

Bringing the Classroom to the Seder Table

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On Moshe Rabbeinu – Moshe, Our Teacher

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Moshe is famously absent from the Haggada. He is never directly mentioned and plays no role, other than one passing reference in a proof text regarding *kriyat yam suf* (the splitting of the Sea): "And Israel saw the great hand that Hashem had done in Egypt, and the people were in awe of Hashem, and they had faith in Hashem and in Moshe, His servant." (Shemot 14:31) The Vilna Gaon, among others, explained that Moshe is largely absent so as not to obscure the role of Hashem. It might seem like Moshe, rather than Hashem Himself, orchestrated the Exodus, or that Hashem could not have done it without Moshe His servant. So on the night of the seder, Moshe appropriately takes a back seat. Others have argued that Moshe's absence has to do with his humility and desire to not be the focus of the story. A third answer is that the seder night focuses on the spiritual liberation of the Jewish people, not their physical liberation. Since Moshe's primary responsibility was their physical exodus, his role is thus minimized. Each of these answers falls short in various ways. If there was such concern for Moshe's role being blown out of proportion, we might expect the book of Exodus to similarly minimize Moshe's role, but it does not. If Moshe truly requested that his name be taken out of the Haggada, where is that request to be found and how would all the authors and editors of our Haggada have known to honor it? It also seems demonstrably true that the Haggada is concerned with both physical and spiritual liberation and that Moshe's role could not have been limited to just the physical.

Despite Moshe's absence from the Haggada, when we think and learn about *yetziat Mitzrayim* it is impossible to conceive of the story without Moshe. As Hashem's servant, Moshe was instrumental in many ways and fulfilled many roles. Whether through his negotiations with Par'o, his implementation of the miracles and plagues, or his consistent instruction to the Jewish people, Moshe's participation is a constant throughout the exodus story and, indeed, for a full four out of the five books of the Torah. His role throughout Jewish history similarly looms large in law, literature, and lore.

Because his presence is so important and yet still ambiguous, Rav Soloveitchik asked a fundamental question: “What, then, is Moses’ role in Jewish History?” If we had to narrow it down, how should we understand Moshe’s role?

The Rav answered, “He was not immortalized as a political hero or a strategist. Moses was immortalized as a teacher. We do not say *Moshe Go’aleinu* or *Moshe Moshi’enu*, or *Moshe Meshi’henu*; we say *Moshe Rabbeinu*.”

Moshe did many great things—as a national leader, a prophet, and a judge (to name a few!), but he is immortalized as a teacher. I like to think that this is, at least in part, to show us the great importance of teachers and the position of honor that teachers should hold. As a society, we too often get the message that banking, law, and medicine are more prestigious fields than education. However, those who teach know that a teacher must be like a banker—tracking data, noting inputs and outputs, examining the growth of “investments,” and assessing potential. A teacher must be like a lawyer—acting in the interest of our “clients,” testing for logic, and considering precedent. A teacher must be like a doctor—taking a careful history, diagnosing problems, and ensuring continuity of care. A teacher is like a CEO—managing multiple responsibilities, constituencies, and personalities. Our greatest leader is called *Moshe Rabbeinu*—Moshe, Our Teacher—in order to show him honor because of the tremendous challenge, privilege, and responsibility of teaching. There can be no greater achievement in Jewish life than to be a great teacher.

In fact, this is the Rav’s solution to the conundrum of Moshe’s absence from the Haggada. “Where can we find Moses? Where is Moses rewarded and glorified as the leader? It is at Sinai on Shavu’ot. There he is the great teacher of the people, *Moshe Rabbeinu* ... He is called *Moshe Rabbeinu* only in reference to Sinai, not in reference to *ge’ulat mitzrayim* ...” Moshe is glorified in exactly the place where he belongs; not in Egypt, but at Sinai, during the greatest educational endeavor of the Jewish people.

The Rav said, “The teacher of mankind, and particularly the Jewish community, is the Almighty. Behind every teacher ... stands God. The attributes of wisdom, knowledge, kindness and grace belong exclusively to God, but man has a right—even a duty—to usurp them, to take something of God’s attributes to himself. He is duty-bound to imitate God—not regarding power, but regarding teaching.” One can only hope that each of us has the capacity to live up to this mandate, for one needn’t be a classroom teacher to fill this role. Every parent has the mitzva to teach Torah to her children. Every individual has the opportunity to teach his neighbor.

The selections that follow are two examples, one from a middle school teacher and one from a high school teacher, of how we can use techniques of the classroom at our seder table. They were written by young teachers who have decided to dedicate their lives to imitating God regarding teaching, as *Moshe Rabbeinu* did before them. Please use these contributions to this collection to join them in the holy work of educating our next generation.

Source:

Soloveitchik, Joseph B. “Moses and the Redemption.” *Festival of Freedom*. Ed. Joel B. Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler. New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2006.

Tips for a “Colorful” Interactive Seder

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In a Memorial Lecture for Rabbanit Tonya Soloveitchik entitled “The Story of Exodus,” the Rav stated that the seder night was one of two nights that “stand out as endowed with unique qualities, exalted in holiness and shining with singular beauty.” For the Rav, the Seder night flowed with “a strange peaceful stillness... joy and ecstasy... holiness.” The Rav said that it was these emotions and experiences that “have always been the fountainhead of my religious life.” For the Rav, his “colorful religious life” was “derived from my childhood experiences...”

The Rav taught that the purpose of many of the practices of the Seder night (karpas, yachatz, stealing the afikomen, wearing a kittel, etc.) is to interest the children and propel them to ask questions. In fact, the *Beit Ha'Levi* (the Rav's great-grandfather) used to add his own practices beyond the traditional practices in order to arouse the children's curiosity.

Growing up, my parents always involved my siblings and me in all holiday preparations, specifically for Pesach. By the time Seder night arrived, we were silly with excitement. The following are some activities I have prepared based on my own experiences growing up.

1. Take a large light blue sheet (bed sheet, shower curtain, or whatever works for you) and a few boxes of Sharpie markers. Ask your children to decorate the blue sheet to make it look like the ocean, with whales, sharks, corals, blowfish, seaweed, etc. When they are done, cut a line down the middle of the sheet, leaving about a foot and a half uncut at the top, and hang it at the most-frequently used doorway. You have just created your very own handmade kriyat Yam Suf (splitting of the Sea)! It is so much fun walking through the “Yam Suf” and imagining what it must have felt like for B'nei Yisroel.
2. Assign the children the task of making the *makkot* come alive at the seder table. Some helpful materials to give your children beforehand are as follows:
 - A. Blood: Red food coloring.
 - B. Frogs: Plastic frogs for the children to throw around the table (sounds messy and chaotic, but it is well worth it). These can also be handmade, if preferred.
 - C. Lice: Plastic lice (or any small white insect) for the children to throw around the table.
 - D. Wild Animals: Masks of lions/tigers/bears for the children to wear as they run around the table yelling “ROAR!”
 - E. Plague: No need to provide anything, as the ‘wild animals’ just drop to the floor silently.
 - F. Boils: No need to provide anything; the children can just pretend to have boils or prepare hand-drawn boils.
 - G. Hail: Ping-Pong balls and red Sharpie markers. The children should draw fire on the balls of hail, and then throw them around the Seder table.
 - H. Locust: Plastic crickets for the children to throw around the table.

- I. **Darkness:** Cut out rectangular pieces of navy/black cotton material which everyone (kids and adults alike) tie around their heads covering their eyes and sit silently for 30 seconds.
3. Buy a medium/large cardboard box. Cut out a hole on one side of the box, big enough for you to stick your hand and arm in. Cut off the foot of a knee sock and then staple one opening of the sock to the hole in the box (creating a tube-like structure that looks a bit like an elephant's nose). Ask your children to decorate the box however they like. Then, stuff the box with all kinds of prizes and tape the box shut. Find a good hiding place for this box, because your children will surely try to locate it and guess what prizes are inside. Throughout the seder, ask your children dozens of questions (prepared or impromptu). When your child answers his or her question correctly, he or she is rewarded by sticking his/her hand in the sock, through the hole, and pulling out a prize from the "prize box". The prizes can be as simple as hair clips, yo-yo's, or a package of kosher-for-Pesach gum. This prize box might sound like a lot of work, however it is a strong motivator for the children to be involved in the seder and share what he or she has learned. After all, for a child, the suspenseful excitement of being called on to answer a question, getting it correct, walking to the front of the table to stick their hand in the box and pulling out a prize is completely exhilarating.
4. Assign to each of the children different parts of the Haggadah to act out. Some ideas are: The 4 sons, the hard work and enslavement of the Jews, the Jews crying out to Hashem to save them, a student coming to tell his *Rebbeim* that it is time for Shacharit, etc. In most cases, the children will become thrilled about the idea of performing in front of family and guests, and work hard to prepare his or her "portion" beforehand. This really gets the child thinking and excited about the Seder ahead of time, and oftentimes helps with camaraderie between all the children as usually the "performer" needs some assisting actors.

Sources:

R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Story of the Exodus", lecture given on March 30, 1974, audio recording available at: www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/751404.
Harerei Kedem, Vol. II no. 86.

Making Hallel Meaningful

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Introduction:

Most of us are familiar with the Hallel prayer. There is an additional emphasis on Hallel on the holiday of Pesach when it is the one time a year when we say Hallel at night, and in fact some have the tradition to recite it twice at night, once after Maariv, and once during the seder. When we think about the meaning of this prayer, we can take away a profound lesson for our daily lives.

Shlomo, a 15 year old boy, had stomach pains for several years. His parents took him from doctor to doctor and from test to test to try to uncover the source of these pains and to see if there was anything that could alleviate them. After much searching and trials they were referred

to Dr. Young, who diagnosed him and prescribed for him an experimental medicine that he thought may help Shlomo. After a week of taking the pills, Shlomo was feeling a lot better and the stomach pains were gone.

Questions for discussion:

- When Shlomo goes back to Dr. Young for his follow up visit what do you think Shlomo will say to Dr. Young?
- When Shlomo sees Dr. Young again, how do you think he will feel about what Dr. Young did for him in the past?
- What will Shlomo expect in the future from Dr. Young? Will he ask him for anything? If so, why?
- Can asking for something be praising the person being asked?

Think about the answers to these discussion questions as you continue.

Activity:

Before reading ahead, think about the definition of the word הלל. If you are unsure of the translation of this word, look it up in a dictionary. Once you have done so pull out a siddur (or a Haggadah) and look through the paragraphs of Hallel and note the content of these prayers. Does the content of these prayers completely match the definition of the title Hallel? If you were the one creating the Hallel prayer, would you have selected all of the paragraphs that are currently present?

Let's discuss:

The word Hallel means praise, so we would expect that the prayer of Hallel would be full of praises to Hashem. While this is partially true, Rav Soloveitchik points out something that you may have noticed when carefully examining Hallel - that much of the content of the Hallel prayer is not praises but petitions. Let us look at a few specific examples together:

In the paragraph of 'מה אשיב לה', "what shall I respond to G-d", there is the following phrase, "אנא - "please G-d because I am your servant the son of your maidservant - you release me from my binds (chains)."

The whole paragraph of 'מן המצר קראתי ה' - "from the places of distress I called out to G-d" discusses asking Hashem for different things, culminating in the refrains, "אנא ה' הושיעה נא, אנא - "G-d please save me, G- d please give me success"

These are not praises at all! Rather, they are requests, petitions, asking for something. Why would these verses of Tehillim be included in the Hallel prayer at all? Hallel should be the time we praise ה', not where we submit request and ask favors of Him?

Rav Soloveitchik explains this with the following idea. The Mishna in *Berachot* states the following:

Ben Azzai says ... "and give thanks to what has passed, and cry out for what will happen in the future"

Talmud Tractate Berachot Chapter 9 Mishna 4

בְּן עֲזַאי אוֹמֵר ... וְנוֹתֵן הַדָּאָה לְשֹׁעֵבֵר, וְצוֹעֵק
לְעֵתִיד לְבֹא
תְלִמוּד בְּבֵלִי מִסַּכַּת בְּרִכּוֹת פֶּרֶק ט - מִשְׁנֵה ד

The Rav explains that in Judaism, we cannot praise G-d without also praying to and beseeching

Him as well. This is because if you do not "cry out for the future," it means that you are secure and confident about your future. Even in our times of success and triumph, we must realize that the continuation of that success will only happen if G-d allows us to do so. Yes, we should thank G-d for what he has done thus far, but once we have done so we should also continue to look to the future, to look at the potential for our continued growth, which we must recognize can only happen with the help of G-d. By recognizing this, we are giving even greater praise to G-d, because we are showing that we are not only thankful for what he has done for us in the past, but also that we will continue to thank Him for everything He will help us with in the future.

Sources:

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik on Pesach, Sefirat Ha-Omer, and Shavuot, by David Shapiro. Pages 33- 52