to be their couriers. And at Mr. Waronker's new school, these kids made more money than the principal himself.

But Mr. Waronker took charge and established law and order immediately. He used his military experience, and on the first day, he sent home 22 students who then threatened to kill him.

But when those kids heard that he had served in the Army, they started respecting him a bit more—especially when someone passed around a photo of a soldier in Afghanistan with a drawn weapon who looked like their new principal. They were sure it was him—and they were afraid that he'd actually use weapons on them. So the first thing Shimon Waronker did was show them that he was a man's man.

Once that was taken care of, he started forging personal relationships with the kids. Most of the students at P.S. 22 came from Spanish-speaking homes—and the moment they discovered that he also spoke fluent Spanish, it brought down all the barriers, and they suddenly discovered a person who understood them and could connect with them, and they felt that they could trust him.

Mr. Waronker next called for a parents' assembly, at which he advised that the school establish a school uniform. As one voice, the parents all agreed—and it helped purge the school of all the gangs that fought each other on school property.

But Shimon Waronker's biggest innovation was that he divided the school into eight mini schools, with 60 students and four teachers each. Those teachers were to then serve as their

students' teacher for the next six years. He thought that the most important thing the students needed was a genuine and long-term bond with an adult who personally knew them and with whom they had a personal relationship.

And so, in a very short time, Shimon Waronker succeeded in turning P.S. 22 into a place of success and love, where the students were proud to be students there.

The Department of Education was so excited over his success that they wanted to duplicate his model in every New York City public school, and eventually to start a revolution in American educational theory.

Mr. Waronker says that before he accepted the position of principal in the Bronx, he was very scared—and that he prayed for three days for G-d to help him succeed. Not only that, but he would pray the entire way in each morning while riding the subway to work, asking G-d to give him all the right answers for all the problems that would pop up that day.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion, in which we read about the fateful encounter between Yaakov and Eisav.

The Three Methods

Eisav had hated his brother Yaakov for decades. Even before Yaakov had left Beer Sheva, Eisav had already been planning to murder his brother for his theft of their father's blessings. And when Yaakov finally returns to his homeland, he hears that Eisav is coming with a contingent of 400 gangsters to deal with him.

But ultimately, when they finally met, we read that Eisav ran up to Yaakov, “and he hugged him and fell upon his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (Bereishis 33:4). Such an emotional scene has no comparison anywhere else in the Torah. A hug, a kiss and even weeping—with the possible exception of Yaakov finding his beloved long-lost son Yosef after 20 years, which we’ll read in a few weeks—there is no other passage like that.

What was Yaakov’s secret? How did he turn Eisav from a mortal enemy to a loved one, and from a hit man to a guy who hugs and kisses you?

The answer is in Rashi, who says, “[Yaakov] prepared himself in three ways: A gift, prayer and combat” (Bereishis 32:9). The Rebbe explains that these three things symbolize the three paths of Chesed (love—the gift), Gevurah (combat), and Rachamim (prayer). (See Likutei Sichos Vol. XV, pg. 273.)

First, Yaakov prepared himself for combat. He divided “the folk that were with him... to two camps.” In one camp he gathered his wives and children, and in the other camp he gathered his servants and livestock. He showed Eisav that he had power and that he, too, was capable of fighting. That was the Gevurah.

Secondly, he approached Eisav with the path of Chesed. He showed him love. He sent him presents and words of appeasement. He called him “My master, Eisav” and referred to himself as “Your servant, Yaakov”—and all “to find favor in your eyes,” which, as Rashi (32:6) explains, was to “seek your love.”

But the most important of all is the attribute of Rachamim. Yaakov prayed to G-d. He turned to G-d and said, “I have

become small from all of the kindnesses.” With these words, Yaakov delineated the entire concept of prayer. The entire concept of prayer is surrender—which is what is meant by “I have become small.” When a person prays, he essentially says that he doesn’t have all the answers—he doesn’t know what’s right to do and he confesses that he doesn’t control the situation. And so he asks that G-d protect him and guide him in the right way.

And when a person says, “I have become small,” then he becomes a receptacle for G-d’s blessing, and he becomes an agent through which G-d brings blessing into the world.