

Teaching Children With Different Learning Profiles

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MINDFULNESS AS A REMEDY FOR INATTENTIVENESS

The Pesach Seder is an immersive experience that allows us to engage with each other and with our Creator using nearly all teaching modalities — the five senses, story-telling, singing, questions and answers, and lively debates. One of the most foundational and simultaneously profound moments of the Seder — eating the matzah — is also a sacred moment of recollection, focus and mindfulness. When we eat the designated *shiur* of matzah, we employ mind, body and spirit to fulfill the mitzvah. Leaning to

the left, we chew in silence, avoiding conversation to encourage our minds to concentrate on the purpose of the moment, reflecting on the mitzvah of remembering the suffering of our People and the remarkably glorious redemption from slavery to freedom.

This moment of purposefully eating the matzah with *kavannah* — concentration — while being fully present and engaged is actually an ancient prescription for a contemporary ailment. Our society is plagued by the affliction of inattentiveness. Teachers see it with

their students, children see it with their parents, colleagues and spouses see it in each other. While our lives are moving at light-speed and we are constantly achieving more in less time, we are also fooling ourselves into believing in the myth of multitasking. There are many consequences of this trend.

In recent years, the number of ADHD diagnoses has spiked among young children, adolescents and adults alike. In the United States alone, 6 million children (one in ten) have been diagnosed with ADHD, making it the

most common childhood behavioral condition in the country. This is both good news and bad news. The good news is that more attention is being paid to learning patterns, instructional methodologies and interventions for antisocial behavior. The bad news is that we know that ADHD is being over-diagnosed and misdiagnosed, since the actual identification process is quite challenging.

Add to the mix an unprecedented shift in childhood reality: screen-based technology and mobile devices. Multiple studies have found that the amount of time a child spends engaged with a screen (laptop, phone, tablet, etc.) has a significant impact on that child's behavior. A child who is strongly connected to his or her screen tends to demonstrate strikingly similar behavior to those children with ADHD; that child might be able to spend large quantities of time focused on the task at hand, like watching a show or playing a game, but struggles to focus in other areas, like conversations, class discussions and household chores. There is no shortage of evidence to show us how emotional connections are being formed (or not formed, or misformed) in ways that dramatically deviate from historical human trends, or that learning — inside and outside of the classroom — is becoming increasingly superficial, and, that as time spent online increases, attention spans decrease. Research also shows that parents who try to accomplish something on their phones while also being with their children lose their patience and temper with their children much more quickly than those parents who have put their phones away.

With all of this as a backdrop, mindfulness is having its cultural moment, but its trendiness should not

be cause to dismiss it. Mindfulness is the mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment. Unlike meditation (its close cousin), which is about directing your thoughts elsewhere, mindfulness is about being completely present in the moment. The popularity of mindfulness is due to many factors, including the ease in which it can be practiced, and the direct positive feelings it creates as a result. Corporate giants are bringing mindfulness seminars to their employees, while hospitals, educational institutions, prisons and the U.S. military are all including mindfulness training in their programming as well.

The genius of its simplicity is also causing it to take root in the Jewish world. Jewish day schools are starting to talk about how to bring mindfulness into classrooms and school culture, rabbis are incorporating it into their *divrei Torah*, and I have the distinct pleasure of teaching it to many gap-year students in Israel. The beauty of mindfulness is that a knowledgeable Jew doesn't have to veer off the path of *Yiddishkeit* to tap into it — it is, in fact, the essence of *Yiddishkeit*. We just call it something else — we call it *kavannah*.

When we make a *bracha* with *kavannah* before eating, that's mindfulness.

When we say *Asher Yatzar* with *kavannah* after using the bathroom, that's mindfulness.

When we *bentch* our children on *Leil Shabbos* with *kavannah*, that's mindfulness.

And when we eat matzah in silence on *Pesach*, savoring the taste, reflecting on the moment, and listening to

the soundtrack of crunching, that's mindfulness.

Shutting out the distractions and focusing on the present moment can be extraordinarily challenging. Yet we know we are capable of it, because we practice it at different moments throughout the year. Perhaps it's only on *Yom Kippur*. Perhaps it's each Friday night at candle lighting. Perhaps it's more frequent, on a daily basis. Recognizing that it is challenging, but not impossible, is the key to searching for more opportunities to bring presence, mindfulness, and *kavannah* into our daily lives.

As with most behaviors, our children learn from us. If we model mindfulness, and even explicitly share with our children why it matters and why it's hard to achieve, our children may be inspired to follow our example. If it is known that this shift in focus and behavior is for the precise purpose of establishing deeper, more authentic connections with each other and with our Creator, there is even more reason to go outside our comfort zones and to be present in the moment.

There are many strategies that can help individuals and families incorporate mindfulness into their

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daily lives. Here, however, are some tools that might help your family become less distracted and more mindful, specifically for Pesach:

1. Choose one part of the preparations for Pesach on which to be especially focused: reciting *Kol Chamirah*, slicing/shredding/chopping one food for the Seder plate, cleaning one specific part of the house.

2. Let halacha guide you: during the moments that are meant to be devoid of conversation (drinking from the four cups, between washing and Hamotzi, eating the matzah, various points throughout Maggid), make a point of being present in the moment, focusing on the task or thought at hand.

3. During clean-up: Use the moments during dishwashing or table-clearing to speak to the others who are joining the effort to discuss highlights of the Seder. What was particularly meaningful for you?

4. Don't forget Chol Hamo'ed: Designate specific moments during Chol HaMo'ed to have conversations with those you love, maintaining eye contact and keeping phones in pockets or bags.

5. Make the Omer count: Sfiras Ha'Omer is a great example of having the prescription already in our hands. Like in other instances, there is a short paragraph that starts with *hineni muchan umezuman*, which is a verbal preparation for creating the mindset in which we can fulfill the mitzvah of counting the Omer each day. By actually focusing on the words we say in that paragraph, we sharpen our *kavannah* and create mindfulness for ourselves, and potentially for those around us as well.

This Pesach, may we help our children and ourselves be freed from the bonds of distraction and inattention; may we find the clarity of purpose to reestablish the connections that

matter most to us; and may we find ways to have *kavannah* — to be mindful and to be present with ourselves, our loved ones and with our Creator.

Resources:

For more information about the research on the relationship between screen time and behavior, see the work of The Kaiser Family Foundation, Jean Twenge, Edward Swing, Elizabeth Lorch, and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

For information about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in children and adults, see the work of Amnon Gimpel, the Journal for Attention Disorders, or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

For more information on mindfulness, see the work of J. David Creswell, Jon Kabbat-Zinn, Charlotte Zenner, and Tal Ben Shahar.

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