

# So the Children Will Ask

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

*Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS*

Chazal instituted that *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* be performed in a question-answer format, as derived from the Mishnah in Pesachim (117a).<sup>114</sup> The Emek Brachah (Haggadah, 1) quotes Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik who observes that this specific format is one of the three elements that distinguishes the mitzvah of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* at the seder from the mitzvah of *Zechirat Yitziat Mitzrayim* that applies every day of the year. Likewise, the Rambam's codification of the seder procedures includes the question-answer format.

Chazal instituted several practices that encourage children to ask questions, among them: removing the food early on, as if the meal was over (115b), dipping vegetables twice (114b), and distributing treats to younger members of the family (Rambam, Hilchot Chametz u-Matzah 7:1). Along these lines, Rav Gershon Zacks (Haggadah Siach ha-Grid, pp. 8, fn. 1) suggests that the Rambam opines that one should add anything he or she can that will cause children to ask questions. Rav Moshe Soloveichik explains that the custom to wear a Kittel at the seder is meant to spark the children's curiosity. This symbol of solemnity and sadness, donned at a time of redemption, will bring children to inquire about the custom.

The Rosh emphasizes the importance of questions in fulfilling the mitzvah of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim*. The Rosh holds that one can only satisfy his Torah obligation of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* by responding to questions that are posed. Rav Yerucham Perlow (Sefer ha-Mitzvot le-Rasag, Asin 33, p. 167) notes that the Rosh holds that a lone person is only rabbinically obligated to ask himself questions at the seder. The Biblical obligation is limited to a seder where children are present, as described in the verse, "And it shall be when your son asks you..." (Shemot 13:14). However, the Rabbis, in order to reflect the Biblical commandment of answering the child's questions, required a single person to utilize the question-answer format.

Rashi's explanation of the verse in parshat Re'eh, Devarim 16:3, "*lema'an tizkor* - so that you will remember," seems to support the ruling of the Rosh. Rashi states that the only way of remembering is through eating the Korban Pesach and matzah, and "only when the son asks did the Torah impose the obligation to tell him."

---

<sup>114</sup> The Rambam and the Rashbam argue whether this halachah entails asking specific questions, or would any questions suffice.

The rabbis prescribed actions that would beg the questions of the children, in order to ensure the fulfillment of the Torah obligation. If children were not motivated to ask, they might remain silent, depriving the adults of the mitzvah to answer them. This type of institution exists regarding other mitzvot. Chazal require one to purchase a four-cornered garment in order to create a Torah obligation to attach tzitzit to it. This stems from the Gemara in Menachot (41a) that tells us that in a "moment of anger" Hashem will punish one who does not obligate himself to wear tzitzit.

In light of the Rosh's opinion, one can understand the words of Tosfot in Pesachim (114b, s.v. Zot Omeret): If one has only enough greens for either karpas or maror, he should use it for karpas, which arouses children's curiosity, even though he will sacrifice proper observance of the mitzvah of maror. The Rashbam (ad loc.) finds this problematic. Why should one forfeit the mitzvah of maror simply for the purpose of arousing the curiosity of the children? The answer, based on the Rosh, is that karpas invites the questions of the children, allowing for the fulfillment of the Torah commandment of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim*. Perhaps this opportunity, which arises first, supercedes the mitzvah of maror, which today is a rabbinical requirement.

In contrast to the Rosh, the Rambam (Hilchot Chametz u-Matzah 7:2) obligates one in the mitzvah of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* even in the absence of any questions.

- Q** If so, why was it necessary for Chazal to institute elements of the seder that are intended to invite questions?
- Q** Furthermore, it is clear from the Rambam's codification (ibid.) that even if no questions are spontaneously asked, one should still perform the mitzvah through the question and answer form. Why is this required?
- Q** The Rambam (ibid. 8:2) requires that the leader of the seder, rather than the children, ask the questions. The purpose of this is to focus the attention of the participants on the observances of the night. If so, the goal of the questions is actually the questions themselves, not the answers. Why is this focus so important?
- Q** Moreover, over the years, many practices have become so familiar that their observance does not arouse any questions at all. Indeed, the Rambam states that one may introduce new practices that invite inquiry. Why, then, do we still practice those customs that no longer arouse the curiosity of the participants?
- Q** The Shibbolei ha-Leket (218) explains that we read "*Baruch ha-Makom baruch Hu*" before the section of the Four Sons as a *Birkat ha-Torah* to precede the *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim*. Rabbenu Yeshaya is quoted as expressing a similar opinion. Why is there a need for a special *Birkat ha-Torah* before learning on this night more than any other night of the year?

## Sippur Yitziat Mitzrayim through Talmud Torah

To answer these questions, we must begin with a fundamental principle that is alluded to by the Rishonim and illuminated by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (*Shiurim le-Zeicher Abba Mari* z"l vol. 2, pp. 156). The Rav explains that we are required to tell the details of the Exodus via the

medium of *talmud Torah*. The proof is the fact that the Haggadah revolves around the exposition of the portion from the Torah of *Arami Oved Avi*, recited by one who brings *bikkurim* - first fruits - to Jerusalem. Rabbi Yaakov of Lisa (Haggadah Maaseh Nisim, Introduction) and Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik (quoted in Emek Bracha) note that *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* requires *ha'arachat devarim* - extensive elaboration. The way of one who wishes to express appreciation is to do so at length (see Rashi, Bamidbar 33:1). One would therefore expect the Haggadah's focus to be on the lengthy, organized verses of Shemot or the *aggadot* and *midrashim* that directly address leaving Egypt. Yet instead, the Haggadah focuses on disorganized *drashot* from the selection of *Arami Oved Avi*. Why is this so?

Chazal wanted us to engage in *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim* through a *Ma'aseh Limud*, learning a portion of the Torah with the thirteen methods of Torah exposition. The pesukim in Shemot are too explicit, and would not allow for the same richness of limud Torah. Therefore, the Torah chose more cryptic verses, to facilitate the limud experience of the seder.<sup>115</sup>

This idea, that we tell the story of the Exodus through the mitzvah of *Talmud Torah*, emerges from the Mishnah in Pesachim (116a) and the Rambam (ibid. 7:2). Both express that the story must be told in a way that befits the intelligence of the children involved. This element is characteristic to the mitzvah of *Talmud Torah* itself, as explained by the Rambam in Hilchot Talmud Torah (1:6). The Rambam also states (ibid. 4) that the more intelligent and wise one is, the greater is his fulfillment of the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*. The Rambam also indicates that each person should elaborate on *yitziat Mitzrayim* to the best of his or her ability, and that the more one elaborates, the more he or she deserves praise. Clearly, it is not the terse specific text that is most important, but the learning and understanding of the subject.<sup>116</sup>

Perhaps the author of the Haggadah intended for all the participants at the seder to fulfill the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* in a complete fashion. The seder, therefore, includes portions from all sections of the Torah (see Brachot 11a): *mikra*, *midrash*, Mishnah and Gemara. According to Rashi, included in the category of Gemara are the answers of the Mishnayot that provide halachic rulings; for example, the Mishnah of "*yachol mei-rosh chodesh*." According to the Rambam (Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:12), *gemara* is defined as creative learning. This too can be fulfilled at the seder. Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that the words, "*afilu kulanu chachamim... chayavim anu le-saper be-yitziat Mitzrayim*," serve as an imperative. One is required to tell over the story in great depth. The Haggadah emphasizes the obligation of even *Chachamim* and *Nevonim*, people who are very knowledgeable in Torah. One is not merely required to *tell* the story of the Exodus from Egypt, *le-saper et yitziat mitzraim*, but to *be involved in telling* the story, *le-saper be-yetziat mitzraim*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik cited another proof to the idea of the seder revolving around the mitzvah of *talmud Torah*. The Haggadah includes the Mishnah of Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah and the sources

---

<sup>115</sup> Alternately, both Kriat Bikkurim and Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim share the theme of showing gratitude to Hashem for taking us out of Egypt. For this reason, Chazal chose these verses as the focus of the seder night, rather than a selection from Shemot. Rabbi Soloveitchik demonstrates how Rambam's description (in Sefer ha-Mitzvot mitzvah 132) of *Kriat Bikkurim* and *Sippur Yitziat Mitzrayim* (mitzvah 157) parallel each other.

<sup>116</sup> The source of the Rambam's opinion may be found in *Torat Kohanim* (Bechukotai 1:2-3, Rash MiShantz), as cited by Rabbi Michael Katz (Beit Yitzchak 1987).

of *Zechirat Yitziat Mitzrayim*. Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that the Rambam's version of the Mishnah had Rabbi Elazar and the Chachamim actually debating the derivation of the mitzvah around the seder table. Yet the derivation of the mitzvah has nothing to do with the story itself; why, then, is it present? Clearly, the mitzvah is broader than mere story-telling; the mitzvah is to learn the sugya of yetziat Mitzrayim.

Further proof is found in the answer given to the Chacham, i.e. all the laws of Pesach, as well as the Tosefta that states that one should delve into the laws of Korban Pesach until the rooster crows. The laws of the Korban Pesach do not belong to the narrative portion of the exodus story. Yet their study is desirable, because *sippur yetziat Mitzrayim* is not merely a story; it is a sugya.

Rabbi Soloveitchik (Haggadah Siach haGrid pp. 39) also points out that the word "*Sippur*" can be understood in two different ways: retelling, as well as learning. Ibn Ezra (Tehillim 119:13) notes that the verb *sippur* is used to describe teaching Torah.

**Q** Why does the Haggadah formulate our gratitude to Hashem for freeing us from slavery in the form of *talmud Torah*?

Perhaps the purpose of this is to highlight that receiving the Torah was the ultimate purpose of the redemption. However, a deeper meaning may be seen in light of the Ramban's discussion of the selection and salvation of the Jewish people. The Ramban in his introduction to Shemot writes that the redemption is the process through which the Jewish people return to the level of the patriarchs and serve as the "Chariot of Hashem" in this world. In this way, the Exodus was not merely a transition from *Hester Panim* to *Gilui Panim* - God finally clearly revealing His Providence in the world. Rather, it was also the process through which the Jews themselves became the embodiments of Hashem's Presence and accepted responsibility for its further revelation in the world. The book of Shemot, the *Sefer ha-Geulah* - Book of redemption, begins with a nation that does not yet realize God's providence, and ends with Moshe's teaching Torah to the Jews and the Jewish people's travels through the desert - events that proclaimed Hashem's providence in the world. Through learning Torah, we perpetuate the exodus' legacy; we make ourselves "Chariots of Hashem" in this world. Specifically, the learning of great scholars, Talmidei Chachamim who have mastered the entire Torah, helps us accomplish this goal. The deeper one delves into this learning, the more Hashem's presence becomes known. The greater the understanding one achieves, the more Hashem's holiness is valued in this world. Through this, one becomes a partner in the process of the redemption; one exhibits an appreciation of its benefits and goals, and, as a result, is grateful for it in a most profound way.

## Teaching Others

The Gemara (Bava Batra 21a) describes the development of yeshivot in Jewish communities. Originally, fathers would teach their sons individually, but since some boys had no father to teach them Torah, a system of Jewish education began with yeshivot in Yerushalayim. However, attendance was limited to older boys of the age of sixteen or seventeen. Yehoshua ben Gamla is credited with enabling the continuance of the Torah by expanding the yeshiva system to a

national scale and including boys from the age of six or seven. Tosfot (ibid. s.v. Ki me-Tzion) explains that the yeshivot were originally founded in Yerushalayim, because the students there would see the great sanctity of the city and the Kohanim performing the service in the Beit haMikdash. This environment would inspire them towards a greater fear of Heaven and a greater love of Torah study. Yet how was this supposed to aid the educational situation of orphans in other Jewish cities?

The Gemara explains that the impetus for providing education to the orphans stemmed from the verse "*Ve-limaditem otam* - and you shall teach them [i.e. words of Torah, to your sons]," which can be expounded upon to mean "and you shall teach them [i.e. all Jewish children who need education]." Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman asks why this explanation is necessary, if Chazal have already taught that the verse *Ve-shinantam le-vincha - Eilu ha-talmidim* indicates the obligation to teach Torah to students (see Rambam, Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2; Sefer ha-Mitzvot 11).

The Birkat Avraham writes that the mitzvah to teach one who is not his son only applies if that student comes forward of his own volition. One is not required to search out others to teach, with the exception of his son (see Kiddushin 29a). He cites the words of the Vilna Gaon (Yoreh Deah 245:5) as proof. The Vilna Gaon explains that the requirement of a Talmid Chacham to teach students stems from the mitzvah of tzedakah - charity. Therefore, explains the Birkat Avraham, just as one need not give money to a poor person when that individual is not interested in the gift, one need not teach a student who does not wish to learn. It is not the responsibility of the rebbe to pursue the student.

However, this understanding is problematic according to the opinion of the Rambam. The Rambam (Hilchot Talmud Torah 1:2,3) lists the differences between the requirement to teach one's son and the requirement to teach others. He mentions only that one's son takes precedence over other children, and that only for the education of his own child is one required to spend money. The Rambam does not list that one must seek out and teach his son, but that one need not seek out others' children.

The Rambam explains the mitzvah of teaching Torah as, (mitzvah 11) '*Ve-shinantam le-vincha*' - *eilu ha-talmidim she-ha-talmidim keruyim banim* - 'You shall teach it to your son:' this is a reference to the students, since the students are called children [of the teacher]." By quoting this exposition of the Sifrei, the Rambam implies that one is obligated to teach Torah to his students. Formulating the obligation as teaching those who are already one's students appears to be consistent with the opinion of the Vilna Gaon quoted above. Although the mitzvah begins as tzedakah, once the teacher gains students, he becomes obligated to teach them, for they are treated by the Torah as his sons.

Perhaps for this reason, Chazal learn the obligation to teach the children of others from the verse "*Veshinantam*," from the word *Shinun*, which implies repetition or teaching for a second time. Only after he has taught them once and made them his students is he obligated to teach them a second time.

This may also be the explanation of the Beraita (Bava Metzia 33b) that states that one who learns one chapter, one halachah, one *dibbur*, or even one letter from someone else must treat this individual with the respect due to one's teacher. He is considered a student, and under these circumstances, the teacher is required to teach the student further.

Hence, the Vilna Gaon would understand that the Rambam's list of differences between teaching one's son and teaching others only applies when both obligations are already in effect, i.e. after the others have sought out their teacher.

With this background we can understand the institution of Yehoshua ben Gamla. The intention was to create the Rebbe-Talmid relationship that obligates continuing Torah study. The creation of yeshivot through the contributions of the community allowed greater opportunities for those relationships to exist. As Tosfot explain, the effort to focus the building of the yeshivot in Yerushalayim was due to the great influence that the environs of the Holy City would provide. When a father-son or Rebbe-Talmid relationship already exists, both elements naturally commit themselves to the study. However, when this relationship does not exist, the proximity to the Beit ha-Mikdash and the Temple service allows for the students to devote themselves and their efforts to receiving the Torah of their teachers. We also understand what follows in the Gemara, the acceptance of younger children to the yeshivah system. Though older students may be more prepared to absorb the teachings, it was too late in life to hope for the expected impact of Beit ha-Mikdash and the ability to capture the hearts of the students in order to influence them.

In conclusion, we can answer our earlier questions on the Rambam. Why is the question and answer format necessary, even when children volunteer no questions, and even when one is alone? Why is the focus generated by the seder leader's questioning so important? Why do we ask questions even about things that no longer appear strange to us? Why is there a *birkat ha-Torah* on *sippur yitziat mitzrayim*?

There is a unique fulfillment of *talmud Torah* on the seder night as a vehicle to perform the mitzvah of *sippur yitziat Mitzrayim*. The mitzvah of Talmud torah uncovers hidden ideas, gives expression to the geulah we celebrate, and ultimately reveals hidden evidence of Hashem dominion in this world. Since focus is essential to *talmud Torah*, Chazal required one to focus on this night's learning through the medium of questions, either because of the "*ki yishalcha vincha*" imperative, or because of a rabbinical decree to emphasize this element of *talmud Torah*. Moreover, question and answer format emphasizes the Talmid-Rebbi relationship, which is the neshama of Talmud Torah. Through the questions, one prepares himself to focus and receive the learning of the seder; children will feel the humility necessary for successful learning, and the mitzvah of *talmud Torah* will be performed in its complete form. This is why, according to the Shibbolei ha-Leket, a special *Birkat ha-Torah* is made. The purpose of every *Birkat ha-Mitzvah* is to focus the mind, according to many Rishonim. Similarly, the purpose of *birkat ha-Torah* at the seder is to focus the mind on the forthcoming talmud Torah. This emphasizes that the *Sippur* will be performed through the mitzvah of *Talmud Torah* and will prepare the participants for the great task at hand.