

The Methodology of Teaching the Pesach Story

Introduction

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MAXIMING AND MINIMIZING: THOUGHTS ON CREATING A FAMILY-FRIENDLY SEDER

The Seder night has a certain magical quality. Perhaps that is because, as R' Mayer Twersky explains, specific times of the year are mystically imbued with a particular flavor or characteristic, and *Leil Haseder* is suffused with “*giluy Shechina*,” G-d’s close and intimate presence waiting to be uncovered and embraced.¹ Or perhaps it is the dazzling effect that is created when loved ones come together at the culmination of intense collective preparation, education, and anticipation. Whatever the underlying cause, there is a palpable sense of opportunity and wonder that underlies the evening.

Set against the backdrop of this subtle but powerful momentousness, the explicit content of the evening surrounds the theme of our nation’s past and future. Through both words and actions, celebration and perpetuation of our tradition weaves its way through the Seder experience. Unlike certain religious edicts that may be fulfilled equally as well or perhaps even more effectively through solitary and independent observance, the Seder night mimics the eve of the korban Pesach in that we achieve optimal observance when surrounded by family and guests.

The mandate that the Seder night serve as a vehicle to pass on our

tradition squarely places children at the heart of this endeavor, for they are the segue that connects the present moment to the future of our nation. It is no surprise, then, that children play a prominent role in the Seder experience — from the singing of the Mah Nishtanah to the protracted game of hiding and finding the afikoman to the numerous rituals that were created with the explicit purpose of spurring children to ask questions. While there may be certain mitzvot in which the presence of children may be a barrier to personal religious observance and fulfillment, in the case of the Seder, the children serve as a focal point, with the goal of creating a

meaningful and engaging experience specifically for them.

It is one thing to talk about the value of a shared family experience recounting our tradition and inspiring each other toward meaningful living. It is quite another to orchestrate and execute this tall order. When sitting in the company of a range of ages, knowledge levels, backgrounds, and attention spans; when some come to the table armed with mountains of divrei Torah and others are wondering just how they will survive until the meal is served, how can we effectively capitalize on the opportunities that *Leil Haseder* offers? In the coming sections, some important considerations, both developmental and pedagogical, will be explored, with the goal of further enriching the Seder experience for everyone, and in particular the children.

Engaging Young Children

Given that the Seder includes an important didactic element, in that its goals include teaching and sharing important concepts and information, a brief exploration of how children learn is in order.

From a very young age, children's interaction with their environment serves as a catalyst for thinking and organizing information and making sense of the world. As children's language develops, they discover an entirely new galaxy in which they can interact with their world, discover questions, and seek answers. Play is also a very central learning theater for preschool-aged children. Through imagining and engaging the world through their five senses, and adopting a host of different roles, children's minds build cognitive webs that organize and give meaning to information about the world that surrounds them, and about their place in it.

These learning concepts have important implications for *Leil Haseder*. The classic model of "divrei Torah" is hardly relevant to children in the preschool age bracket. Experiential learning, powerful for any age group, will be particularly appropriate for younger children. As they create Pesach-themed adornments for the Seder table, taste the different foods on the table and consider their flavors and accompanying associations (sweet, bitter, salty, etc.), act out the

Ten Plagues (on a personal note, my children were very excited to cut a marshmallow in half, lick the stickiest surface, and "glue" it to their arm for Shechin), and dramatically recount the story of Yetziyat Mitzrayim, interactive learning engages children's senses and their minds. Rather than adults driving and imposing the learning, the goal is to set the stage for these children to learn, experience, and ask questions, and for us to provide them with age-appropriate answers. As their curiosity is piqued, their cognitive wheels begin turning, and their inquisitiveness awakened. Under these circumstances, children are engaged and excited to learn the ideas we have to share with them.

Children in late preschool and early elementary school who have developed some basic literacy and numerical understanding can be more directly engaged through the Haggadah. Haggadah bingo, where children have a bingo card with different words, names, and concepts in Maggid, can be a fun way for kids to follow along even when they're not yet ready to engage analytically with the material. A similar concept is a number search, which assigns

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children a specific number, and they then look for mentions of that number throughout Maggid (for example, the number 4 — four questions in Mah Nishtanah, the Four Children, etc.). Children who may enjoy this but are not yet ready to participate independently can be paired up with an adult to help them follow along in the Haggadah and assist them in finding their bingo words or assigned number. Furthermore, though children of this age may not be ready for intensive analytics and high-level philosophy, most children are certainly capable of and interested in answering age-appropriate thought questions. For example, questions such as, “What do you think the Jews felt when they were woken up in the middle of the night and told they would leave Mitzrayim?” and “What do you think Hashem was trying to teach the Mitzrim (and the Jews) when He did the Eser Makot?” can engage the minds of children as they enter developmentally into a stage in which they are more capable of abstract thought. Last, encourage the children to ask questions. A token prize, such as a chocolate chip, for each question posed can get kids thinking, and their refreshing way of viewing the world may yield questions that bewilder even the wise adults at the table.

Older Children (and Beyond) and the “Classic” Dvar Torah

Common among older children and adults is the traditional model of dvar Torah, where one person shares a Torah thought and table participants listen. This model has both important advantages and notable drawbacks. On the most basic level, the sharing of meaningful Torah content is

inherently valuable and holy. Torah is meant to be studied and expounded upon, and therefore we cherish the opportunity to offer and exchange ideas and insights. Additionally, verbal expression often prompts the speaker to further clarify and organize the concept in his/her own mind, which leaves the speaker with an enhanced and sharper understanding of the idea. Last, particularly in the case of children sharing a dvar Torah, a child often experiences both a sense of ownership of the material and a feeling of pride at being the center of attention and receiving positive feedback.

At the same time, if the Seder is viewed, at least in part, as an opportunity for a meaningful learning experience, then the traditional dvar Torah model has certain limitations. High-quality learning involves active engagement with the material. The more we directly interact with and process new material, the deeper and better our comprehension and long-term retention. For many of us, the number of hours we have spent listening to lectures, sermons, and speeches, let’s even say over the last ten years, is embarrassingly disproportionate to the amount of knowledge we can show for it. This is because certain conditions are much more conducive to effective learning, and passively receiving information is not one of them. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, given the range of ages and backgrounds that often populate the same Seder table, the dvar Torah model is often inappropriate or unsuitable for a segment of the Seder participants.

Though there is no “one size fits all” solution to this challenge, there are a number of considerations and

suggestions that can help.

Some families choose to view Maggid as the beginning of a process that is by no means limited to this specific section of the Haggadah. While a meaningful exchange of ideas can start during Maggid, there is ample opportunity to continue this process, whether during Shulchan Orech or after the formal Seder is over, well into the night after the younger and/or more wearied have retired. Other families choose to spread out these discussions over the entire Yom Tov, sharing ideas at each of the Yom Tov meals. This both enhances the Yom Tov meals and serves as a great solution to the child who came home with a stack of divrei Torah. In this way, the child can have opportunities to share all of the content that he/she excitedly prepared, while minimizing the stress and challenge of fitting it all in on the night(s) of the Seder.

In addition to identifying opportunities beyond the confines of Maggid for sharing divrei Torah, we can employ certain strategies for engaging more of the listeners at the Seder table, thereby creating a more active learning experience for all present. The dvar Torah presenter can introduce the dvar Torah with a question that the listeners should seek to answer while the dvar Torah is being delivered. This helps listeners focus their attention and gives them a cognitive anchor to process the information. Because listeners are looking to answer a specific question, their minds are more actively engaged in processing the information than if they were just listening passively. Alternatively, after each dvar Torah, the head of the table can present participants with a question on the content of the dvar Torah, perhaps

even offering a token prize (small prize,² treat, etc.) for correct answers. Another way to expand divrei Torah engagement is to ask that Seder participants prepare some kind of visual aid associated with each dvar Torah they share, in order to give the dvar Torah both an auditory and a visual element.³ This item can be a concrete item, a hand drawn picture, or an image that was printed from the computer. If appropriate, in advance of the Seder, older siblings or guests can be paired up with younger children for this task, perhaps by inviting the younger child to draw a picture before Yom Tov, or to help find and present the associated item. This gives the younger children an important and prominent role in “sharing” divrei Torah, and directly involves them in an element of the Seder from which they may have previously felt alienated.

The Other Stars of the Show

Thus far, the emphasis has been on the children. I would like to shift to the other end of the spectrum, namely, the grandparents, great grandparents, and senior citizens sitting around the table, those who serve as the direct link to our tradition and heritage.

In some families, the older generation is heavily involved in participating in and even running the Seder. In other families, due to a host of reasons, the participation of senior citizens does not occur organically, but instead needs to be actively invited

and facilitated. This population has a unique and valuable asset that can greatly enhance a Pesach Seder: they have a more direct connection to previous generations and first-hand experience of Pesach Seders as they were celebrated in eras gone by. Each family has its own story, its own roots in its countries of origin, and each family can consider what might be meaningful to hear from the senior generation at the table. I have very cherished memories of hearing my grandparents share how Pesach was prepared for and celebrated in Poland and Lithuania. Even more powerful was when my father would turn to my grandfather, may they both live and be well, and say, “So, Daddy, tell us about slavery to freedom. Tell us about the day of your liberation at the end of the Holocaust.” Suddenly, concepts that felt so distant and remote, the notion of captivity and subjugation and denigration, become very real and very close to home, and my appreciation of freedom takes on new and vast proportions. What better way to emphasize our heritage than by looking to those whose life stories, each in their own way, tell a microcosmic tale of the story of our people.

Conclusion

Rabbi Norman Lamm, in a Passover sermon delivered in 1969, aptly described that which we are trying to convey at the Seder: “Tradition is not a symbol on the order of the American flag, or a celebration like July 4, or a

social or political sacrament. Tradition is my way of orienting to my G-d, it is that which sensitizes me spiritually, which opens me to eternity and to the timeless... Tradition, for the Jew, is not a sentimental recollection of the past, but the long process of preparing for a spiritually meaningful future by consecrating the present.”⁴ When families and friends unite around a common heritage and seek to strengthen their connection to their tradition, some creative thinking may be required in order to maximize and optimize the experience. At the same time, such opportunities have the potential to create lasting memories, shape identities, and nurture the spirit of the next generation.

Endnotes

- 1 Rabbi Mayer Twersky, “And It Happened at Midnight,” Retrieved from: http://Torahweb.org/Torah/1999/moadim/rtwe_pesach.html
- 2 Based on a conversation with R’ Hershel Schachter, it is permissible to give out prizes, provided that they are not muktzeh and could theoretically be used on Yom Tov.
- 3 Of course, this is more suitable for divrei Torah that are prepared in advance. This wouldn’t apply to, nor am I suggesting that it replace, the banter of Torah conversations that naturally occurs when individuals are engaged in meaningful, naturally-flowing exchanges of Torah ideas.
- 4 Rabbi Norman Lamm, April 3, 1969. “Questioning Tradition.” The Jewish Center, Manhattan, NY. Retrieved from: <http://brussels.mc.yu.edu/gsd/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASHf403.dir/doc.pdf>.



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