

# How do We Transmit Emunah?

## Maximizing the Pesach Seder

**F**ew things are as important in Judaism as faith in G-d. Our religion is not only one of behavior but also of belief. Though there exist extensive debates surrounding the status and particulars of specific elements of our faith, all Rishonim affirm the critical role and value of *emunah*.<sup>1</sup>

While faith in G-d is clearly of utmost importance all year long, it may have increased value on Pesach night, the anniversary of our Exodus from Egypt. Indeed, the Torah (*Shemot* 20:2) links belief in Hashem to leaving Mitzrayim, and a variety of Rishonim offer suggestions as to why our leaving Mitzrayim is so significant in shaping our *emunah*.

Ramban (*Shemot* 13:16) explains that so many of our mitzvot are intended to remind us of Hashem's active involvement in this world. The mitzvot help crystalize for us Hashem's continued role in impacting world events — rejecting the erroneous belief that Hashem created the world, but has now abandoned it and left it to run on its own. *Sefer HaChinuch* (mitzvah 25) similarly writes that the Exodus from Egypt demonstrates G-d's providence, clarifying that certain events did not occur as happenstance but as intended results of G-d's actions.<sup>2</sup>

An alternate explanation for the critical role of *yetziat Mitzrayim* is offered by Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi



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(*Sefer HaKuzari* 1:25-27). He suggests that while creation of the world is obviously fundamental to our faith, it is the public miracles surrounding our leaving Egypt that serve as more concrete testimony to the validity and accuracy of our faith. Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi maintains that our belief in G-d is, in part, predicated upon the public miracles performed in front of an entire nation while we were in Egypt and then the desert, ultimately culminating in the receiving of the Torah.

With this background in mind, we turn to an important question. Pesach night is one in which Jewish education plays a primary role. So many of the activities that take place during the seder revolve around engaging the next generation, ensuring their continued connection to our wonderful tradition. How does one transmit faith to the next generation? Pesach may be the holiday that, in a certain sense, is most intrinsically linked with the cultivation of *emunah*. How can *emunah* in Hashem be effectively transmitted to our children?

What follows are three general ideas regarding fostering *emunah* in the next

generation, all based on insights into the unique experience of seder night.

### Approach # 1: Value Questions

Much of the content discussed on Pesach night is acquired through questions and answers. A highlight of the Pesach seder is certainly the Mah Nishtanah, the four questions asked by a child at the beginning of the seder. The seder could have easily been structured in a way that proactively provides answers to these questions, eliminating the need to even raise the questions. That Chazal chose to have children ask the initial question reflects an understanding that questions are often a critical educational tool. Questions directly engage the minds of students and help them feel more invested. In structuring the seder around children's questions, Chazal help ensure that the children realize that their questions have value and that their voice will be included in the seder.

A similar concept is found slightly later on in the Haggadah when we relate to the four sons. The fourth son is the "she'aino yode'ah lishol,"

the son unable to even ask his own question. Our response is very telling. We do not satisfy ourselves by merely informing him of the most critical facts relevant to *yetziat Mitzrayim*, offering a crash course to ensure that he has acquired, at minimum, the basic pieces of information. Instead, we are told “*at petach lo*,” that our responsibility toward him is to open him up. We are instructed to do our best to engage him and make him an active learner, to ensure that he, too, is seeking, questioning, and uncovering to the best of his ability.

Indeed, many elements of the Pesach night experience have the explicit goal of prompting the children to ask questions. Chazal (*Pesachim* 114) explain that we eat *karpas* at the beginning of the seder so that the children will ask about this unusual practice. According to R’ Moshe Soloveitchik, the custom for certain people to wear a *kittel* at the seder is, likewise, for the sake of piquing the children’s curiosity.

Both the explicit questions in the text of the Haggadah, as well as the practices that implicitly attempt to prompt the children to articulate questions, clearly point toward a very specific goal. During the night of Pesach, when we are trying to transmit our faith to the next generation, we are taught to make sure the children are active participants in exploring and understanding our traditions. When children’s questions become a focal point of the seder, we convey our confidence that we are transmitting something of value, that we are not scared of a close examination of our tradition, and that we value and cherish our children’s cognitive engagement in the religious sphere.

## Approach # 2: Commitment and Behaviors

Recent research on education has revealed a fascinating and possibly counterintuitive perspective on how beliefs are transmitted from parents to children. One might have expected that children’s beliefs would likely correlate with those of their parents. Yet recent research<sup>3</sup> has shown that the relationship between parents’ and children’s beliefs is not that straightforward. Rather than beliefs being transmitted from parent to child in a linear fashion, children view their parents’ behaviors and intuit their parents’ beliefs based on the actions that they witness. It is those perceived parental beliefs that correlate most strongly with the creed of the children. In other words, the ultimate influence on the children’s beliefs is *not* what the parents actually believe, but what children *perceive* their parents as believing based on parental actions. In essence, what best predicts the degree to which children internalize principles of faith is less what their parents believe, and more how their parents behave.

It is possible that this insight is reflected in the manner in which we structure the Pesach seder. True, a primary goal of the seder is to impart messages onto the next generation, to share with them our most cherished ideals and our collective history. Yet, the seder bears little resemblance to the typical classroom. We certainly impart information, and, as noted above, questions and answers are explored. However, many of the most impactful parts of the seder involve behaviors, rather than explicit statements of beliefs. From the eating of the matzah to the drinking of the four cups, much of the seder

involves adults performing mitzvot. We understand that to impart values to the next generation, more important than talking about faith is living faith; more fundamental than complex theological discussions may be the simple acts of careful ritual observance.

It is possible to extend this idea further. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks offers a beautiful and critically important insight into the observance of Pesach, one that highlights the specific form of behaviors found on Pesach and one that clarifies for us a common misconception about transmitting our tradition to the next generation:<sup>4</sup>

*Throughout a century of reflection on how to sustain Jewish identity in an open, secular society, the case has often been made that we need to make Judaism easier. Why make the barriers so high, the demands so steep, the laws so rigorous and demanding? So, one by one, the demands were lowered. Shabbat, kashrut and conversion were all made easier. As for the laws of taharat ha-mishpacha, in many circles outside Orthodoxy they fell into abeyance altogether. The assumption was that the less demanding Judaism is to keep, the more Jews will stay Jewish.*

*To show that this is a fallacy, I once asked a mixed group of observant and non-observant Jews to list the festivals in order of difficulty. Everyone agreed that Pesach was the hardest, Shavuot the easiest, and Sukkot somewhere in between. I then asked, which festivals are kept by the greatest number of Jews. Again, everyone agreed: Pesach was kept by most, Shavuot by the least, with Sukkot in between. There was a pause as the group slowly realised what it had just said. It was counterintuitive but undeniable: the harder a festival is, the more people will keep it. The proof is*

*Yom Kippur, by far the most demanding day of all, and by far the best attended in synagogue.*

We do not try to ensure our beliefs are passed on to the next generation by lowering standards or by expecting less. Instead, we expose our children to the challenges of ritual observance, to the need to sacrifice for our tradition. Ultimately, it is those communities that have continued to be ambitious and meticulous in their mitzvah observance that have found more success in transmitting their religious values. Indeed, Ritva (*Sukkah* 2b) writes that the mitzvah of *chinuch*, of educating our children, demands that children perform mitzvot in a halachically acceptable way. We do not educate children by having them pretend to observe mitzvot, but by having them actually engage in proper and authentic mitzvah observance, modeling our uncompromising ambition with regard to mitzvah performance.

Pesach is a time when children not only witness their parents' ritual observance. They also see the commitment, the dedication, and at times, the challenges surrounding the observance of the holiday. However, perhaps our children's internalization of our system of belief happens because of, rather than in spite of, parents' ambitious and uncompromising commitment to the details of religious observance.

The first two approaches highlight different pathways for transmitting faith. The first addresses the role of questions, while the second speaks of exposure to figures who model commitment and high levels of observance.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, in his own unique way, relates to both of the aforementioned ideas in an important article about his own faith:<sup>5</sup>

*What I received from all my mentors, at home or in yeshiva, was the key to confronting life, particularly modern life, in all its complexity: the recognition that it was not so necessary to have all the answers as to learn to live with the questions. Regardless of what issues — moral, theological, textual or historical — vexed me, I was confident that they had been raised by masters far sharper and wiser than myself; and if they had remained impregnably steadfast in their commitment, so should and could I. I intuited that, his categorical formulations and imperial certitude notwithstanding, Rav Hutner had surely confronted whatever questions occurred to me. Later, I felt virtually certain the Rav had, so that the depth and intensity of their service of G-d was doubly reassuring.*

The coupling of the willingness to confront questions, with the presence of positive, supportive, and honest role models who themselves exhibit unwavering commitment can play a critical role in empowering

our children to feel confident and comfortable adopting the doctrines of our tradition.

### **Approach # 3: Build Relationships**

As noted above, exposure to parental beliefs can play an important role in the transmission of faith from one generation to the next. An additional component to the transmission of belief focuses less on questions and behavior, and more on emotional connectedness. Recent research has highlighted the critical role of warm and positive relationships between parents and children, specifically as it relates to transmission of values. When children perceive their relationship with their parents as warm and caring, their religious beliefs are more likely to be aligned with those of their parents (Barni, Ranieri, Scabini, Rosnati, 2011;<sup>6</sup> Okagaki & Bevis, 1999<sup>7</sup>). Humans are social beings, and the role of the social context in the process of learning and development is quite significant. Though seemingly distinct from the cognitive realm, close relationships are incredibly effective vehicles for transmitting values and beliefs to others.

The Biblical requirement of korban Pesach, the sacrifice that is to be eaten on Pesach night, underscores this value. In general, two kinds of sacrifices exist. There are sacrifices

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offered by individuals, be it for atonement or other reasons. A second kind of sacrifice is offered on behalf of the entire nation, such as the twice daily *tamid* offering. Korban Pesach, however, appears to be unique. It is not offered by individuals nor by the collective nation. Indeed, a degree of ambiguity exists regarding the best way to categorize this korban. It seems that korban Pesach is the only sacrifice that is offered by a unit that is somewhere in between the individual and the nation, namely by family members who join together to offer the korban.

Pesach celebrates the birth of our nation, and it may offer us the key to its continued survival. The korban Pesach, the first sacrifice offered as a nation, underscores the need to create and nurture close familial relationships. Faith exists in the intellectual realm, but it comes alive in community, when families unite around common causes. Perhaps that is why one of the most important things families can do on Pesach night, both when the actual korban Pesach was offered as well as in our contemporary model of Pesach seder, is come together.

It is important, though, to offer a qualification. It is true that faith is often established through community, through positive and supportive relationships. However, those relationships are not meant to be exclusive. We begin the seder by inviting all those who are alone to come join us at our table. We are not looking to establish relationships in which some are in and some are out. Instead, we want to build inclusive communities where all are afforded the opportunity to benefit from the incredible value of relationships.

## Conclusion

The transmission of faith from one generation to the next can be a significant challenge, but it is also of paramount importance. The Pesach seder offers a number of deep and insightful strategies for effectively transmitting our belief system to the next generation. Whether by celebrating our children's questions and intellectual curiosity, modeling unwavering commitment, or nurturing warm and supportive family relationships, we hope and pray that our children will appreciate the depth of our care for them and the authenticity of our commitment to our tradition. With the help of G-d, may our efforts yield the next link in the chain of "*ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim*," — Believers who are the children of believers.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Rambam (*Sefer HaMitzvot*, Pos. Mitzvah no. 1) and Ramban (ad loc.).
2. For more on the impact of *yetziat Mitzrayim*, see Maharal, *Netzach Yisrael* Chap. 30.
3. Gniewosz, B., & Noack, P. (2012). What you see is what you get: The role of early adolescents' perceptions in the intergenerational transmission of academic values. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 37(1), 70-79.
4. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, "What does this Avodah Mean to you?," *Torah To Go*, Pesach 5774, available at [http://download.yutorah.org/2014/1053/Pesach\\_To\\_Go\\_-\\_5774\\_Rabbi\\_Sacks.pdf](http://download.yutorah.org/2014/1053/Pesach_To_Go_-_5774_Rabbi_Sacks.pdf).
5. Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Source of Faith is Faith Itself." *The Jewish Action Reader*-Volume 1.
6. Barni, D., Ranieri, S., Scabini, E., & Rosnati, R. (2011). Value transmission in the family: Do adolescents accept the values their parents want to transmit? *Journal of Moral Education*, (40)1, 105-121.

7. Okagaki, L. & Bevis, C. (1999). Transmission of religious values: Relations between parents' and daughters' beliefs. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development*. 160(3), 303-318.

In the introduction to the section about the Four Sons, we use the name *Makom*, the Omnipresent, to refer to God — *Baruch HaMakom*. Why do we use this specific name? Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik suggests that we use the name *Makom* to indicate that God transcends time and space. He is present and ready to help us even when we might think otherwise. This is why we invoke *HaMakom* when greeting a mourner. We indicate to the mourner that even in times of suffering and loss, God is really with us. Similarly, at the seder, as we are about to introduce the Four Sons, we might think that it is only possible to properly convey the message of the seder to the Wise Son. Therefore, we invoke *HaMakom* to indicate that God will help transmit the story and values of the seder to all of our children, regardless of their intellect or disposition.

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