

FROM THE EDITOR

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What if there was something incredibly simple and easy that we could do each and every day of our lives that could actually help us to feel more connected to each other and, consequently, bring about a bit more unity among us? And, what if it was something that didn't cost us a thing, which everyone could do regardless of age, background, or experience, and which we could do wherever we went, from our homes, to our places of work or school, to the streets on which we live and travel – and with every person who we encounter, be they family, friends, colleagues, or even complete strangers? And what if it required very little of us in terms of actually doing anything?

Wouldn't we all jump at such a chance?

Believe it or not, our Sages teach¹ that showing a friendly face to another person is the single greatest act of chesed (kindness) there is – because there's absolutely nothing comparable to the power of an encouraging smile! (If only Eskom could find a way to tap into that kind of power...)

In his book, *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor explains why smiling is so important: if we stand opposite from another person and genuinely smile at him – even when that other person has been explicitly instructed to show no emotion in response – “[v]irtually no one can refrain from returning his partner's smile, and most break into laughter almost immediately... [e]ven in parts of the world where smiling is less of a social norm.”

The reason for this? Something scientists call mirror neurons, “Specialised brain cells that can actually sense and then mimic the feelings, actions, and physical sensations of another person.” And it doesn't just work with smiles. If we watch another person getting jabbed by a needle, the neurons in the pain centre of our brains will immediately light up – as though we were the ones being jabbed! In other words, we actually feel a hint of the pain of that needle jab, even though we haven't been physically touched at all.

For those who think this too incredible to be true, Achor notes it has been “replicated in countless other experiments involving sensations that range from pain to fear to happiness to disgust”.

Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon) taught² the same idea nearly 3 000 years ago: “Like water, a face [reflects] a face, and so is the heart of man to man.” Our Sages explain further that our exterior actions awaken and arouse our inner feelings. In other words, smiling on the outside actually helps us to feel happy on the inside.

We're taught³ that we should “receive every person with a sever panim yafos” – a friendly face, a smile – because, as we see, a smile has the ability to touch another person profoundly (even though our Sages didn't know about the neuroscience behind the mechanism involved). And so too, the opposite is also true: a serious, sad, or angry expression can actually cause pain to others!

We are literally surrounded by opportunities to brighten the faces of other people with whom we come into contact throughout our day. We should even make a point of striving to be the first to extend a greeting to every person we see.⁴ And, in so doing, we can actually take a significant step towards breaking down the walls of hatred and division that unnecessarily get built up over time, and slowly start to reverse what our Sages call sinus chinum – the hatred we feel for others that is without any good cause or reason – what they point to as the primary thing holding us back from achieving unity.

Who would have ever thought that flashing our pearly whites to another person could go such a long way towards eliminating any negative inner feelings that exist – both in our own hearts, as well as in the hearts of other people – and that alone is a major step towards creating unity. And, just think, it doesn't cost a thing!

So “put on a happy face” – it's more important than you think!

ROBERT SUSSMAN, EDITOR

* The above Torah ideas were adapted from a sicha of the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, z”l.

¹Kesuvos 111b

²Mishlei 27:19

³Pirkei Avos 1:15

⁴Id. 4:20



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