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*The Impact of a Smile*



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By Yonason Ghermezian

בר'י (מט -יב) - חֲכָלִילִי עֵינַיִם מֵיָן וּלְבָר־שֵׁנִים מְחַלֵּב

Much of the guidance we give ourselves and others originates from the short but powerful statements passed down to us from our Sages. We all know how to answer the questions of “Who is a rich man, wise man and powerful man? He who...”. These and much other “Sage Advice” can be found in Masechet Avot – Ethics of our Fathers.

Where did all this advice originate from? Many may suggest that our Rabbis came to these insights through their own intellect and life experience and do not necessarily stem from the Torah itself. However, this does not seem to be the case. The first mishnah in Avot begins with the words “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and passed it down to Yehoshuah...” It seems as though this introduction is in the wrong place. Would it not be more appropriate for it to be relocated to the beginning of the first tractate, Berachot, as opposed to Avot which is located somewhere in the middle of the order of the Mishnah? Rav Ovadiah MiBartinura (15th century commentator) answers that this passage was deliberately placed here to empathize that although it may seem that Avot is just a book of personal recommendations, in truth, all its wisdom originates from God at Sinai and was passed down to us within the tradition we call the Oral Torah. More-so, we find that the Vilna Goan wrote a commentary to Avot as well, only his work has no explanations, he merely sources each statement to its corresponding source in the Tanach. Remarkable how all this wisdom can be traced back to the written Torah.

This being the case, I'd like to suggest that even one of the most basic actions, one we perform multiple times daily, is actually grounded in that powerful tradition from Sinai; SMILING.

The Mishnah in Avot states “Greet every person B’Sever Panim Yafot “- with a pleasant countenance (Avot 1,15). Where in the Torah do we find any mention of this? Naturally, I looked to see where the Vilna Gaon sourced this and was led to a verse in this weeks Torah portion - Vayechi. There the Torah describes the blessing of abundance Yaakov Avinu bestows upon his son Yehudah - “His eyes shall be red with wine (many vineyards) and his teeth white with milk (much pasture)” (Bereshit 49,12).

No mention of smiling there, however, the Talmud (Ketubot 101b) reads this passage a little differently, “Said the Jewish people to the Almighty, 'the white of your teeth (when you smile) is more delicious than milk,' R Yochanan affirmed (based on this interpretation) that giving a smile to a friend is greater than giving him a glass of milk. Finally, the source for smiling.

What I find a little strange about this alternative reading of this verse is what connection is there between the end the verse which talks about smiling to the beginning which refers to the red of the eyes?

## *Real v. Fake Smile*

Ever wonder why sometimes you can sense that someone's smile isn't genuine but rather a passing formality? Well, researchers seem to have found the answer. In the mid-19th century a French physician named Guillaume Duchenne discovered that what distinguishes between a real (Duchenne smile) and artificial smile is that some of the facial muscles required to produce a genuine smile cannot be controlled voluntarily and move only with real emotion. One of those muscles is called the Obicularis oculi muscle which slightly pulls back the outer corner of the eyes and produces creases at the outer edge (notice the lines around the eyes in the picture above). Thus, we can shine those bright whites as much as we like but the true intent is seen through the eyes. This may be what the Torah is conveying, that we desire the genuine smile of God and others, the smile that includes the eyes.

## *The Challenge*

This mandate of greeting ALL people with a pleasant face may seem like a daunting task. How is it that we are expected to do so even at times when we're just not feeling it? Isn't smiling something we do only if we feel happy?

To answer, I'd like to challenge the axiom that being a 'nice guy' is not voluntary but rather a requirement. To illustrate, we may be aware of the story of the would-be convert who was thrown out by Shammai for his request to learn the entirety of Torah while standing on one leg. Hillel, on the other hand, embraced him and stated "Love your neighbor as yourself". We would expect then that the author of the Pleasant Greeting mishnah we are dealing with above to be Hillel – the seemingly nice guy and not Shammai. Surprisingly, the opposite is true. This motto is attributed to Shammai. R' Dessler points out from here that Shammai understood pleasant greetings to be a social obligation even though in general he took a stronger position in Jewish law.

Why is it that smiling is so important? Better yet, why is it that we feel slighted when we don't get that smile? Nothing was taken from us? One Yom Kippur eve, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, the 19th century sage who founded the Mussar movement, met a person on the way to synagogue for the Kol Nidrei prayers. Rabbi Salanter warmly greeted him, but this person was so absorbed with the awesomeness of the Day of Atonement that he did not return the greeting. Rabbi Salanter then remarked to his disciple, Rabbi Itzele of Petersburg, "Why must I need to suffer because of his preoccupation with the Divine judgement?" Rabbi Salanter was teaching his student that regardless of our mood, we have a responsibility to greet everyone with a cheerful and pleasant countenance. The Alter of Slabodka taught that the expression on our face can affect the mood of those around us; thus, our face is considered to be within the "public domain," and it is not within the "private domain. As a proof he pointed out the irony that a person will never actually see his own face (other than through a reflection).



In the secular world, Dale Carnegie, the developer of famous courses in self-improvement and interpersonal skills, authored a book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936), which is one of the first bestselling self-help books ever published. and has sold 15 million copies world-wide. He writes that one of the most important principles of getting people to like you is to smile, a subject to which he devotes an entire chapter of the short book.

What is it about a smile which makes it so powerful?

## *A Little Science*

“Research conducted in Sweden by Drs. Ursula Hess and Sylvie Blairy exposed participants of a study to images of faces while they monitored their facial muscle movements through little electric pads that were stuck to their faces. When exposed to happy faces, participants moved their zygomatic major muscle (used in smiling); when exposed to sad faces, participants moved their corrugator supercilii muscle (used in frowning). Participants did this even when the stimuli were hidden and rapidly presented and usually were not even aware that their muscles moved.” (Quoted from an article at <http://pos-psych.com>.) What this seems to indicate is that there is somewhat of a courageous effect our expressions have on others, similar to yawning, that almost forces them to mimic that expression themselves. Some maintain that it is for this reason older couples sometimes resemble one another. Years of this facial mimicry can cause them to develop similar creases and muscular positions in their faces. Even more remarkably, Daniel Goleman, in his book *Social Intelligence*, describes a patient who “had suffered two strokes that destroyed the connections between his eyes and the brain's system for sight in the visual cortex leaving him completely blind – or so it seemed. On tests where the patient was presented with various shapes like circles and squares, or photos of faces of men and woman, he hadn't a clue what his eyes were gazing at. Yet, when he was shown pictures with angry or happy faces, he suddenly was able to guess the emotions expressed, at a rate far better than chance.

But how? (Social Intelligence page 15)” What they realized was that there are two separate pathways that our seeing takes after an image has been processed by the brain. One pathway leads to the visual cortex and the other to a section of our brain which registers emotions, known as the amygdala. Remarkably, although this patient had destroyed the visual pathway, the emotional one was still fully intact. Thus, he could not see the smile but he could FEEL it!

## *Can smiling actually make you happier?*

The Sefer HaChinuch, a 13th century work which discusses the meaning behind mitzvot, reveals a truth in human nature that external actions influence emotions. Thus, smiling, even superficially, can have the effect of producing real cheerfulness.

“In 1988 a team led by Fritz Strack came up with a brilliant cover story that allowed them to manipulate the facial expressions of participants involved in a study without their awareness. The researchers told participants that they were studying lifestyles of people who had lost the use of their hands. Such individuals would need to use their mouths to hold pencils for writing, or to use a television remote. The participants then held a pencil in their teeth (which naturally activates the muscles typically used for smiling) or lips (which does not activate those muscles), and then rated several cartoons for funniness. Those who were (unknowingly) “smiling” rated the cartoons as funnier than people who weren’t smiling.” (From an article by D. Munger.).

## *Putting it all together*

What all this seems to tell us about the power of smiling is that when we smile, it makes us happier, triggers others to smile as well, whereby they become happier and even actually feel its warmth.

## *In Practice*

R' Dessler illustrates, based on his understanding of Shamaï's Mishnah, how this greeting should be done. The Mishnah states "Greet others B'sever Panim Yafot". 'B'Sever', from the word Savar, means to actually 'turn' your body to the person (shows more interest). 'Panim' - then show them your 'face' (don't look around). 'Yafot' - Present that face 'beautifully'. R Avrohom Grodzinski embodied this teaching. He would spend a great deal of time in front of the mirror practicing his smile and worked for two years on greeting others pleasantly even while living through the horrors of the Holocaust. Our sages say that a smile is likened to a candle. Many candles can be lit from a single one, but never diminishing from its own light. If you smile today to three people and each of them to three others, then, by the twenty first step in this chain, you will have smiled to all of mankind.

