

Teaching Children With Different Learning Profiles

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STRUCTURE, SPIRIT, SIPPUR

THE SEDER TABLE AS THE ORIGINAL BEIS MIDRASH, AND AS A MODEL FOR AMBITIOUS, ASPIRATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION

Nowadays, how can we best share the richness of Torah with the next generation? How can we share this with as many young people as possible? What strategies can we learn from studying the original mandate to teach and transmit Torah?

I. Questions of Effective Teaching and Transmission

As we continually strive to convey Torah to all our children with ever-increasing effectiveness, two of the areas for ongoing growth are questions of scope.

First, **breadth**: How can we ensure that we share the breadth of our rich Torah? Are our children and *talmidim* engaging and absorbing

both the sense and the sensitivities as well as the substance, the themes, values and *machshava*, as well as the content and skills of text and analysis? Second, **reach**: How can we provide instruction and instructional environments that cultivate ambition and foster learning for an array of learners? In this article, we will focus particularly on the following challenge: in a classroom that includes both gifted and more typical students, how do we engage our typical, “middle-of-the-road” learners with level-appropriate ambitious goals in both content and skills development, while simultaneously challenging our gifted students to excellence, ensuring that they neither stagnate nor lose interest?

In surveying the field of contemporary educational thinking about these and similar questions, the following is striking. The Big Bang Theory constitutes the scientific community’s embrace — after 3-and-a-half millennia — of the core lessons of the opening verse of Bereishis²; namely, that a Cause outside of and predating physics and causality brought the material universe into existence. Similarly, some key aspects of contemporary thinking in educational theory present a return to elements that have been integral to our beis midrash dynamic for tens of centuries and that continue to underpin this sacred dynamic.

Our appreciation of the beis midrash, at once age-old and contemporary,

begins by reaching even further back, with the original mandated structure for Jewish learning that preceded the centrality of the yeshiva. After all, Rav teaches us in *Masseches Bava Basra* that a yeshiva is a place in which the rebbi teaches Torah is an *in loco parentis* evolution from the original mandate of father-son transmission:

שבתחלה, מי שיש לו אב, מלמדו תורה. מי שאין לו אב, לא היה למד תורה. מאי דרוש? ולמדתם אותם [את בניכם] (דברים י"א) – ולמדתם אתם. התקינו שיהו מושיבין מלמדי תינוקות ...

Initially, whoever had a father would have his father teach him Torah, and whoever did not have a father would not learn Torah at all. What pasuk did they interpret that indicated this? "And you shall teach them [osam] to your sons" (Devarim 11:19), as "And you yourselves [atem] shall teach your sons." When the Sages saw that not everyone was capable of teaching their children and that Torah study was therefore declining, they instituted that teachers of children should be established.

Bava Basra 21a

However, if we seek to base our learning and teaching on the details of this model, the original *de-Oraysa* (Biblical) format of Torah transmission, we encounter a basic obstacle: difficulty in formulating or articulating the specific methodological model. While the general mitzva to teach Torah to one's son — *ve-limadtem osam es beneichem* — is a ubiquitous, year-round mandate, the halacha tells us little about required methods or modalities for this all-encompassing mitzva. In search of instruction and insight into the how-tos, let us therefore focus instead on a **second** mitzva *de-Oraysa* of Torah education, one that is specific to Pesach. The final *perek* of *Masseches*

Pesachim provides us with an array of instructions for fulfilling *ve-higadta le-vincha* (Shemos 13:8), the requirement to tell the story of *yetzias Mitzrayim* on the first night of Pesach, the mitzva typically known as *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*.

In our context, we will discover that a nuanced halachic analysis of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* is not only fundamentally enlightening but also practically instructive. In the upcoming section, we switch gears and analytically engage the *sugya* of mitzvas *sippur* on its own terms. As is so common in the world of *talmud Torah*, opening with seemingly small questions about halachic details will lead us to grand vistas and great vision. Solving the technical problems provides us with profound insight into Pesach; moreover, appreciating the details of this mitzva will enable us in the final section to recognize some of the unique value and dynamic of the beis midrash, and to begin to envision and plan for enhancing learning and teaching Torah throughout the year.

II. Sippur Yetzias Mitzrayim

Children are not the only ones to ask questions about the structure and substance of the Seder. We, too, might be moved to wonder — for instance — why we don't wash *netilas yadayim* and begin eating matza immediately following Kiddush, much as we do at any other Shabbas or Yom Tov meal, particularly since the requirement of *kiddush bi-mkom seuda* (*Pesachim* 101a) — eating a meal in the same place as Kiddush and immediately thereafter — ought to militate against an unnecessary lag between Kiddush and beginning the Yom Tov meal.

The Sequence of the Seder

This seemingly tangential question actually introduces us to the two main elements of the Seder: the mitzvos of eating matza and of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*, telling the Pesach story. According to the accepted opinion,³ these are the two *mitzvos de-oraysa* at the Seder nowadays, since each of these is a mitzva *per se* rather than exclusively an adjunct to *korban Pesach* (unlike maror,⁴ which is *de-rabbanan* nowadays).

This pair's connection, however, goes far beyond merely sharing this common status of *mitzvos de-Oraysa* that apply nowadays. Each of these mitzvos actually requires the other, and so *achilas matza* and *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* are doubly connected in a bond of mutual causality. First, we say "*Yachol me-rosh chodesh ...*," near the opening of Maggid. We can only fulfill the mitzva of *sippur* "*bi-zman she-yesh matza u-maror munachin le-fanecha*" at a time when the matzah and maror are in front of us — in conjunction with the palpable, tangible *cheftzei mitzva*. Similarly, Rabban Gamliel famously taught⁵ that one of the genres that comprise *sippur* is an explication of the matza and maror on the table, relating the narrative to the tangible "audiovisual aids." Second, the converse is true as well: *achilas matza* needs to follow the verbal mitzvos. The Torah's central description of *matzas mitzva* is the enigmatic and multivalent phrase "*lechem oni*."⁶ One meaning of this term is "bread of conversation" ("*lechem she-onin alav devarim harbei*").⁷ Rashi understands that the matza meets this criterion only after Maggid has been recited (*sippur* and some Hallel) over the uncovered matza.⁸

This interdependence begins to explain the mysterious sequence of the Seder. Maggid must precede *motzi matza* for both reasons: *achilas matza* can be properly fulfilled only after the matza has “absorbed” the words of *sippur* and Hallel,⁹ and the *sippur* must be accomplished while the matza is as yet uneaten and available as prop and context for the verbal mitzva.

The Length of the Seder

While we may now understand the need to precede *achilas matza* with some sort of Maggid, the length of the Maggid might still seem curious. The need for such a lengthy “*hefseik*” or lag between Kiddush and seuda becomes clear in light of the following comment attributed to Rav Chaim Soloveichik.¹⁰

Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s statement “*harei ani ke-ven shiv'im shana,*” which is actually a Mishna in *Masseches Berachos* (12b), has been made famous among children — in the context of the Haggada — primarily in connection with “*ke-ven shiv'im shana,*” which Rashi (ad loc) explains as a reference to his miraculously premature aging. The **content** of Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya’s statement, however, is very striking. He taught that the daily mitzva of *zechiras yetzias Mitzrayim* (which we fulfill by reciting “*ani Hashem Elokeichem ...*” at the end of *kerias shema*) applies at night as well as by day. Why, then, should anyone who has already recited *Sh'ma* on *leil Pesach* bother to have a Seder at all? Haven’t we already mentioned *yetzias Mitzrayim* in this briefer format?

Rav Chaim responds with a small but significant difference in terms: the daily mitzva is *zechiras yetzias Mitzrayim*; the annual one is *sippur*.

Drawing upon a series of mishnayos in the closing chapter of *Masseches Pesachim*, the Rambam¹¹ lists six qualities that characterize the *sippur* process: 1) dialogue, 2) interactive question-and-answer format, 3) dramatic contrast — starting with the negative and ending with the positive, 4) the nexus of *Torah she-bi-chsav* and *Torah she-be'al pe* — the exposition of the *Arami oved avi* section, 5) relating the story to the palpable *mitzvos ha-layla* — Rabban Gamliel’s requirement to discuss these mitzvos, and 6) physical portrayal of the *geula* (kinesthetic *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim*). None of these apply to the twice-daily *zechira*, which is a simple mention, a recital to ourselves. *Sippur*, on the other hand, is an entirely different activity with fundamentally different goals. *Sippur* is a richly experiential educational opportunity, a **retelling** of the story of *geula*, which generates **relating** and **relationship**-building, in service of **relaying** a dynamic, vibrant *emuna* and *yiras shamayim* to the succeeding generation.

With this enriched perspective, the length of the printed Maggid is certainly no longer merely an application of *kol ha-marbe harei ze meshubbach*, the longer the better. Rather, it is a careful combination of each of the six minimal ingredients listed above: After Kiddush, we engage in several surprising, (hopefully) question-provoking activities that diverge from the program of a typical Yom Tov meal, such as following our *netilas yadayim* with *karpas* vegetables rather than with the typical bread, as well as clearing the table (which we fulfill nowadays¹² by removing the matzos and/or Seder plate), and refilling the cup as though we have already completed the meal and are preparing for *birkas ha-mazon*. Having

thus catalyzed the *sippur*, we proceed almost immediately to instructions and parameters for the *sippur* as explained above (“*afillu kullanu chachamim ... kol ha-marbe ... Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya [as a contrast to sippur] ... arba'a banim ... bi-sh'a she-yesh matza u-maror munachin le-fanecha ...*”), followed by each of the elements of *sippur* listed above. After completing the multifaceted *sippur* and thereby tasting our ancestors’ experience of *yetzias Mitzrayim* and *geula*, we naturally respond with a brief Hallel on a cup of wine. Having enriched our matza with words of *sippur* and Hallel, it is now *lechem oni* — *lechem she'onin alav devarim harbei* — and we now proceed directly to the mitzva of *achilas matza* and the balance of our seuda.

III. Back to the Beis Midrash

Consider the larger picture that *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* now paints. Unlike the daily *zechira*, *sippur* is a robust retelling rather than mere referencing, and that retelling in turn leads to relating between generations and relaying *emuna*.

The elements of the **process**, the educational modalities, include **personal and direct engagement, dialogue** driven by **questions and answers, targeted differentiated instruction**, and the combination of **personal application** together with **song and joy**, which cap the *limud*. A parent who has had the pleasure and privilege of presiding over a Seder at home will know that it requires **work** — work that is both challenging and deeply rewarding. These educational elements — already mandated in the original *mitzva de-oraysa* of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* — can and should be richly present in the beis midrash.

The **results** of *sippur* — in the building and enhancing of relationships, both with parents and grandparents who are teaching and with Hashem — also find their parallel in the results of successful engagement in the beis midrash dynamic. The beis midrash provides an unparalleled opportunity to build relationships, and it also opens the door within for personal growth.

Building Blocks for Beis Midrash-based Learning

Inspired by the model of *sippur yetzias Mitzrayim* — the original beis midrash — here are some elements to consider in building a contemporary high school beis midrash with ambition. The model will of course require tailoring to each unique school context and culture (much as the above passage in *Bava Basra* 21a — on the history of Torah education — goes on to speak of refining the processes of Torah education to specific locations and ages), but the following elements will be among the critical ingredients in many successful recipes.

Some ingredients of a morning seder for *hachana* in advance of an *iyun shiur*

- carefully crafted *mareh mekomos* that are not merely a list of *mekoros*, but are energized by guiding questions;
- quantity of time allocated for seder will be carefully considered, graduated over the years by age, skill, and sense of developed self-confidence;
- deliberate training in the skills of effective *chavrusa* learning (e.g., the mechanics of reading together, *shakla ve-tarya* with one's *chavrusa*), beis midrash etiquette, sense of mature responsibility for our time and product (enabling our *talmidim*

to grow beyond common limiting adolescent mindsets);

- sense of *masora* and of membership in the *masora* community — ideally, engendered by sharing a beis midrash with older *talmidim*;
- cultivating a culture of *dibbuk chaveirim* (camaraderie) within the group of *talmidim*;
- actively rotating from *chavrusa* to *chavrusa* during seder can allow for differentiated instruction to augment the full-group learning and teaching in the *shiur* room, as well as for individual assessment of progress in skills, content mastery, and motivation.

This seder can be complemented by an active *shiur* that engages *talmidim* in building upon what was learned *be-chavrusa*. Subsequent *sidrei chazara* (review sessions, perhaps during daily or biweekly night *sedarim*, or daily afternoon *sedarim*) offer a further, dynamic opportunity to return to the original *mekoros* with newly-seasoned eyes, equipped with the added insight gained from *shiurim* to now — during *seder chazara* — notice the nuances in the *mekoros* that went unnoticed and unappreciated during a prior *seder hachana*.

This beis midrash-centered *limud be-iyun* pairs exceptionally well with ambitious goals in *bekius* (with an age- and level-appropriate *beis midrash* element) and in new vistas in Tanach, halacha and *machshava* to help our *talmidim* to draft visions of themselves as *talmidei chachamim* and to begin to realize those visions.¹³

The Beis Midrash as Smithy

The beis midrash is the smithy¹⁴ in which a talmid can forge more profound emotional relationships

with people and a deeper personal identification with Torah and its Giver. Consider the following two passages:

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא, אפיל האב ובנו הרב ותלמידו שעוסקין בתורה בשער אחד נעשים אויבים זה את זה. ואינם זוים משם עד שנעשים אוהבים זה את זה.

What is the meaning of the phrase “with enemies in the gate” (Tehillim 127:5) with regard to Torah study [as “gate” often refers to the ancient beis midrash]? Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba says: Even a father and his son, or a rabbi and his student, who are engaged in Torah together in one beis midrash [literally, one “gate”] become [temporarily] as adversaries with each other due to the intensity of their studies. Yet they do not leave there until they love each other.

Kiddushin 30b

א"ר מתנה אמר רב חסדא, האב שמחל על כבודו, כבודו מחול. הרב שמחל על כבודו, אין כבודו מחול. ורב יוסף אמר, אפיל הרב שמחל על כבודו, כבודו מחול, שנאמר "וה' הולך לפניו יומם". אמר רבא, הכי השתא?! התם, הקדוש ב"ה עלמא דיליה הוא ותורה דיליה היא, מחיל ליה ליקריה. הכא, תורה דיליה היא?! הדר אמר רבא, אין, תורה דיליה היא. *Rav Mattana says that Rav Chisda says: With regard to a father who forgoes his honor, his honor is forgiven [and his son does not transgress if he does not treat him in the proper manner]. By contrast, with regard to a rabbi who forgoes his honor, his honor is not forgiven. Rav Yosef disagrees: Even with regard to a rabbi who forgoes his honor, his honor is forgiven, as it is stated: “And Hashem went before them by day” (Shemos 13:21). Rava questioned [Rav Yosef’s position]: How can these cases be compared? There, with regard to the Holy One, Blessed be He, the world is His and the Torah is His, and therefore He can forgo His honor. By contrast, here, is it his Torah, that the teacher can forgo its honor? Rava subsequently said: Yes indeed. If he studies, it is his Torah ...*

after he studies, it becomes "his Torah."
Kiddushin 32a-32b

Shared intensive Torah study ultimately generates deeper bonds between those who engage in it together. Moreover, we become as partners to Hashem in His Torah as we make it our own through sustained effort and focus. The beis midrash can and should be a hub, a primary venue for this personal engagement and multifaceted relationship building. The beis midrash also thereby provides a platform to open the door to both minds and hearts; we ought to capitalize on this openness and thoughtfulness, this open-door opportunity, to develop increasingly profound identification with *emuna* and understanding of the ideas and ideals of *machsheves Yisrael*, of Torah thought.

Rav Menachem Mendel Morgenstern of Kotzk commented on a curious wrinkle in the language of *kerias sh'ma*. Immediately after the first two *pesukim*, which contain key notions of Hashem's existence, uniqueness and omnipotence and of the love for Him and dedication to Him that we ought to cultivate, the Torah commands us:

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עֲלֶיךָ לְבַרְכֶּךָ:

These words [instructions and ideas] — which I have commanded you today — shall be upon your heart.

Devarim 6:6

We might have expected the Torah to require that the words enter *within* our hearts, rather than merely sit *upon* our hearts. The Kotzker¹⁵ explained that if we encounter inspiring Torah ideas when we are presently unready for them, they can still remain *atop* our hearts, as it were; when our hearts open at a later date, the Torah ideas are there, ready to be absorbed and digested.

We seek to design our batei midrash around this pair of goals: to open the *levavos*, the hearts and the minds,¹⁶ and to fill those open and willing hearts and minds with ambitious Torah — with deep and broad understanding of many *sugyos ha-Shas*, with a sense of the vision and values that those *sugyos* convey in the context of Tanach and *sifrei machshava*, with deepened *emuna* and with personal identification with the glorious procession of *masora* whose heroes we study with¹⁷ and from, and with the yearning to grow ambitiously and dynamically as *talmidei chachamim* throughout the decades of our lives.

Tefilla

Tefilla plays a particularly crucial role in our success in *chinuch*, both for our own biological children as well as for our students, *banim heim heim ha-talmidim*.¹⁸ Closing these musings with a dual tefilla:

May we be inspired to vividly relate and portray the yetzias Mitzrayim narrative and thus meaningfully relay its messages and lessons of emuna and of hope, and may we soon merit to precede the Seder with the truly first Hallel of the Pesach season, the afternoon Hallel that accompanied the offering of the korban Pesach.

כן ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו יגיענו למועדים ולרגלים אחרים הבאים לקראתנו לשלום שמחים בבנין עירך וששים בעבודתך ונאכל שם מן הזבחים ומן הפסחים אשר יגיע דמם על קיר מזבחך לרצון ונודה לך שיר חדש על גאולתנו ועל פדות נפשנו.

May we succeed — throughout the year and throughout our lives — in conveying Torah richly and fully, sharing both the substance and the sensibilities of devar Hashem, inspiring future generations of am Yisrael to ambitiously cultivate minds

bright and full of Torah knowledge and wisdom, lives a-sparkle with mitzvos and their values, and hearts brimming with awareness and love of Hashem.

והאר עינינו בתורתך ודבק לבנו במצוותיך
ויחד לבבנו לאהבה וליראה את שמך

Endnotes

- 1 Rabbeinu Yonah, *Iggeres ha-Teshuva* 81-82; *Zeri`a u-Binyan be-Chinuch* pp. 34-35.
- 2 Prof. Nathan Aviezer, *In the Beginning*, p.15; Dr. Gerald Schroder, *The Science of God*, p. 23.
- 3 Rava in *Pesachim* 120a; qtd. by Rambam, *Chametz u-Matza* 6:1.
- 4 *Pesachim* (*ibid.*); qtd. by Rambam, *Chametz u-Matza* 7:12.
- 5 Mishna *Pesachim* 116a.
- 6 *Devarim* 16:3.
- 7 *Pesachim* 36a.
- 8 See as well *Tur* and *Beis Yosef* 473.
- 9 This seems to explain as well the kabbalistic terms for matza: *nahama di-mheimanusa* or *michla di-mheimanusa*, bread or food of faith (referenced in *Sefas Emes*, *Pesach* 1878 and 1879; et al).
- 10 *Chiddushei ha-Grach mi-Pi ha-Shmu`a*, *Pesachim* 116a (*siman* 40).
- 11 *Chametz u-Matza* 7:3-6.
- 12 *Shulchan Aruch* 473:6. See as well *Rashi*, *Rashbam* and *Tosfos* to *Pesachim* 115b.
- 13 *Midrash Tanchuma*, Ki Sissa 16, qtd. by *Rashi* ad loc. 31:18.
- 14 The metaphor is inspired by the simile in *Yirmeyahu* 23:29, particularly as explicated in *Kiddushin* 30b.
- 15 Quoted by his grandson in *Shem mi-Shmuel* (5677).
- 16 Rav Yaacov Kaminetzky, *Emes le-Yaacov*, *Devarim* 6:5.
- 17 Rav J. B. Soloveitchik, 1974; qtd. in *Reflections of the Rav* 2 pp. 21-23; cf. *Nefesh ha-Rav* pp.48-51 and fn. 21. Audio available at <http://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/753994>.
- 18 Rabbeinu Yonah, *Iggeres ha-Teshuva* 81-82; *Zeri`a u-Binyan be-Chinuch* pp. 34-35.