The Charisma Conundrum: Thoughts on Parashat Vayera, November 7, 2009

View PDF

Some years ago, I learned about a doctoral dissertation that explored the nature of charisma. The author spent many hours talking with and observing individuals who were widely regarded as being very successful in their interpersonal relationships. Among the group of charismatic people were clergy, doctors, teachers, businesspeople, and a bartender.

What qualities did these individuals have that made others feel attracted to them? What was at the root of their charisma? Why were these men and women so highly regarded among their peers?

The author of the dissertation found basic threads that tied them all together. Charismatic individuals all demonstrate enthusiasm for what they do; they love their work. They enjoy meeting challenges. They desire to share their enthusiasm with others, and to do things for others. They are successful with people, because they genuinely feel a commitment to others.

An enthusiastic person inspires enthusiasm in others. An idealistic individual inspires idealism in others. Charisma is a function of one's inner enthusiasm, love and overflowing commitment to others. To the extent that a person can convey these qualities to others, his/her charismatic power is enhanced.

This week's Parasha opens with a description of Abraham's hospitality to three strangers. The Torah emphasizes Abraham's alacrity--he rushed out to greet them, he told Sarah to hurry to bake bread, he ran to find a suitable meal for his guests. The Midrash points out features of Abraham's hospitality: he kept his tent open on all four sides in order to encourage guests to enter; he fed them well and taught them to offer blessings to God; he was the embodiment of "hesed"--kindness and compassion.

Abraham was charismatic. He founded a new religious worldview and he made many converts. Why were they attracted to him and his message? Because he was so enthusiastic, loving, and helpful; because he had a great message and was able to communicate it to them.

The Midrash teaches that Abraham and Sarah were both overflowing with love of God and love of humanity. Abraham converted the men, and Sarah converted the women. They were overwhelmingly successful because they were able to attract people to themselves and to their ideas.

Few people can reach the level of charisma of Abraham and Sarah, and few will be able to change the world so dramatically. However, everyone can raise his/her "charisma quotient" by becoming more energized with one's own work; by demonstrating greater enthusiasm for one's ideals; by devoting more time and effort to reaching out and helping others in an honest and loving way.

Erich Fromm noted: "Most people fail in the art of living not because they are inherently bad or so without will that they cannot live a better life; they fail because they do not wake up and see when they stand at a fork in the road and have to decide."

Charisma entails a constant awareness of life's challenges, an enthusiasm to meet those challenges, and the ability to make decisions in an intelligent way.

***Please share this Angel for Shabbat column with family and friends. Please visit the website of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, jewishideas.org , and read the new articles and blog that have been posted this week. We welcome your support, membership--and enthusiasm.

Angel for Shabbat