

“Drive Carefully”

As I continue to work on my teaching and my parenting, I often wonder about the best way to engender the behaviors and patterns we would like to see from our students and children. What motivates our students to learn, to behave and to excel? As a psychology major in college, I enjoyed reading about perception, personality, development, motivation, and the mind and the heart.

Over the most recent vacation, I had a chance to read some more about what motivates people in all sorts of settings. In his book Drive, Daniel Pink proposes that while the current scientific knowledge shows that three main sources of motivation are autonomy, mastery and meaning, teachers, parents and business managers often practice as though motivation is more related to receiving rewards and avoiding punishments- an older, perhaps outdated understanding of what drives us.

Pink shares a fascinating example of autonomy, mastery and meaning at work. He invites the reader to pretend that in the late 1990’s you ask an economist to predict the future, giving him or her two possible outcomes. The first choice is that Microsoft will spend millions of dollars to hire the top writers and editors to produce articles on thousands of topics for the latest, most up to date, most informative encyclopedia that will be sold on CD Rom and online. The second choice is that a group of people that don’t work for any company and don’t get paid will get together to write articles of interest on a variety of topics with no oversight or supervision. They won’t need any special qualifications to be part of the project, they will contribute their time and expertise for free, and then the encyclopedia will also be free and available online.

On October 31, 2009, Microsoft gave up on its project of creating this disk and online encyclopedia and Wikipedia became the largest and most used encyclopedia in the world with 13 million articles in 260 languages. To use the traditional, perhaps most common understanding of motivation of rewards producing results would make it impossible to explain this history, but the quest for meaning and sense of purpose and mastery seem to be reasonable.

As we share our values and learning with our children and help them continue to grow, focusing on the powerful meaning and sense of purpose these HACD experiences create and being careful **not** to focus on any remuneration (even earning good grades) can maximize their interest and dedication as well as their moral and spiritual growth.

Some other questions to consider:

Can rewards cause harm to motivation? Do rewards actually boost performance? Does the size of the reward matter?

Stay tuned. . .

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Purim Sameach.

Rabbi Rami Strosberg