

How to Educate Our Children Seder Style

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Chazal ask us all to be educators on seder night. It is a night which centers around educating our children with a focus we don't find on any other night. If we look carefully at the Haggadah we see that it is really a carefully crafted document designed for optimal chinuch. I would like to pull out three ideas about chinuch from the Maharal's (Gevurat Hashem Ch. 52) approach to part of the Haggadah.

Maggid begins with the "four questions" of *Mah Nishtanah* and then the paragraph of *Avadim Hayinu*. The Maharal asks why this frame is necessary. Let's just jump right into the answer, why the need for questions at all? He asks further that although the idea of *Adavim Hayinu* is based on the Mishna's one instruction for the general structuring of the Haggadah, the meaning behind this construct is less than clear. The Mishna (Pesachim 116a) lays down the dictum that the Haggadah should be *מתחיל בגנות ומסיים בשבח*, we are to start with the low point and then reach the praise for our exodus. This gives rise to the idea of mentioning both our physical low point in the exile in Egypt and also our spiritual nadir in our idol worshipping forefathers. However, the Maharal points out, we are not really told why this is necessary. What is the purpose of giving the Historical background if the night is essentially to commemorate the exodus itself?

In answering these two questions the Maharal lays down three critical principles in how to lead our sederim. Firstly he gives us a principle of education to explain the need for questions. He tells us that when teaching a concept one must always go *מן המורגש אל המוסכל*, meaning that one must first speak to the emotional side of things and only then move to the intellectual and more abstract. The children need to first feel the questions and be bothered and curious before we give them an intellectual explanation of what we are doing. We need to ignite their natural curiosity and create an experiential type of seder which has them realizing that there is something which requires an explanation. This explains a great deal about the structure of the seder and the plethora of experiential aspects as well as the need to identify specific questions before we frame the experience more intellectually. So point number one is that the seder must be an emotional experience for our children.

Secondly, the Maharal explains the purpose of starting with the galus (exile) before getting to the geulah (redemption). He explains that we are clarifying the connection between the two. It is possible that something could be saved without that being tied to the danger per se. He gives the example of a house on fire and a sudden rain storm causes it to extinguish. The rain did not come because of the fire, this is a geulah which is not tied to the problem. When we are taken out of Egypt it is because Hashem sees our low spiritual and physical level and decides to take us out. This is the 2nd point, tonight is to focus on our relationship with Hashem and give this message to our children. The Aruch Hashulchan (O.C. 472:15) comments that the seder nights have the *ikkar haEmunah* (the critical aspects of belief in Hashem) resting on them. The end goal must be for our children to recognize more deeply their connection with Hashem as it relates to their lives and the Jewish people.

Finally, in this context the Maharal speaks about the Mitzvot of the night (and in general) as a ladder (סולם) for us to climb up to Hashem. This is an amazing imagery. Rav Chaim of Vohloshin (Ruach Chaim) uses this same imagery to stress that we must always be growing as Jews. He gives the parable of a servant who is asked by his master to fetch a wine barrel at the top of the wine cellar. The servant begins to climb the ladder to get up to the specified barrel. The master is not at all upset that the servant is on the lower rungs, how else could he ascend to the top? However, if the servant will remain resting on the lower rung then the master will be upset. So too, we are meant to ascend up to Hashem always growing in our spiritual lives. We are not expected to leap up to the top but simply resting at one rung is not an option. This is the third point of the seder, we must inculcate this value of constantly identifying the next rung in our mitzvah observance and relationship with Hashem, for us and for our children. If we are able to create a seder (and truly a life) which encourages all three of these principles then we will have succeeded in being the educators which chazal wanted us to be on the seder night!