

Jewish Perspectives on Staff Happiness and Stamina: Staying Internally Motivated

Judaism stresses optimism and positive thinking as keys to success and positive outcomes. At the same time, the Torah also stresses that thought itself will not accomplish anything. It is only when thought is combined with action that true happiness and positive experience will occur. In this handout, I want to share five ways to THINK and ACT to enhance motivation and success at your camp, school, or other youth program.

1. Think of an Obstacle as a Challenge for Success:

“Chazak! Chazak! Venitchazeik!” - Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened.

These words (Chazak! Chazak! Venitchazeik!) are spoken at the end of each book of the Torah as a transition from one book to the next. These words exemplify a core value in Judaism. When there is an obstacle it is not the end, but rather, a possibility of something greater than what you ever expected. If you find yourself in a challenging situation during camp, remember the words “Chazak! Chazak! Venitchazeik! Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened.”

The Bible has many stories of individuals who looked for the silver lining during challenging times. For example, Joseph who had many travails (thrown in a pit to die, was forced into slavery, went to jail) was able to see these horrific events in a positive light. Instead of focusing on the negative, he was able to see the experience as part of a greater and larger good.

What can we learn from Joseph?

- Look for the good stuff.
- When you are having a difficult day or working with a challenging camper, try to find the good.
- Look for the bigger picture.

2. Gratitude

*“Who is rich? The one who appreciates what he has.”
Ethics of the Fathers 4:1*

Gratitude is a core concept in Jewish teachings. That is why the morning prayers begin with a series of blessings thanking God for simple things that we can easily take for granted. Judaism recognizes that true happiness comes from appreciating and consciously enjoying what is already good in your life rather than focusing on what is missing.

To demonstrate this point, consider this simple exercise.

- Each day try to count three things you are grateful for, such as supportive colleagues, supportive staff, and friends.
- By doing these exercises your gratitude will increase, you will be happier, and even your worst days won't be so bad.
- Keep this up for at least 3-4 weeks.
- We know it takes at least 3-4 weeks to make something into a habit.

3. The Power of Positive Thinking

"Think good and it will be good."

T'zemech Tzedek

The pioneers who settled Israel in 1948 demonstrated the power of positive thinking. The pioneers were faced with a land that was barren and with enemies all around. However, instead of giving up, they believed that they could overcome all obstacles and return Israel to "a land flowing with milk and honey." (Exodus 3:8).

How can you apply these ideas to working with campers? If you find that you are getting easily angry, sad, or moody, ask yourself: how is the way I am thinking about my campers, co-counselors, supervisors, and camp making me upset?

Ask Yourself the Following:

- Can I change the way I think about the situation so I feel better?
- Am I expecting the worst? What is the worst thing that can happen?
- Am I being demanding about how others should act?
- Can I change the way I think so that I am being more flexible?
- Is it helpful how I'm thinking? Or, am I making matters worse?
- How can I think about the situation so that I am being more realistic, practical and flexible in my approach?

4. Acknowledge When Times Get Tough

"Kol Yisroel Areivim Zeh La'Zeh - Every Jew is responsible for one another."

It is normal to feel down or cranky at times. However, it is a myth that all staff experience some kind of slump at a predictable time during the summer. If you accept how you are feeling, but don't let it define you, there won't be a noticeable slump.

Also, remember that you are not alone and to ask for help. As Rashi quotes (Bamidbar 13:23) from the Talmud (Sotah 34a) "A burden that a person can carry on his own is only a third of what he can carry when he is assisted". If this is true in the physical form, how much more does it apply mentally.

Boost your own morale by:

- Recognizing that negative feelings will pass. They always do.
- Remembering you are not alone. You can and should count on your fellow staff members.
- Knowing that asking for help is a sign of strength.
- Embracing the notion that asking for help and relying on others is a strong Jewish tradition.

5. One Person Can Make a Difference

That One person can make a difference is a key concept in Judaism. A motivated individual can make real, positive changes both in his or her life and in the world.

The Gemara says that a person should say to himself, "The whole world was created only for my sake". This saying is not designed to make one feel self-important, but rather to realize that the survival or the destruction of the world depends on you. Each individual can have great impact on the outcome.

You too can make a lasting and real change for your campers.

- By focusing on the positive (changing your thinking)
- Staying motivated (changing your actions) throughout the summer.

Learn More: Staff Advancement Activities

Exercise #1: Red Experiment: Look around the place you are in right now and try to find all the examples of RED that you can see. Give yourself 20 seconds to look around. Good. Now tell me. What did you see that was GREEN?

Wait, you may be saying, I didn't ask you to look for green. I asked you to look for red. That's right, I did. However, what do you notice? If you are like most people, you will be able to easily tell me some RED items around you, but will struggle to tell me any GREEN ones. You did look around for 20 seconds, right? So why did this happen?

- a. Ask the staff what is this exercise trying to demonstrate? Try to elicit their answers. Then discuss that what this experiment demonstrates is that our focus can narrow our observations. What we focus on expands and what we don't focus on goes to the background.
- b. What does this experiment have to do with working with children? If as youth leaders, we focus on the negative stuff (the lost towels, the whining children, the heat, or the food we dislike) this negative focus will become prominent in our lives. Without meaning to, we will change our mood and attitudes with our focus on the negative.

Exercise #2: Bank Robber Story: There are 50 people in a bank. You are among those 50 people. A robber comes into the bank. He shoots you in the shoulder. No one else is shot. Would you consider yourself lucky or unlucky?

- a. Ask the staff, what is the point of this experiment? Try to elicit from the staff that we don't always have a choice as to what situation we are thrown into, but we do have a choice about how we think about it. In addition, there can be multiple perspectives to the same situation.
- b. Discuss Joseph and his travails. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, was thrown in a pit to die, was forced into slavery, and spent several years in jail. Still, Joseph was able to learn a positive lesson. When Joseph re-met his brothers, the same ones that threw him in a pit and into slavery, he wasn't downtrodden or angry. Instead, he said, "I am Joseph your brother. It is I, whom you sold into Egypt. Don't be distressed, for it was to be a provider that God sent me ahead of you. God has sent me ahead of you to ensure your survival in the land and to sustain you for a momentous deliverance". What a remarkable example this is of seeing the positive in a situation.
- c. What does this have to do with staff and camping? When you are having a difficult day with your peers or struggling to work with a challenging child, find the good in the experience and remember your true mission. Remember, we can't always change the situation we are placed in at camp, but we can change the way we think. In addition, campers and counselors can have many different perspectives to the same situation. You and your co-counselor can have different perspectives, as well as you and your campers. It doesn't make one right or wrong, it may just be different.

Exercise #3: Story and Reflection: Share the story of the starfish and the child.

“One day an old man was walking along the beach. It was low tide, and the sand was covered with thousands of stranded starfish that the unusually high tide had carried in and left behind. The man began walking very carefully so as not to step on any of the beautiful creatures. Since the animals still seemed to be alive, he considered picking some of them up and putting them back in the water, where they could resume their lives.

The man knew the starfish would die if left on the dry sand, but he reasoned that he could not possibly help them all, so he chose to do nothing and continued walking. Soon afterward, the man came upon a small child on the beach who was frantically throwing one starfish after another back into the sea.

The old man stopped and asked the child, "What are you doing?" "I'm saving the starfish," the child replied. "Why waste your time? There are so many you can't save them all so what does it matter?" argued the man. Without hesitation, the child picked up another starfish and tossed it back into the water... "*It matters to this one,*" the child explained."

- a. Share with the staff that each individual can have great impact on the outcome. You can make lasting and real changes for the children in your care, by focusing on the positive and staying motivated throughout the summer.
- b. Remember, *you* matter to that starfish/ child and every starfish/child matters.
- c. Ask the staff to reflect on when they were campers. If they had to look back and share a memorable moment from when they were campers what would it be? Ask the counselors for their responses. Whenever I have done this exercise, I have always found that the events or camping experiences that have reported to be most memorable are not about the new water slide or the trampoline in the lake, but rather about relationships (primarily relationships between camper and counselor). Just like the previous story demonstrates - the counselor has the power to make the difference.