

“Those who encamped before the Mishkan to the front, before the Ohel Moed to the east, were Moshe and Aharon and his sons.” (3:38)

Rashi cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* which declares, “Fortunate is a *tzaddik* and fortunate is his neighbor.” Because the tribes of Yehudah, Yissachar and Zevulun encamped on the east near Moshe *Rabbeinu*, who was constantly engaged in Torah study, they themselves became great in Torah.

A *tzaddik* has the ability to leave an indelible impression upon those who are in his proximity. *Chazal* address the concept of a neighbor with whom one spends quite some time, one who, while in a *tzaddik*’s presence, falls under the impression and influence of a *tzaddik*. This is a phenomenon that occurs even during a short meeting.

The *Ahavas Yisrael* of Vizhnitz was known for his love of all Jews and his ability to reach out to even the most assimilated Jew. His warmth and love, his sensitivity and caring for a person – regardless of his level of observance – would find their way into a person’s heart. Many Jews who had acculturated and turned their backs on the religion their ancestors had died for returned as a direct result of his “open-heart” policy. One *Shabbos*, *Rav* Yisrael was in a small town and was joined by many townspeople for his Friday night *Tish*, table, which he conducted in the local *shul*. A free- thinking member of the community decided to attend out of curiosity. When he came close to the *Rebbe*, one of the *chasidim* attempted to discourage the *Rebbe* from getting too friendly with him. “Rumor has it that he smokes on *Shabbos*,” the *Rebbe* was told by a zealous *chasid*. When the man came forward to greet the *Rebbe*, another *chasid* asked, “What are you doing here?” As soon as the *Rebbe* heard this, he immediately silenced the indignant *chasid* and personally greeted the Jew with a warm smile. Years later, the now-observant Jew would relate that every time his desire to light up a cigarette on *Shabbos* began to ignite within him, he reminded himself of the *Rebbe*’s warm, friendly smile that night. After that, he could no longer smoke. That was the genesis of his return to observance.

I have a similar story to relate, one for which I can vouch. Twenty- five years ago, I assumed my first position in *Torah chinuch*, Jewish education, by opening a *yeshivah* high school in a community which was then far from the beaten Torah path. For the most part, the students – although very sweet – were far-removed from *Yiddishkeit*. It was our hope and goal to introduce them to Torah, and the Torah would do the rest. *Baruch Hashem*, we achieved moderate success. There was one student who hailed from a small community in southern California, who only had a minimal knowledge of *Yiddishkeit*. Yet, he acclimated nicely and became a *frum ben Torah* – despite the objections of his parents.

Towards the end of the school year, there was a pseudo contest whereby a number of the *yeshivah* high schools in the West Coast submitted the name of a student whom they felt would

receive the greatest inspiration from a trip to New York, which included a special visit with the *gadol ha'dor*, the preeminent Torah leader of the generation, *Horav Moshe Feinstein, z.l.* This young man, who was sixteen-years-old at the time, won the prize, and off to New York he went. I might add that his parents, especially his mother, were far from overjoyed with this trip. We were “endangering” their child. He might become *frum*. The trip was a success. The high point of the journey, meeting *Rav Moshe*, was an experience that changed his life and forever remained indelibly ingrained in his psyche.

He graduated and went on to a *yeshivah gedolah*, regrettably without his parents' best wishes, and he began to *shteig*, succeed, as a *ben Torah* and *yeshivah* man. I subsequently lost touch with him as we both moved on – I to Cleveland and he to greater heights in *Torah* learning. Then, tragedy struck. While in *yeshivah*, he was diagnosed with Hodgkins disease. The prognosis was hopeful, but he would have to undergo serious and, at times, very painful treatments. *Hashem Yisborach* sent him a *refuah sheleimah*, and after months of treatment, the doctors felt that he had reached survivor status.

A number of years later, during one of my trips with our school, I had occasion to be in his *yeshivah*, where he was now a distinguished member of the *kollel*, a post-graduate fellow, and lo and behold we met. The meeting was emotional, as we recounted the many years that had gone by since graduation. He excitedly told me that his parents had become *frum* and were very supportive of his current lifestyle, as well as his desire to pursue a lifelong career in *Torah chinuch*. I then asked him what had given him the courage to undergo the pain and travail of his treatment, while still maintaining steadfast belief and trust in Hashem? He said that it had not been easy. What made it more difficult was that his mother, who was not a fan of *yeshivah* and *frumkeit* at the time, would stand by his bed in the hospital, when he was partially comatose and ask, “Where are your rabbis now?” He said that every time the pain became unbearable or the nausea was too much to handle, and the anger welled up in his mind, he saw *Rav Moshe* in his study shaking his hand and giving him a *berachah*, blessing, to excel in *Torah* study. *Rav Moshe's* eyes pierced through the pain and gave him hope and courage to go on!

This young man is today a successful principal and *mashpiah*. He has inspired and helped many children of all ages and backgrounds. He overcame scorn, despair, and pain, all because of that one meeting with the *gadol ha'dor*. He never forgot those eyes; he never forgot that look.