

# Keeping Your Kids Engaged at the Seder: The Talmud's Caffeine-Free Method

Rabbi Josh Flug

Children play a central role at the seder. Their questions, comments and insights are an integral part of the mitzvah of *sippur yetziat Mitzraim*, the mitzvah of recounting the exodus from Egypt. One of the challenges of conducting a *seder* is that the *seder* must be conducted at night. Due to the late hour, it is often difficult to keep younger children engaged. In this article, we will explore a passage of the Talmud that provides one method of engaging the children. We will see various interpretations of this Talmudic statement which not only provide explanation to the particular method, but provide a general approach to keeping children engaged at the seder.

The Talmud states:

*It is stated in a Beraita: R. Eliezer says 'chotfin matzahs on the nights of Pesach for the children so that they don't fall asleep.'*

**Pesachim 109a**

תניא רבי אליעזר אומר חוטפין מצות בלילי פסחים בשביל תינוקות שלא ישנו.  
פסחים קט.



- What is the definition of *chotfin*?
- How does this method prevent the children from falling asleep?
- Are we attempting to keep the children awake until the end of the seder or only until a specific point in the seder?
- What is the ultimate purpose of keeping the children awake?

It should be noted that R. Eliezer's statement is sandwiched between two statements regarding R. Akiva's methods of keeping the children awake:

1) They said about R. Akiva that he would pass out to the children roasted grains and nuts so that they wouldn't sleep and would ask [questions]... 2) They said about R. Akiva that in all his days there never was a time when he stopped learning except for Erev Pesach and Erev Yom Kippur. On Erev Pesach for the children so that they don't sleep.

**Pesachim 109a**

אמרו עליו על רבי עקיבא שהיה מחלק קליות ואגוזין לתינוקות בערב פסח כדי שלא ישנו וישאלו ... אמרו עליו על רבי עקיבא מימיו לא אמר הגיע עת לעמוד בבית המדרש חוץ מערבי פסחים וערב יום הכפורים בערב פסח בשביל תינוקות כדי שלא ישנו.

**פסחים קט.**

## Rashi's interpretation

Rashi provides two explanations to R. Eliezer's practice. The explanation that Rashi prefers is:

*We eat quickly. This interpretation is the primary interpretation. One can prove this from the fact that R. Akiva's practice was brought together with this statement.*

**Rashi, ad loc., s.v. Chotfin**

אוכלין מהר, וזה הלשון עיקר מדמייתי הא דר' עקיבא בהדה.  
**רש"י שם ד"ה חוטפין**

According to Rashi the purpose of R' Eliezer's practice is to conduct the seder before the children become tired. *Chotfin* is translated as "quickly eating" (see *Ma'aseh Rokei'ach, Hilchot Chametz UMatzah* 7:3). It would seem that according to this interpretation, one should try to ensure that the children are awake for the entire seder. As such, it is possible that the ultimate motive for the children to stay awake is to give them the ability to fulfill all of the *mitzvot* of the seder.

Based on this interpretation, *Shulchan Aruch* states:

*One should have his table set before the day starts in order to eat as soon as it gets dark. Even if he is learning, he should pause because there is a mitzvah to hurry and eat in order that the children don't fall asleep.*

**Shulchan Aruch 472:1**

יהיה שלחנו ערוך מבעוד יום, כדי לאכול מיד כשתחשך ואף אם הוא בבית המדרש יקום מפני שמצוה למהר ולאכול בשביל התינוקות שלא ישנו.

**שלחן ערוך או"ח תעב:א**

The idea that it is preferable to conduct the seder expeditiously seems to contradict a well known passage in the Haggadah:

*Those who spend additional time discussing the story of the Exodus are praiseworthy. There is a story about R. Eliezer, R. Yehoshua, R. Elazar B. Azariah, R. Akiva and R. Tarfon who were reclining in Bnei Brak and were discussing the Exodus from Egypt the entire night until their*

וכל המרבה לספר ביציאת מצרים הרי זה משבח. מעשה ברבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע ורבי אלעזר בן עזריה ורבי עקיבא ורבי טרפון שהיו מסבין בבני ברק, והיו מספרים ביציאת מצרים כל אותו הלילה עד שבאו תלמידיהם

students came and told them 'Our rabbis, the time for the morning Sh'ma has arrived.'

**Haggadah**

ואמרו להם: רבותינו, הגיע זמן קריאת שמע של שחרית.

**הגדה של פסח**

**?** **Question:** According to this passage, it would seem that one should not conduct the seder expeditiously. If one rushes through the Haggadah, how is it possible to fulfill the praiseworthy act of spending additional time discussing the story of the Exodus?

This question is addressed by the Rishonim. Rashbam, in his *Commentary on the Haggadah*, comments on the story of the five sages who spent the entire night discussing the Exodus:

*This took place after the meal, for if [one wants to say that] it was before the meal, it states 'chotfin matzahs on the nights of Pesach for the children so that they don't fall asleep.'*

**Rashbam, Commentary on the Haggadah**

וזה היה אחר אכילה דאי קודם אכילתו הא אמרינן חוטפין מצה בלילי הפסח בשביל התינוקות שלא יישנו.

**רשב"ם פירוש להגדה ז"ה מעשה ברבי אליעזר**

Similarly, R. Ya'akov HaKohen of Narbonne explains:

*But one who spends more time discussing the Exodus from Egypt after the meal is praiseworthy.*

**Kol Bo, 51**

אך המספר ביציאת מצרים אחר אכילתו הרי זה משובח.

**כל בו ס' נא**

Rashbam and R. Ya'akov HaKohen are of the opinion that expediting the seder does not contradict the idea of spending extra time discussing the Exodus from Egypt. Those additional discussions should take place after the meal, after the children are sleeping.

*A person is obligated to study the laws of Pesach and the Exodus from Egypt and to speak about the miracles and wonders that the Almighty performed for our forefathers until one is overcome by sleep.*

**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 482:1**

חייב אדם לעסוק בהלכות הפסח וביציאת מצרים ולספר בניסים ובנפלאות שעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא לאבותינו עד שתחטפנו שינה.

**שלחן ערוך אורח חיים תפב:א**

This comment of *Shulchan Aruch*, refers to what one should do after the seder. His insistence on expounding upon the Exodus after the seder is consistent with the idea that the laudable practice of spending more time expounding upon the Exodus need not take place during *Maggid* or any other part of the seder.

*Mishna Berurah* presents a different approach to resolve the apparent contradiction between the idea that one should conduct the seder expeditiously and the idea that one should spend extra time expounding upon the Exodus. He bases his opinion on the comments of R. Shimon Ben Tzemach.

It states in a Tosefta 'R. Eliezer says chotfin matzahs on the nights of Pesach for the children so that they don't fall asleep.' This means that we hurry to **feed them** so that they won't be sleepy and will ask [questions].

**Ma'amar HaChametz no. 120**

תניא בתוספתא ר' אליעזר אומר חוטפין מצה לתינוקות כדי שלא [יהיו] ישנים. פי' ממהרין להאכילם כדי שלא יהיו ישנים וישאלו.

**מאמר החמץ אות קכ**

*Mishna Berurah* notes the stress on feeding them (as opposed to the adults) and comments:

One cannot conclude that the purpose is to spend less time on the Haggadah, for is the meal the main part [of the night]? In *Yavin Sh'mua* of the *Rashbetz*, he writes 'we hurry to feed them,' referring to the children. According to this explanation everything works very well.

**Mishna Berurah, Sha'ar HaTziun 472:2**

דא"א לומר דהכוונה הוא שיקצרו בהגדה דאטו האכילה הוא העיקר וביבין שמועה להרשב"ץ כתב בזה הלשון וממהרים להאכילם כדי שלא יישנו ואתינוקות קאי ופירוש זה אתי שפיר טפי.

**משנה ברורה, שער הציון תעב:ב**

According to *Mishna Berurah*, one does not have to conduct the seder expeditiously. Rather one should make sure that the children eat earlier than the rest of the participants. This means that the children will experience a seder that is quick and engaging while the adults spend more time discussing the Haggadah. [In order to do this, one adult would have to focus on the children until they are finished with their seder.] *Mishna Berurah's* interpretation shows an early precedent for the concept of differentiated instruction, the concept that encourages teaching a group of people at different levels based on each one's needs.

There is an important practical difference between the interpretation of Rashbam and the interpretation of Rashbetz (as understood by *Mishna Berurah*). According to Rashbam, one should perform the seder quickly and expound upon the Exodus from Egypt after the seder. According to Rashbetz, one should expound upon the Exodus from Egypt during the actual seder while simultaneously providing the children with an abridged form of the seder.

Both interpretations offer varied solutions to ensure that the children are active participants in the seder. They both agree that the participation of the children is of primary importance. Regardless of which approach one follows, one should ensure that the conversations and discussions surrounding the seder are age-appropriate to the participating children.

## Rambam's Interpretation

Rambam, in codifying R. Eliezer's statement, writes:

One must do something unique on this night so that the | וצריך לעשות שינוי בלילה הזה כדי שיראו

children will see and ask (saying) 'why is this night different from all other nights?' until he answers them (saying) 'this and this happened; this is how it was.' How does one make it unique? He passes to them roasted grains and nuts and we remove the table from them before they eat and we grab matzah, one person from the other's hand, and other similar activities.

**Hilchot Chametz UMatzah 7:4**

הבנים וישאלו ויאמרו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות עד ששייב להם ויאמר להם כך וכך אירע וכך וכך היה וכיצד משנה מחלק להם קליות ואגוזים ועוקרים השולחן מלפניהם קודם שיאכלו וחותפין מצה זה מיד זה וכיוצא בדברים האלו הלכות חמץ ומצה ז:ד

Rambam implies that R. Eliezer's method is that the adults grab matzahs one from another in the presence of the children. The ultimate purpose of doing this is to elicit questions from the children, specifically, the question of why this night is different.

There are still a number of questions that must be addressed regarding Rambam's position:

- 1) R. Eliezer's statement clearly indicates that the purpose of grabbing the matzahs is so that the children remain awake. Why does Rambam omit the idea of keeping the children awake?
- 2) The childrens' questions are ostensibly an immediate response to witnessing people grabbing matzahs one from another. If so, how will grabbing matzahs contribute to keeping children awake? If the child does not anticipate that this is going to happen, he may fall asleep before the matzahs are grabbed. And, if he anticipates this ritual based on previous years, he is not necessarily going to question why this night is different.
- 3) The four questions of *Mah Nishtana* question the peculiarities of the night of the seder and those questions are answered by reciting the Haggadah. Yet, the questions that Rambam attempts to elicit are questions that seem to have no answers. When the child asks "Why are you grabbing matzahs from each other," what should the father answer?
- 4) The questions of *Mah Nishtana* seem to highlight all of the major differences between the night of the seder and other nights of the year. Why is there a need for the child to ask more questions than the questions already found in *Mah Nishtana*?

An insight of R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik provides an answer to these questions. R. Soloveitchik (cited in *Harerei Kedem* 2:86) notes an interesting comment of Rambam:

*We pour the second cups and here the child asks. And the reader says 'Why is this night different from all other nights? On all other nights we dip ...'*

**Hilchot Chametz UMatah 8:2**

ומוזגין הכוס השני וכאן הבן שואל, ואומר הקורא מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות שבכל הלילות אין אנו מטבילין וכו'. רמב"ם הלכות חמץ ומצה ח:ב

**?** **Question:** Rambam states that the one reciting the Haggadah recites the questions of *Mah Nishtana*. If so, what does Rambam refer to when he states "And here the child asks"?

R. Soloveitchik suggests that the questions that the child is supposed to ask are not the questions of *Mah Nishtanah*. Rather, the child is supposed to ask questions that personally bother him. According to Rambam, the purpose of *Mah Nishtanah* is to fulfill a technical requirement that the Haggadah be recited in question and answer format.

Based on R. Soloveitchik's comments, one can now answer the questions that we presented. The goal of eliciting questions is not an end unto itself. Rather, it is a means of keeping the children engaged at the seder. When a child asks a question about something that interests him, he is now engaged in the conversation and will take interest in the answer. One method of piquing the child's interest is to do something out of the ordinary. When the child sees this extraordinary practice, he will question the practice and take interest in hearing the answer. Therefore, R. Eliezer recommends grabbing matzahs. His ultimate motive is to keep the children engaged which he phrases as "so that the children don't fall asleep." Rambam, in codifying R. Eliezer's ruling, explains how grabbing the matzah achieves the ultimate goal of engaging the children. Upon observing matzah-grabbing, the children will inquire and anticipate the answers to their questions. This approach established an early precedent for the concept of inquiry-based instruction, a concept that encourages children to inquire about the study material in order to engage them in the material.

Although the child never directly receives the answer to the question of why the matzahs are grabbed, the child receives the answer indirectly. Through the Haggadah, the child will learn that in addition to the *mitzvot* of *Korban Pesach*, matzah and *maror*, one of the *mitzvot* of the night of the seder is to speak about the Exodus from Egypt. Part of that *mitzvah* is to create a dialogue between the parent and the child. When the child realizes that he is an integral part of the seder, he will realize that there are certain rituals of the seder that exist simply to keep him involved.

Rashi, in his other interpretation of R. Eliezer's statement, presents an idea that is similar to Rambam's interpretation. Rashi states:

*We raise the plate in order that the children ask [questions].*

**Rashi, *Pesachim* 109a, s.v. *Chotfin***

מגביהין את הקערה בשביל תינוקות שישאלו.  
רש"י פסחים קט. ד"ה חוטפין

According to this interpretation the goal is to elicit questions. However, rather than grabbing the matzahs one from another, Rashi explains that the plate is lifted in order to arouse the curiosity of the children. One can explain that Rashi is also of the opinion that the ultimate purpose of eliciting questions is to keep the children interested. As such, all of the questions that we asked regarding Rambam's opinion can be applied to this interpretation and they can be answered with the same answers.

In most families, the child recites the four questions of *Mah Nishtanah*. Nevertheless, this does not negate the basic premise that one should try to elicit questions from the children. In fact, Rama rules:

When the son or the wife ask [their own questions], וכשהבן או האשה שואלת אין צריך לומר מה  
there is no need to recite Mah Nishatana. Rather נשתנה אלא מתחיל עבדים.  
one begins with Avadim Hayinu.

**Rama, Orach Chaim 473:7**

**רמ"א או"ח תעג:ז**

One can explain that Rama agrees that ideally, the child should ask his own questions. However, if he does not ask his own questions, we instruct him to ask the questions of *Mah Nishtanah*. Although, the "spoon-fed" questions are not as effective in keeping the child engaged, they will certainly have a positive effect on the child's interest in the seder. [Furthermore, the technical requirement of reciting the Haggadah in question and answer format must be fulfilled. Therefore, someone must ask questions at the beginning of *Maggid*.]

## Stealing the *Afikoman*

R. Yaakov ben Yoseif Richer Bechofen notes that Rambam's interpretation of R. Eliezer's statement is the basis for the practice of many families that the children steal the *afikoman* (the piece of matzah set aside for the end of the meal). R. Ya'akov states:

The Rambam ... writes 'we grab matzah one זה הרמב"ם פ"ז מהל' חמץ ומצה כ' חוטפין מצה  
from the other's hand.' It is possible that this is זה מיד זה כדי שיראו התינוקות וישאלו עכ"ל  
the basis for the practice that we allow the ואפשר שמזה נתפשט המנהג שמניחין  
children in these areas to grab the afikoman so לתינוקות במדינות אלו לחטוף האפיקומן  
that they won't sleep and will be encouraged to שעי"ז לא ישנו ויתעוררו לשאול.

**Chok Ya'akov 472:2**

**חק יעקב תעב:ב**

It should be noted that according to this interpretation, the ultimate goal is to elicit questions. The means of doing so is getting the children involved in an activity that will keep them awake until the end of the seder. This is the opposite of our original presentation. In our original presentation of Rambam's opinion, the questions are a means of keeping the children interested. The purpose of the grabbing the matzah is to elicit those questions.

There are a number of difficulties in attributing the practice of stealing the *afikoman* to Rambam. Some of these difficulties address attributing this practice specifically to the aforementioned passage of Rambam. Others address the validity of the practice as a whole, implying that Rambam would not have endorsed such a practice. First, R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (cited in *Harerei Kedem* 2:79), notes that if Rambam would have written that the matzahs are grabbed 'one from another' (*zeh mizeh*), one can attribute the source of stealing the *afikoman* to Rambam's opinion. However, Rambam formulates the practice as "one from another's **hand**" (*zeh miyad zeh*). R. Soloveitchik suggests that this practice is actually what we call *yachatz*

(breaking the matzah). It is accomplished by one person grabbing the matzah from another person's hand until the matzah breaks.

Second, R. Nachman Kahana writes:

*See Me'orei Ohr ... who writes that the practice of children stealing the afikoman from under the pillow is false and worthless and among the non-Jews there are rumors that the Jews teach their children to steal. Therefore, one who refrains from doing so is praiseworthy.*

**Orchot Chaim 473:19**

וע' בספר מאורי אור ... שכ' דמה שגונבים התינוקת האפיקומן מתחת הכסת הוא בדוי והבל ובגוים נשמע שיהודים לומדים ילדיהם לגנוב ... ע"כ המונע משובח.

**אחרות חיים תעג:יט**

According to *Me'orei Ohr*, the practice of stealing the *afikoman* is not a valid practice because it creates the perception that the Jews teach their children to steal.

However, other authorities disagree with this premise. R. Chaim D. HaLevi, *Shana B'Shana* (5746 pp. 144-148) addresses the issue of whether this practice violates the prohibition against stealing. He concludes that this is not real theft and that everyone knows that it is a customary part of the seder. As such, there should be no concern about the perception of this practice. R. Moshe Y. Veingarten, *HaSeder Ha'Aruch* (Vol. I pg. 337) notes that one should specifically call it "grabbing the *afikoman*" rather than "stealing the *afikoman*."

Third, R. Chaim Soloveitchik (cited in *Halichot HaGrach* pg. 65) objects to the practice of stealing the *afikoman* based on technical problem that occurs when children handle the *afikoman*. *Shulchan Aruch* states:

*One takes the middle matzah and breaks it into two pieces. One of the halves should be given to one of the other members to guard for the afikoman and it should be placed under the tablecloth.*

**Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 473:6**

ויקח מצה האמצעית ויבצענה לשתים, ויתן חציה לאחד מהמסובין לשומרה לאפיקומן ונותנין אותה תחת המפה.

**שולחן ערוך אורח חיים תעג:ו**

R. Chaim explains that the reason to place the *afikoman* under the tablecloth is that the *afikoman* serves to commemorate the *Korban Pesach*. Just as the *Korban Pesach* requires *sh'mirah* (someone to watch over it) so too, the *afikoman* requires *sh'mira*. This cannot be accomplished if one allows the children to steal the *afikoman*.

R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik (R. Chaim's grandson, cited in *Harerei Kedem* 2:95) presents the same idea of guarding the *afikoman*. However, he does not negate the practice of the children stealing the *afikoman*. Rather, he notes that the children should be told to guard the *afikoman* and leave it covered (in a cloth).