



# Popularity, Charisma, and the Teaching Profession

— RABBI YITZCHAK BLAU

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In this piece, the author draws on Jewish teachings and educational theory to argue for prioritizing careful and skillful teaching, ethics, and integrity — not charisma — when hiring, guiding, and evaluating teachers.

In the last 10-15 years, a disturbing number of rabbis have been identified as guilty of sexual abuse, many of them abusing multiple young victims. Many of these rabbis were (or still are) charismatic and popular educators. While not all abusers can be characterized as charismatic (and, of course, not all charismatic teachers are abusers), a number of factors help explain the frequent connection between charisma and abuse.

Charismatic individuals often have both many opportunities for abusive behavior and devoted followers desperate to defend their mentors and rebbes. The charismatic abuser's victims may feel flattered by the abuser's focus on them, and/or confuse inappropriate attention with appropriate intimacy. In addition, institutions are often reluctant to face up to the abusive behavior of charismatic teachers and leaders, who are often central to an organization's reputation and mission as well as its financial bottom line. Thus, it behooves those concerned about abuse to analyze the role of charisma and popularity in our calculus of what makes a good educator. While we should not assume that the classroom (or area of responsibility) of every popular educator is a dangerous minefield, we can recognize the risks of being enthralled by charisma, individually or institutionally; reassess our priorities in the hiring, retention, and evaluation of teachers; and identify the other qualities we want to see in educators that can protect their students, and the teachers themselves, from the dangers of unchecked charisma.

All other things being equal, education is enhanced when students like their teachers both as pedagogues and as people. A mishnaic commentary penned by a nineteenth-century German Rabbi conveys this point:

הוא היה אומר, אין בור ירא חטא, ולא עם הארץ חסיד, ולא  
הביטן ללמד, ולא הקפדן מלמד, ולא כל המרבה בסחורה מחכים.  
ובמקום שאין אנשים, השתדל להיות איש: (אבות פרק ב:ה)

He was accustomed to say: A boor cannot fear sin. An ignorant person cannot be pious. A person prone to being ashamed cannot learn. An impatient person cannot teach. (*Avot 2:5*)

Hillel, the first-century sage, teaches here that the *kapdan*, the impatient or short-tempered person, cannot teach. R. Yisrael Lipschutz offers several explanations for this:

**ולא הקפדן מלמד**  
מי שהוא קפדן וכעסן, אינו ראוי ומסוגל להיות מלמד לתלמידים או  
מורה לעדה, דמלבד שע"י הכעס יסתלק חכמת המלמד באותו  
שעה להסביר דבריו יפה [כפסחים ס"ז ב], ויתבלבלו דעת משמיע  
ושומע. בל"ז איך ישגיח התלמיד על דברי שונאו. (תפארת ישראל אבות י"ג ב:מא)

Someone who is impatient and angry is not fit or able to teach students or head a congregation. Beyond the fact that anger will cause him to temporarily lose his wisdom and ability to explain things clearly and will generate confusion for the speaker and listener, how will a student pay attention to the words of someone he hates? (*Tiferet Yisrael Yakhin, Avot 2:41*).

R. Lipschutz begins by noting that an angry and tense atmosphere makes it impossible to think straight; an environment with irate teachers and petrified students does not encourage productive dialogue. He then adds a positive observation, that a good relationship between instructor and pupil augments education. Students are more likely to listen attentively and enjoy the subject matter if they like the person teaching the class. Furthermore, their liking him or her may also reflect the depth and excitement of the lesson. In other words, popularity frequently reflects positively on the quality of the content and presentation.

However, there is another side to this equation, as a story from the Talmud illustrates:

רבי אבהו ורבי חייה בר אבא איקלעו לההוא אתרא רבי אבהו דרש  
 באגדתא רבי חייה בר אבא דרש בשמעמא שבקוה כולי עלמא  
 לרבי חייה בר אבא ואזול לגביה דרבי אבהו חלש דעתיה אמר ליה  
 אמשל לך משל למה הדבר דומה לשני בני אדם אחד מוכר אבנים  
 טובות ואחד מוכר מיני סידקית על מי קופצין לא על זה שמוכר  
 מיני סידקית

R. Abbahu and R. Hiyya b. Abba once came to a place; R. Abbahu taught aggada and R. Hiyya b. Abba taught halakha. All the people left R. Hiyya b. Abba and went to hear R. Abbahu, so that the former was upset. [R. Abbahu] said to him: 'I will give you a parable. To what is the matter compared? To two men, one of whom was selling precious stones and the other various kinds of small ware. To whom will the people hurry? Is it not to the seller of various kinds of small ware?' (*Sotah 40a*)

Two traveling scholars arrive at a new location and deliver very different lectures. R. Hiyya b. Abba teaches about the intricate details of Jewish law, and R. Abbahu lectures about Talmudic tales. When R. Abbahu draws a much bigger crowd, his traveling partner is upset. R. Abbahu attempts to mollify R. Hiyya by pointing out how popularity does not always reflect quality. Sometimes, the masses are drawn to a more shallow presentation that comes with easy excitement, glitz, and gaudy packaging. We can all think of examples of this in religious and other contexts, where simplistic and flashy teachers may be appreciated more than those with a more even-keeled, deliberate approach, even if the latter's teaching is profound and grounded in learning and scholarship.

The issue of popularity of a teacher extends beyond a potential association with superficiality:

אמר אביי האי צורבא מרבנן דמרחמין ליה בני מתא לאו משום  
 דמעלי טפי אלא משום דלא מוכח להו במילי דשמאי

Abaye said: If a scholar is loved by the townspeople [their love] is not due to his superiority but [to the fact] that he does not rebuke them for [neglecting] spiritual matters. (*Ketubot 105:b*)

Abaye observes that popularity sometimes stems from the failure, in one well-known formulation, to "afflict the comfortable" — to urge people to attend to their spiritual lives. He depicts a scholar who resists challenging the townspeople to improve. And there are other problematic ways to achieve popularity, too. For example, a teacher can impart to students the idea that only in his or her classroom is the truth taught while all other approaches reveal gross misunderstanding. Such an educator simultaneously puts

down and distorts other institutions, communities, and teachers while training students in arrogance. A teacher can appeal to adolescents in particular by telling risqué stories or dirty jokes. An educator can also avoid making students work hard, becoming popular (if not always being charismatic per se) by prioritizing endless schmoozing or showing videos over the hard work of skill building and rigorous analysis. Perhaps most importantly, charisma per se can turn manipulative.

In sum, charisma is not only potentially dangerous in an educational setting where it is not accompanied by self-awareness and supervisory caution, but it also can sometimes substitute for — while masquerading as — pedagogic excellence.

Another Talmudic story can help refocus our priorities. Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, on his deathbed, appointed R. Hanina to succeed him as rosh yeshiva. The Gemara wonders why he did not appoint R. Hiyya instead. Ultimately, the passage suggests that R. Hiyya was busy with another worthy endeavor, and Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi did not want to distract him from it. The following story explains what R. Hiyya was busy with.

והיינו דכי הוו מינצו ר' חנינא ור' חייא, א"ל ר' חנינא לר' חייא: בהדי דידי מינצת? דאם חס ושלום נשתכחה תורה מישראל, מהדרנא ליה מפלפולי! א"ל ר' חייא: אנא עבדי דלא משתכחה תורה מישראל, דאיתנינא כיתנא ושדיינא, ומגדלנא נישבי וציידנא טביא, ומאכילנא בישרא ליתמי, ואריכנא מגילתא ממשכי דטביא, וסליקנא למתא דלית בה מקרי דרדקי, וכתיבנא חמשא חומשי לחמשא ינוקי, ומתנינא שיתא סידרי לשיתא ינוקי, לכל חד וחד אמרי ליה אתני סידרך לחברך. והיינו דאמר רבי: כמה גדולים מעשה חייא. (כתובות קג:)

When R. Hanina and R. Hiyya were engaged in a dispute, R. Hanina said to R. Hiyya, 'Do you [venture to] dispute with me? Were the Torah, God forbid, to be forgotten in Israel, I would restore it by means of my dialectical arguments'. — 'I', replied R. Hiyya, 'make provision that the Torah shall not be forgotten in Israel. For I bring flax seed, sow it, and weave nets [from the plant]. [With these] I hunt stags with whose flesh I feed orphans and from whose skins I prepare scrolls, and then proceed to a town where there are no teachers of young children, and write out the five Books of the Pentateuch for five children [respectively] and teach another six children respectively the six orders of the Mishnah, and then tell each one: "Teach your section to your colleagues"'. It was this that Rabbi [had in mind when he] exclaimed, 'How great are the deeds of Hiyya?' (*Ketubot 103b*)

R. Hiyya's dedication to the education of Jewish children deserves great respect. At the same time, R. Hanina's boasting about his analytic abilities may not have been an empty claim. He apparently excelled at Talmudic reasoning and analysis. If so, perhaps R. Hanina truly deserved to be the rosh yeshiva delivering the advanced Talmudic lectures. Why does the Gemara assume that R. Hiyya would have received the position if not for the fact that he was previously engaged?

R. Moshe Sofer, in his commentary on this Gemara, offers a significant answer. R. Hanina may have been more learned or more acute at analysis, but R. Hiyya was more righteous. Indeed, R. Hiyya's willingness to travel the country and teach elementary school children indicates impressive idealism, dedication, and humility. As much as we value the life of the intellect, our leaders need to model ethical behavior for their constituents. Our students learn much more from how their role models behave than from what they say. From this perspective, R. Hiyya would have been the best teacher to serve as rosh yeshiva had he been available.

If the Jewish community adopted this educational priority, explicitly valuing ethical behavior over intellectual achievement and attractive allure, it would help on myriad levels. If educational leaders consciously promoted and valued humility over arrogance, kindness over charm, and decency over charisma, we would be less likely to hire popular but problematic teachers — and quicker to remove such teachers from our schools. In that context, administrators would be more likely to pay attention to red flags when hiring charismatic teachers and react with greater alacrity to accusations against popular ones.

Parker Palmer, a renowned author, educator, and activist, has articulated a perspective that may help guide us in the search for the best educators. He contrasted three types of education. In a student-centered model, everything revolves around making the students feel good about their knowledge and opinions. In a teacher-centered model, the focus is the brilliance and personality of the teacher. To avoid the pitfalls of these approaches, Parker suggests a subject-centered model. In this model, both teacher and student are less significant than the body of knowledge they jointly study. A Jewish educator and his or her disciples who work on passing along the information and understanding that enables a holy and ethical tradition to survive through the generations, and engaging with that tradition, are involved in something much bigger than themselves as individuals. In a healthy educational model, a teacher and an educational environment convey that learning is not about the teacher but about the Torah.

"If we want a community of truth in the classroom, a community that can keep us honest, we must put a third thing, a great thing, at the center of the pedagogical circle. When student and teacher are the only active agents, community easily slips into narcissism, where either the teacher reigns supreme or students can do no wrong... True community in any context requires a transcendent third thing that holds both me and thee accountable to something beyond ourselves, a fact well known outside of education... The subject-centered classroom is characterized by the fact that the third thing has a presence so real, so vivid, so vocal, that it can hold teacher and student alike accountable for what they say and do." (*The Courage to Teach*, p. 118-120).

Indeed, explicit accountability to values and ideals beyond the personalities and egos of the participants, along with norms for how those values and ideals are to be enacted, would not only foster a healthier educational atmosphere in general. It would also help prevent sexual abuse, which too often is facilitated by enthrallment with, or failure to provide checks and balances on, the behavior of the teacher.

## Discussion Questions

1. What qualities does your community value in an educator? A leader? How are these values enacted?
2. How do you define charisma? What makes it dangerous, and what makes it instead a valuable component of teaching?
3. Identify an example of a teacher or youth worker who was charismatic and personally powerful, yet those aspects of their personality were not destructive or abusive. What about this person's other traits, and about the norms and expectations in that educational context, made the person's teaching relationships safe?
4. If you were responsible for establishing in an educational setting the norms that would ensure a focus on teaching and learning of the "transcendent third thing," what would you put on that list?

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*This piece is part of the Respect & Responsibility: A Jewish Ethics Study Guide that is a joint project of Sacred Spaces and the Center for Jewish Ethics. Learn more at [www.jewishsacredspaces.org](http://www.jewishsacredspaces.org).*