

Sermon/Drasha 'People Passion' and the Month of Adar

A fellow comes up to a cab driver by Union Station (St. Louis) and says, "Take me to London."

The cab driver says, "London Street? Where's that?" The guy says, "No, London, England." The cabbie tells him that not only is it an incredibly expensive 14 hour drive to New York, but there's no possible way for him to drive the cab across the Atlantic.

The customer insists there is. "We'll get to New York. You'll drive me down to the pier and we'll put the taxi on a freighter and when we get off at Liverpool, you'll drive me to London and I'll pay you whatever is on the meter." The driver agrees and when they arrive in London, good to his word, the passenger pays the total on the meter and gives him a five thousand dollar tip.

Now the St. Louis cabbie is roaming around London and doesn't know what to do. A Britisher hails him and says, "I want you to drive me to St. Louis, Missouri." The cab driver can't believe his good mazal. How often can you pick up a fare in London who wants to go to St. Louis? The passenger says, "First, we take a boat..."

The driver says, "That I know. But where to in St. Louis?"

The passenger says, "Clarkson and Baxter Rd."

And the driver responds, "Clarkson and Baxter Rd? Sorry, I don't go to Chesterfield."

Silly, isn't it? But no more foolish, really, than many opportunities that often slip through our hands.

Our English word *opportunity* comes from Latin and means "toward the port." It suggests a ship taking advantage of the wind and tide to arrive safely in the harbor. Life is an opportunity, and life is short. So while we can, we have to take advantage of the opportunity to get true joy and happiness, especially in the month of Adar.

The Hebrew month of Adar II - which begins this Sunday night - is the happiest month of the year. As the Talmud teaches us, *Mishenichnas Adar Marbin B'Simchah* – when the month of Adar begins, we increase our joy. What is interesting is that the Talmud doesn't say 'Be happy in Adar.' It says, 'Be happier in Adar.' We're supposed to "increase" our happiness and joy during the month of Adar. That implies that we are really supposed to be happy all year 'round. But it's just that we pick up the joy a notch when Purim comes around.

What is the source of this perpetual joy?

Rabbi Sholom Schwadron, who passed away in 1997, was a famous rabbi known as the "Maggid of Jerusalem" for his fiery, inspirational talks on mussar and high standards of ethical conduct..

On one of his early trips to America from the Holy Land, Rav Sholom witnessed his first major snowstorm. More than two feet of snow was on the ground, and the Rabbi was homebound. On the third day, he ventured outside, taking in the beautiful scene of snow-covered trees and sidewalks. As he walked, he noticed a rabbi standing in the distance. He nodded his head in greeting and was surprised when there was no reply.

"Maybe he didn't see me," thought R' Sholom. As he approached the man, he said, "Good morning", and still there was no reply. This upset the Rabbi. After all, it was a mitzvah to greet each and every person, and the least he had expected was some minimal reaction. However, as R' Sholom came up close to the rabbi, he was amazed to see that it wasn't a rabbi, or even a man at all. It was a snowman!

Decked out in a hat, scarf and overcoat, and sporting a "beard", the snowman had appeared from the distance – to someone who had never seen a snowman before – like a human being.

"When I came near him," R' Sholom recalled years later with great laughter, "I realized that he was a *kalter Yid* (a cold

Jew), and that's why he didn't respond. If an individual is indeed a *kalter Yid*, it's a sign of no life, no commitment, no passion."

A *kalter Yid*a Jewish snowman ...is lacking passion. Better to be a *heimishe Yid*...a warm Jew! Warmth and passion -- People Passion -- is the key to perpetual joy.

Sometimes you see people who seem to have People Passion. But it's just another type of passion in disguise.

In the early 1990s some vandals had cut down six royal palm trees along Miami's Flager Street. Since the palms were very expensive, Dade County authorities weren't sure if they could soon replace them. But then someone donated six more and even had them planted. The old ones had been about 15 feet tall and proved a nice foreground for a "Fly Delta" billboard. The new palms were 35 feet tall -- completely hiding the sign. The new donor: Eastern Airlines.

People have passion for money and various other things. But the goal is to have People Passion. Let's talk about some of the identifying signs of someone with People Passion.

Former professional football player Bill Glass became a pastor and started a prison ministry. Pastor Glass tells of visiting a prison in Florida in 1993. He asked one of the prison officials there how many Jews were in prison in Florida. The official answered, thirteen. Only thirteen Jews in all the prisons in Florida! Florida has a high Jewish population, and there are 40,000 inmates in Florida prisons.

Intrigued, Pastor Glass began to ask the same question all over the country. He discovered that in relation to the overall Jewish population there is an infinitesimal number of Jews in jail or prison. One reason for this, Pastor Glass said, is that;

Jewish families are strong on hugging, kissing and touching. Jewish fathers, going back to the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, have always done three things whether their sons were three or thirty years old: "Bless you, my son. I love you, son." And then they give a big hug and kiss.

Perhaps someone should tell Pastor Glass that we also bless, hug and kiss our daughters!

Pastor Glass suggests that others who have appreciated the Judeo-Christian tradition may have missed out on this heritage. Many Christians, he says, have been influenced more by the Prussian-German lifestyle, and also a sort of Puritanism that says don't touch anyone or show emotions.

Those who have People Passion acknowledge the presence of others (in ways that are, of course, halachically appropriate) in a warm, demonstrative way. Shaking hands, hugging, kissing and embracing.

A second identifying sign of those with People Passion: They acknowledge the presence of others and greet them warmly. Pirkei Avos (1:15) states, "Shamai taught, **Greet every person** with a smiling and warm face!" Every person. Look them in the eye, present a smiling face, and acknowledge them.

To do so is basic decency ...and perhaps more.

There was a fascinating letter in "Psychology Today" magazine some years back. Dr. Robert Healy, a psychotherapist, wrote of a patient of his, a young man, who had come to him for therapy after having changed his mind about committing suicide. It seems that this young man planned to jump off a bridge in his town when something strange happened. While driving his car to the bridge, he stopped at a traffic light. Looking toward the sidewalk he spotted an elderly woman who was smiling at him. He felt himself smiling back.

The light changed and he drove on, but the memory of her kindly face stayed with him. Later, he told the psychologist, "Her smile made me think that perhaps life wasn't so bad after all." Before reaching the bridge, he turned his car

around, drove home, and entered therapy to get help with his problems.

It was nothing dramatic, just an old woman with a pleasant expression on her face. But she changed this desperate young man's entire psychological environment.

I read this story and thought to myself, "What if he had passed ME on that street? Would I have smiled? Would the result have been the same?" Powerful thought. One life touched another, and a life was saved.

I have to admit that I thought of omitting this story because it seems like such an isolated, unlikely event -- a kindly smile from an elderly woman changes a young man's life. But I recently saw on YouTube a taped interview with the well known inspirational speaker W. Mitchell. He was in a motorcycle accident that left disfiguring burns over most of his body, including his face. Mitchell says that after his motorcycle accident, the most difficult adjustment he had to make was dealing with people who refused to look at him because of the appearance of his face. This was more crushing than the accident itself. But then, he said that one day a woman not only looked at him, but she also smiled.

"That smile changed my life," Mitchell says.

Can a smile do that? You bet it can. Those with 'People Passion' smile and acknowledge the existence of others. After all, isn't every person *b'Tzelem Elokim* -- created in the image of G-d?

And a third sign of those with People Passion is that they do ...and do as much as they can.

The film *Schindler's List* chronicled the heroic efforts of German industrialist Oskar Schindler. Through his unselfish activities, over a thousand Jews on the trains to Auschwitz were saved. After Schindler found out what was happening in Auschwitz he began a systematic effort to save as many Jews as he could. For money, he could buy Jews to work in his factory which was supposed to be a part of the military machine of Germany. On one hand he was buying as many Jews as he could, and on the other hand he was deliberately sabotaging the ammunition produced in his factory. He entered the war as a financially wealthy industrialist; by the end of the war, he was basically financially bankrupt.

When the Germans surrendered, Schindler met with his workers and declared that at midnight they were all free to go. The most emotional scene of the film was when Schindler said good-bye to the financial manager of the plant, a Jew and his good and trusted friend. As he embraced his friend, Schindler sobbed and said, "I could have done more." He looked at his automobile and asked, "Why did I save this? I could have bought 10 Jews with this." Taking another small possession he cried, "This would have saved another one. Why didn't I do more?"

Helping others should be a natural extension of our People Passion. Unfortunately, it doesn't come as easy as you'd think. As busy people we get too caught up in our own problems to help. But in the spirit of 'doing more', there is so much more we can do for others -- for example:

- 1) Sharing knowledge. Send a friend an interesting news item or magazine article you come across.
- 2) Find for a friend something small at the store that would be appreciated.
- 3) Share your resources. Have tickets to a play or game you're not going to use?
- 4) Pick up the slack, and surprise someone in the family by unexpectedly doing a household chore. Last week I decided to make the bed. Chani said to me, "Where's my husband, and what did you do with him?"

Give it all you've got --with whatever you've got.

We began this morning with a story about 'opportunities'; let's conclude with a story on the same note.

Two men went fishing. One man was an experienced fisherman, the other wasn't. Every time the experienced fisherman caught a big fish, he put it in his ice chest to keep fresh. Whenever the inexperienced fisherman caught a big fish, he threw it back. The experienced fisherman watched this go on all day and finally got tired of seeing this man waste good fish. "Why do you keep throwing back all the big fish you catch?" he asked.

The inexperienced fisherman replied, "I only have a small frying pan."

Sometimes, like that fisherman, we throw back the big plans, big dreams, big jobs, and the big opportunities that G-d gives us. We act as if we're *kalter Yidden* -- Jewish snowmen -- not Jews who have People Passion

This was the problem the Jews had at the time of Purim. They had been affected by the influence of Amalek (the arch-enemy and spiritual opposite of the Jews, and the nation to which Haman belonged) about whom the Torah states when the Jews left Egypt, "*Asher 'karcha' baderech* – they [Amalek] happened to come upon the Jewish People [to attack them]" (Deuteronomy 25:18). The root of the word '*karcha*' is *kor* (cold).

The take-home lesson (and good news) for all of us today – and what the happiness of the month of Adar (and the year-round) is all about - is that if we really want to be happy as human beings and especially as Jews, we don't need to buy a new car, redecorate our home, get liposuction, change jobs, take a vacation, do yoga – although all those things might make us feel better for a while.

All we really need to do to be happy is to have People Passion.

- Embrace others
- Smile and acknowledge them
- Do as much as we can

The word '*opportunity*' means 'toward the port'. Life is an opportunity, and life is short. So while we can, we have to take advantage of the opportunity to get true joy and happiness by cultivating 'People Passion', especially in the month of Adar.