

# The Methodology of Teaching the Pesach Story High School

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## ONCE UPON... A KARPAS

Once upon a time has become an iconic opening phrase that launches its audience into a story. We know we are at the beginning of a story when we see such a phrase, and we know we are at the conclusion when we read “and they lived happily ever after.” Truth be told, throughout our lives we are all storytellers in some way. We tell the story of our people, we learn from our family’s story, and we even share our own personal story with those we truly trust

and love. On the night of Pesach, we are commanded to retell the story of our people to the next generation; but how do we start to tell this story? Where do we begin?

If we examine the Haggadah closely, we can clearly see that there is an order to our evening, but can we identify the beginning of where our story starts? Is it clear where we should begin?

If we look at the Maggid section we see an interesting opening line:

### Discussion Questions:

1. If you were to tell your own personal story, at what point in your life would you start it? (i.e: Birth, first independent accomplishment, start of school, discovery of a talent, first job?) Explain.
2. What are ways or methods that get you most engaged when starting to learn something new?
3. If you were commissioned to put together the Seder, where would you have started the story? Explain.
4. Is it important to know where something began or is the ending really the only relevant part? Explain your answer.

הא לחמא עניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא  
 דמצרים. כל דכפין ייתי ויכל, כל דצריך ייתי  
 ויפסח. השתא הכא, לשנה הבאה בארעא  
 דישראל. השתא עבדי, לשנה הבאה בני חורין.  
*This is the bread of destitution that  
 our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt.  
 Anyone who is famished should come  
 and eat, anyone who is in need should  
 come and partake of the Pesach sacrifice.  
 Now we are here, next year we will be in  
 the land of Israel; this year we are slaves,  
 next year we will be free people.*

Although there is much beautiful  
 Torah written on this opening phrase,  
 it doesn't really give our story any  
 specific beginning. The opening  
 phrase does not seem to open up to  
 any story at all. Even if we consider  
 this section to be an introduction  
 to Maggid, and claim that the story  
 really starts with *Avadim Hayinu*, after  
 the children ask their *Mah Nishtanah*  
 questions, we still haven't solved the  
 problem. We go straight into being  
 slaves to Pharaoh in Mitzrayim,  
 then jump around to Rabbi Akiva  
 and his contemporaries, back to

our forefathers, and then back to  
 Mitzrayim. Why is there no clear  
 starting point?

The answer might be found in a  
 brilliant educational tool we call  
*karpas*. *Karpas* is a difficult word to  
 translate. Although we might want  
 to translate it to something like  
 “vegetable” or “something we dip in  
 salt water,” the word *karpas* actually  
 means cotton or fine linen. If we look  
 in Tanakh, we see the word *karpas*  
 only once: It is found in Megillat  
 Esther to describe the elaborate  
 decoration of Achashverosh's palace:

חור כרפס ותכלת אחוזו בחבלי בוץ וארגמן  
 על גלילי כסף ועמודי שש מטות זהב וכסף על  
 רצפת בהט ויש ודר וסוקרת.

*[There were hangings of] white cotton  
 and blue wool, caught up by cords of  
 fine linen and purple wool to silver rods  
 and alabaster columns; and there were  
 couches of gold and silver on a pavement  
 of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl,  
 and mosaics.*

**Esther: 1:6**

Why is *karpas* at our Seder? Why  
 do we dip it into salt water? Is this  
 practice done only so that “the  
 children should ask”?

In education there is a teaching  
 practice called “the hook” of the  
 lesson. The hook is a creative and/  
 or engaging tool that serves as a way  
 of getting students interested and  
 invested in new material. It would  
 seem that Chazal, in their mastery  
 of teaching, start off the Seder with  
 a “hook” to get us involved and  
 interested. Chazal knew that before  
 you can teach, you must first engage  
 your students and make them active  
 participants in their own learning. The  
 Gemara says of Rabbah that he used  
 to open his class with a humorous  
 comment:

דרבה מקמי דפתח להו לרבנן אמר מילתא  
 דבדיחותא ובדחי רבנן.

*Rabbah, prior to beginning his lecture,  
 would open with a humorous remark  
 (mitla debidichuta).*

**Shabbat 30b**

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Rabbah understood that if he created an atmosphere that opened his students to learning, he could then proceed to teach them Torah that would leave a lasting impact. Perhaps Chazal are doing that as well on the Seder night by making a “hook” they called *karpas*. They are engaging each of us before we start Maggid, which will get us thinking. It will give us context about the start of our story and place us in the proper mindset to learn.

The opening of our story starts with an interactive activity of dipping something that is called cotton or linen, but what does this have to do with the story of Mitzrayim? A medieval commentator on the Rambam known as Rav Manoach discusses why we have Karpas at the Seder:

ואנו נוהגין בכרפס זכר לכתונת הפסים שעשה יעקב אבינו ליוסף אשר בסבתה נתגלגל הדבר וירדו אבותינו למצרים.

*And we have the custom of karpas as a remembrance of the coat of wool that Jacob made for Joseph which caused the entire episode of “and our forefathers went down to Egypt.”*

#### **Hilchot Chametz U’Matzah 8:2**

Furthermore, Rashi makes a comment on the *ketonet pasim* that was given to Yosef, and explains that this coat was made of *karpas*:

וישראל אהב את יוסף מכל בניו כי בן זקנים הוא לו ועשה לו כתנת פסים.

פסים: לשון כלי מלת, כמו כרפס והתכלת, וכמו כתונת הפסים דתמר ואמנון.

*Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic.*

**Bereishit 37:3**

*Pasim is a term for raiment of fine wool (Shabbat 10b). Similar to pasim is karpas utechelet — fine linen and blue (Esther 1:6). The same garment, ketonet pasim, is mentioned (2 Samuel 13:18) in the story of Amnon and Tamar and we may therefore presume that it was made of very fine material[.]*

**Rashi, Bereishit 37:3**

We begin the Seder with a reenactment of the story’s beginning. We take the *karpas* and dip it into salt water, reminding us of the dipping of Yosef’s coat by his brothers that began our descent to Egypt. It was the disloyalty and hatred among brothers that led us to us to Egypt, where we ultimately became slaves. The brothers had corrupted themselves with jealousy and hatred and ultimately made their brother suffer. Perhaps these were the actual seeds of slavery. When a human can disregard another human’s importance and individuality, or take advantage of him, that can bring about slavery. The *ketonet pasim* differentiated Yosef and made him special. It was this difference that the brothers could not live with, and so they tried to get rid of him. The same would repeat itself to us as a nation years later in Mitzrayim:

ויקם מלך חדש על מצרים אשר לא ידע את יוסף. ויאמר אל עמו הנה עם בני ישראל רב ועצום ממנו.

*A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us.”*

**Shemot 1:8-9**

It would seem that this Pharaoh would also forget Yosef and the lesson of brotherhood. Pharaoh and the Egyptians would look at Bnei Yisrael as different and too numerous, and would feel threatened

by their numbers. These people were different from the Egyptians and so the fear and disrespect started against our people:

הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה והיה כי תקראנה מלחמה ונוסף גם הוא על שנאינו ונלחם בנו ועלה מן הארץ.

*Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground.*

**Shemot 1:10**

It would take the great lesson of knowing how the story of our slavery began in order to correct it so that it never happens again. Chazal have us dip *karpas* each year so that we remember how our story started. We must try and rectify the past. In place of jealousy and hatred, we need to love and celebrate one another. If we fail to do so, we will be guilty of the same sin that caused our ancestors to be enslaved in Egypt. With an engaging activity at the start of the Seder, we dip the *karpas* into salt water, symbolizing the tears and hardships brought about from the original dipping of the *karpas*. We go through the story only once we have tasted what that dipping can lead to. It is imperative that we start our story this way and see how it develops throughout the Haggadah. We need to consider on a personal and national level how we will ultimately end our story. Will we learn from the lessons of the past and do better for a more promising future? Can we work toward an ending of respect, acceptance, and love for all that can hopefully lead to a “happily ever after”? Let us hope that we can internalize this message and choose an ending that brings about peace throughout the world, next year in Jerusalem!