

Not long ago NPR ran a story that explained how the expectations of teachers can dramatically alter the performance of their students. The story started by covering a famous research study conducted by a Harvard professor named Robert Rosenthal.

In the study a group of 18 elementary school teachers gave their students a special test that Rosenthal put together. The test predicted which children were primed for a boost in IQ over the next few years.

The catch, of course, was that it was not a special test at all. It was just a general IQ test with a fancy sounding name, but the teachers didn't know this. Once the results came back, Rosenthal picked a random group of students from each classroom and told the teachers that these students were "bloomers" that were predicted to blossom into brilliant students.

In reality, there was nothing different about these students from their peers.

A few months later, the students were given another IQ test. The results were astounding. Students who were labeled as "bloomers" (even though they were simply average students to begin with) scored significantly higher on IQ tests than their peers.

Why did this happen?

Researchers discovered that the improvement was due to the different way the teachers treated the students that they expected to succeed. Expectations affect teacher's moment-to-moment interactions with the children they teach in a thousand almost invisible ways. Compared to the other children in the class, the "bloomers" were given more feedback, allowed more time for answering questions, and generally received more smiles, nods, and gestures of approval from their teachers.

In other words, when a teacher treats a student as if they were destined to become smart (even if they were average to start with), the student becomes smart.

A rising tide lifts all boats. And great expectations raises everyone -- as the following story illustrates.

It was the afternoon before Passover, and Rabbi Levi Yitzchak (known as the Berditchiver Rebbe who lived in the late 18th century), was wandering through the streets of the Jewish quarter seeking out local smugglers. From one he quietly asked for a quote on contraband tobacco, from another he enquired about the availability of smuggled silk fabrics and embroideries. No matter the merchandise he sought, everything was available for the right price.

However, when he started asking his new found acquaintances to supply him with some bread or whiskey, those very same businessmen who had previously proved so accommodating balked. "Rabbi," said one, "are you trying to insult me? The seder will be starting in just a few hours and no Jew would have even a speck of *chametz* left in his home or business."

Not one merchant was able to come up with even a crumb of bread or ounce of alcohol, no matter the price offered. The town had converted into a *chametz*-free zone. Thrilled with the results of his failed quest, the rabbi looked up to heaven and declared:

*"G-d Almighty, look down with pride at Your people! The Czar has border guards and tax-commissioners dedicated to his commands. The police and the courts are devoted to tracking down and punishing smugglers and black-marketers, and yet, anything one could possibly want is available. Contrast this with the faith and fidelity of Your Jews. It has been over 3,000 years since you commanded us to observe Passover. No police, no guards, no courts and jails enforce this edict—and yet every Jew keeps Your laws to the utmost!"*

*"Mi k'amcha Yisrael – Who is like Your nation, Israel?!"*

The standard of proper Pesach observance is incredibly high. It's not enough to get rid of most of your chametz. It's not even enough to get rid of almost all of your chametz. Not a *mashehu*, not a single speck, is permitted! We search for chametz in our homes, and we burn it in the streets.

The message of *bedikas* and *biur chametz* is very simple. The more we understand what getting rid of chametz is about, the more we realize that the physicality behind these rituals isn't only about ridding our homes from the bread products inside them. Rather, the purpose of our exacting, demanding mitzvos is to rid ourselves of our spiritual faults in the preparation for Passover, the holiday of freedom.

One of our great spiritual faults is that concerning our children -- and ourselves -- we think and act as if 'good enough' is 'good enough.' Getting rid of 'almost all your chametz' is good, but it's not good enough. Have lofty expectations. And if you're willing to accept "good enough", you'll never be "the best."

"Perfection" may seem impossible and a small margin of error tolerable. However, even the tiniest margins of error can have major consequences. For instance, even at a near-perfect 99.9% error-free level:

- 2.8 million phone calls in the U.S. would reach the wrong number every day.
- 810 commercial airline flights would crash every month.
- 107 incorrect medical procedures would be performed every day.
- We'd have 43 minutes of unsafe drinking water coming out of our faucets each month.
- Each month 76 newborn babies in the U.S. would be given to the wrong parents

At times even minimally satisfactory customer service is difficult to find -- at least in part due to an attitude of 'good enough, is good enough.'

Not long ago I received the following email from a friend:

*Some years ago, I ordered a Total Gym. I ordered the mid-range priced version. What I received, I discovered after it had already been assembled (and the box thrown away) by my handyman, was the high end version. A difference of \$150. But I let that one go. The prospect of trying to explain this on the 800 number, finding a box and shipping the incorrect version back, getting a refund, minus the shipping, plus the Total Gym I originally ordered just seemed too daunting.*

*More and more, I realize that people simply have no interest in doing their jobs correctly. And when you try to HELP them, by pointing out an error in their favor, they get quite testy.*

There are FIVE commandments regarding chametz on Pesach:

- 1) Don't eat chametz
- 2) Don't eat a combination of chametz
- 3) Chametz should not be seen (*Ba'al yira'eh*)
- 4) Chametz should not be found (*Ba'al yimatze*)
- 5) Destroy it (burn) -- (*Tashbisu*)

When it comes to chametz on Passover we have to strive for perfection in distancing ourselves from prohibited leaven. This 'absolutist approach' if observed diligently and thoughtfully has tremendous carry-over value in different areas of our lives. As Lord Chesterfield once said:

*Aim at perfection in everything, though in most things it is unattainable. However, they who aim at it, and persevere, will come much nearer to it than those whose laziness and despondency make them give it up as unattainable.*

Why don't we set great expectations for ourselves and our children?

A business consultant surveyed 110 executives to find out what excuses they hear most from their employees.

Heading the list was "It's not my fault"

The second-place excuse was "it was someone else's fault"

Third, "Something else came up."

The fourth most often used excuse was "I didn't have time", followed by, "We've never done it that way before."

Tom Peters, an American writer on business management practices, is best known for his popular book *In Search of Excellence*. Peters tells the story of the time he was exhorting a group of corporate executives toward excellence. He spoke to these leaders for several hours concerning product excellence, employee training, values, mission, and customer service.

Unable to restrain himself any longer, an irritated executive interrupted Peters to voice his dissatisfaction with the message. "I'm sick and tired of hearing all this stuff on excellence," he

blurted out. "Our company is no worse than anyone else's."

Wouldn't that be a great motto to hang over an organization's entrance point or print on their stationery: "We're no worse than anyone else."

Imagine receiving medical treatment, buying a car seat for a child, flying with an airline, or building a home with companies who claim to be no worse than anyone else. Imagine your child coming home with a report card of all C's and saying, "Well, Mom and Dad, it was no worse than anyone else."

Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, was asked if he was nervous contemplating his trip into space. "Who wouldn't be," he responded. "There I was sitting on top of 9,999 parts and bits -- each of which had been made by the lowest bidder!"

A Rabbinical Association in a small community met to discuss declining attendance in their synagogues. As the leaders discussed the predicament of their individual synagogues, one shul president finally interjected, "It's good to hear the rest of you are experiencing difficulty as well. At least we're no worse than anyone else."

The "we're no worse than anyone else" attitude debilitates personal and community excellence. Good enough -- or just a little bit better than someone else -- shouldn't be good enough for our businesses, our homes, and our relationship with Hashem

On the other hand, there's a tremendous power in great expectations.

Jessica Tandy, Oscar winner for her role in Driving Miss Daisy, was asked if any of her performances have left her unsatisfied. "All of them," she instantly replied. "I've never come off the stage at the end of a performance and said, 'tonight was perfect.' There'll always be some little thing that I'll have to get right tomorrow."

Hall of Fame basketball player Larry Bird said, "Once you're labeled the best, you want to stay up there, and you can't do it by loafing around. If I don't keep changing, I'm history." To the best, 'good enough' isn't good enough. Should we settle for any less?

Our friend and shul member Stanley Goldfeder told me a terrific story about his high school classmate that illustrates this idea in a dramatic way.

Dr. Jerry Fishman is an accomplished research astrophysicist, having receiving numerous awards, having published over 900 publications, including encyclopedia articles, published proceedings, abstracts, reports, and patents. Dr. Fishman was a graduate of the University High School class of '61, and approached Stanley about wanting to make a difference for the current U.City High science students.

Stanley, at the behest of his friend Dr. Fishman, approached the current high school principal to discuss possible ways to support the school's science students. In the discussion the principle asked Stanley,

*Your class was so accomplished. The graduating class of '61 was ranked # 6 in the country. And a few years on each side of your graduating class, the classes were also outstanding. Today many kids can't even conceive of science math, and struggle with arithmetic. What made your class different?*

Stanley paused, and then responded,

*There were high expectations of us. Our parents weren't of means. My father worked as a dress maker and had an 8th grade education. But he, and the parents of my friends, had expectations. They wouldn't put up with anything other than the best.*

If we take pride in ourselves, believe that we have to do our best, and encourage our kids to do their very best, good results will be forthcoming. And if we simultaneously realize that Hashem has high expectations of us, we'll be committed to reach for the stars. And though we might not catch any, at least we won't get our hands stuck in the mud!

Let me offer one practical suggestion:

Committed, successful people approach the decision threshold almost imperceptibly differently. Chances are, you follow this pattern in at least one area of your life.

Unlike the 'average person', who approaches a decision by saying, "I'm not sure yet", the successful person says, "I'm in for good." The difference means instead of being plagued by "Should I?", successful people empower themselves to say "How can I?" "How will I make this relationship work?" "How can I get this done?"

Once we start asking the question "how", our creativity engages. Instead of settling for the default question of "should", our subconscious mind goes into overdrive, and we find ourselves answering those "how" questions -- and achieving more than we ever thought possible.

How can I learn Hebrew?

How can I learn to pray/ daven?

How can I become a better person? A better Jew?

How can I make my synagogue shul a better, more welcoming place?

A rising tide lifts all boats. And great expectations raises everyone. The great demands of Passover remind us that "Good enough isn't good enough." Harness the power of High Expectations for your children and yourself.