

Devoreem

Judaism, Being Positive, and P.R.

We all know that it is very difficult to reach people. How can we grab a person's attention and put our message across? So often it has happened that a person will tell me, "But, Rabbi, why haven't you said this before? How come I never heard this message before?" The truth is that I have been preaching this same message continually for years but, for some reason, this person has never heard it.

We all know that it is not enough just to put your message out, to get it out either through speeches in *shul* or on TV or in print. A person has to come to *shul* to listen or he has to turn on the TV or radio to your station before he can even hear your message, or he has to be willing to pick up your book or newsletter and read your articles before he can get it. It is not easy to get a person's attention. That person who claimed, "Why didn't you ever preach that message before?" has never, so to speak, tuned in.

Every generation also has its own hang-ups and cultural codewords. It is not easy to get the attention, especially, of people from different generations. As they say: "Different strokes for different folks." That's why something which has grabbed people's attention and has worked well for many years will cease working. A new generation demands that the message be packaged in a different way if they are going to pay any attention to it. Sometimes this is very difficult for leaders to grasp. In America today, leaders who were functioning before the 1960's and the great cultural revolution which took place then find it very difficult to put their message across to those who grew up during the 1960's and later; they just are not talking the same language.

Moshe Rabbeinu had this problem. He taught and raised up a new generation in the dessert and then, ironically, he could not communicate with it. Even in the *Torah* portion *Devoreem* when he is reviewing Jewish history for them, when he mentions how the generation which left Egypt was condemned to die in the desert, he says, "And also the Lord was angry with me because of you saying, 'Also you (Moshe) will not come there'." Moshe could not understand what he really did wrong, why G-d has punished him by not letting him enter the land of Israel because he struck the

rock instead of talking to it.

In the *Torah* portion *Chukas* where we learn about Moshe Rabbeinu's sin, we learn how the Jewish people did not have water and how they came to Moshe and said, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to bring us to this bad place, a place without seed and figs and vines and pomegranates and there is no water to drink?" Moshe at that time became very befuddled. He could not understand what was going on and he and Aaron fell upon their faces and the glory of G-d appeared to them. Moshe could not understand what was going on because this was the generation he had raised up, the generation he had taught. This was not the generation which had left Egypt and had a slave mentality. These were independent thinking people who were not dependent upon a master to make every one of their decisions. They were not a cowering cowed people. He did not know how to handle them now. He had taught them how to rise to every occasion, to meet every challenge with confidence. How could they have acted in this way? G-d told Moshe to take the staff and to assemble the people and to speak to the rock before the eyes of all the people, and the rock would give its water. Moshe took the staff and gathered the people before the rock but, instead of talking to the rock, he yelled at the people, "Listen, rebels, will we bring forth water for you from this rock?" Then Moshe lifted his hand and he hit the rock with the staff twice and then water came out and the people drank. G-d then said to Moshe and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in Me to sanctify Me before the Children of Israel, therefore, you will not bring this congregation to the land which I gave to them."

This is indeed strange. First of all, why did G-d tell Moshe to take the staff if he was not supposed to use it to hit the rock? After all, when the Jewish people left Egypt, Moshe was instructed to take his staff and to hit the rock and water did come out. Secondly, why wasn't it also considered a big miracle now when Moshe hit the rock and water came out? What difference did it make whether he spoke or hit the rock? If we would go out and hit a rock, no water would come out, so why wasn't it also considered this time a miracle when Moshe struck the rock and water came out? He still had sanctified G-d's name.

Perhaps we can understand this episode if we realize that the people of this generation never said they wanted to go back to Egypt like the first

generation did. This generation was a proud independent generation. What they were asking Moshe was, "Why did you bring us to this bad place? Why did you teach us to be independent and then not let us be independent? We are still totally dependent upon G-d for our food, our water, our clothing, etc. This is a bad place because we cannot exercise that independence which you taught us that we each possess. This is a place without seed and figs and vines and pomegranates." "*Mayim*," or "water," in Hebrew also has the connotation of ideology. The *Torah* is called *Mayim*. We are being treated here like kids. We are not being allowed to let our minds soar. We are not being given the deeper reasons for things. Moshe did not know how to respond to this generation. The people he had taken out of Egypt were dependent people. That's why he was told to hit the rock the first time. The word used there for "rock" was "*Tzur*," which means "to be narrow." The people did not have any confidence in themselves. They were narrow. They did not think they could solve their problems. Moshe had to goad them, push them to solve their problems. Now, however, he did not know what to do with this generation. Should he goad them, too, or not?

According to the *Rashbam*, when G-d told Moshe to take the staff, He told Moshe to take the staff that Aaron had placed in the Holy of Holies together with the staffs of all the other tribes after the rebellion of Korach. Aaron's leadership was proven only after his staff blossomed. Moshe was not to take the staff to hit the rock; he was to take the staff to remind the people that the *Torah* expands their vistas, that the *Torah* causes their lives to blossom and flower. The time for negative pronouncements and for screaming and yelling and goading the people was at an end. Moshe could not longer call the people names and expect them to follow the *Torah*. This he had to do to a submissive generation to wake them up, to cause them to accept responsibility, but this he could not do for more than a very short while with an independent and enlightened generation. Moshe had to prove to this generation that the ideas of the *Torah*, the *Mayim* of the *Torah*, was sweet and good and beneficial. This he could not do by being negative, by telling them that if they did not do this commandment or that commandment, they were going to get this punishment or that punishment but, instead, he had to stress the beauty of the commandments and how they

would add to a person's life, maybe not materially or financially, but most assuredly spiritually, mentally, and psychologically. Because the people respected Moshe, they perhaps for a short time would listen to him when he lashed out at them so as not to upset him, but Moshe failed to sanctify G-d's name among the Jewish people because he could not make any lasting impression on the hearts and minds of this newer generation. Moshe really could not change his leadership style completely; therefore, he could no longer be the leader of the Jewish people. "G-d was angry at me because of you," he said in the *Torah* portion *Devoreem*, "I have not changed," Moshe said, "but you have." Therefore, the message had to be presented in a different way. Even Moshe realized this because when he castigated the people in the beginning of this *Torah* portion *Devoreem*, he did not do it openly but only with hints. He named certain places in such a way that they called to mind the sins that the people had committed at these places, but he did not castigate them openly. He tried to tone down his negative approach.

Every generation needs its own type of PR. PR should not be confused with advertising. Advertising is only effective if it is done over and over and over again. Through sheer repetition the message finally gets across to many people. PR is also not propaganda. Propaganda is based on lies and the theory behind propaganda is that if you say a lie over and over again, eventually people will take notice of it. PR is something different. PR is a contrived news event. It is something which is true but made up. It is something which grabs the attention of its readers. For example, when the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, of blessed memory, ordered his followers to collect *Chanukah* toys to be given to the Jewish children who lived near Chernobyl after that terrible nuclear reactor accident, it made all the headlines. Jews who were not even aware of *Chanukah* were now made aware of *Chanukah* because of this juxtaposition of *Chanukah* toys with the Chernobyl children. The Lubavitcher's sponsorship of the lighting of huge *menorahs* in prominent locations throughout the United States was also another way of presenting the message of *Chanukah* to Jews who normally would not be concerned about it. Having the President of the United States light one of these huge *Chanukah menorahs* opposite the White House was also a way of giving Jews

pride and bringing the message home of *Chanukah*. For some reason the late Lubavitcher Rebbe knew how to communicate with the new generation. His followers, many of whom dress in 17th century garb, seem to have had more success presenting the message of Judaism to young people than have those who are fully conversant with all aspects of modern society. He realized the futility of presenting Judaism in a negative way. He always presented it in a positive way and usually in conjunction with modern events in Jewish history or world history, which immediately grabbed the attention of the reader. His *bar mitzvahs* for the children whose fathers were killed in Israel's wars made all the headlines. His mass Jewish marriages of Russian Jews who had left the Soviet Union also caught our attention. There are many things, of course, that we would disagree with about the stands and ideology of the Lubavitch movement, but one thing was clear: the late Rebbe knew how to get his message across.

Moshe Rabbeinu recognized, too, after his sin that he had to recount the story of the Jewish experiences in a way which would appeal to the new generation, and that is exactly what he tries to do in the *Book of Deuteronomy*. Propaganda will never work. When we present Judaism, we must present it truthfully. Advertising will also never work because our community does not have enough money continually to put the Jewish message forward over and over again, but we do need PR. As Jeffrey Kann mentioned to us at the last Rabbinical Council of America convention, "If only the rabbis of America would learn more about PR, we would be able to reach so many more Jews and cause them to come back to Judaism and its principles because Judaism has a wonderful message to teach." Judaism, as we all know, enhances greatly the spiritual and mental and psychological aspects of every Jew. We just have to be able to grab the attention of the Jews of America. If we would just be able to do so, we will see that they will once again return wholeheartedly to our religion. This will not only solve the problem of Jewish continuity, but it will also produce happier and more fulfilled individuals. Let us hope and pray that this will happen soon in our day.