

**The Methodology
of Teaching the
Pesach Story**
Middle School

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COMPLEX QUESTIONS FOR A COMPLEX AGE

Interested in disengaging your teen at the Seder? Keep it simple. With greater access to the global world, our teens are actually quite broadminded in terms of their critical thinking. By and large, they are interested in shorter talking points but at the same time deep thought provoking questions. The divrei Torah I have selected here are culled from the “pre-Seder” preparations because they challenge the teenager right at

the outset. This is important so that engagement takes place early on.

Each idea I shared can be framed with a more direct question:

An Opening: Do you think Judaism rewards you for just showing up?

No Bread so we can eat Bread: Is there a negative character trait or quality that you possess that you would delete if you could?

They can Find Everything, Except for Chametz! Do you think restraints hinder us or help us develop? What are some examples where they make us stronger?

When the Night Comes Down: Calling people, nations, or things evil does that help or hinder us?

Tough Decisions: Are there any areas of our lives that you would say isn't black and white? What's an issue that

you can easily make the case one way or the other?

Remove the Candle: Should we maintain museums celebrating military victories?

The Little Three: Is there anything you would say you really are jealous of?

An Opening

Up until now, our lives may have been missing something. Limiting mindsets and past failures have discouraged us from taking charge of our destiny. Perhaps we could use a relationship with G-d. But where do we begin? How much work must we do? The Midrash (*Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 5:2) teaches us that G-d says “open for Me an entrance the size of an eye of a needle and I will open for you an entrance the size of a ballroom.” G-d expects us to start the relationship by making some minimal change. What change? Don’t worry. On Pesach, the work on our part may be even easier. In English this holiday is called Passover because G-d passed over the entrances of the Israelites’ tents when meting out retribution upon the Egyptians. The Gerrer Rebbe, the

Sefas Emes, explains that G-d skipping over the entrances is a reference to the entrance mentioned above in the Midrash. On Pesach, G-d passes over or forgoes the need for us to make the first opening. On Pesach we don’t even need to start by opening an entrance for G-d the size of an “eye of a needle.” Just show up, and the opening has begun. The fact that you are reading this d’var Torah, open to life’s possibilities, means that you are ready.

No Bread so we can Eat Bread

The Torah (Devarim 16:8) teaches us that we are supposed to eat matzah for seven days. The mystical sources call matzah the “bread of faith.” On the other hand, regular leavened bread, chametz, which we eat year round, alludes to the shadow side of the human being or the *yetzer harah*. By eating matzah on these seven days, we are somehow ensuring that we are protected from the possible negative spiritual influence of bread the rest of the year. If chametz is symbolically so bad, why do we continue to eat it the rest of the year?

Maimonides in his *Laws of Oaths* 5:20 says that if somebody takes an oath that they’re not going to eat anything for seven days, it is considered meaningless and they have violated the prohibition of swearing for no reason. The reason it is considered a meaningless oath is because in the eyes of Jewish law no one can live for seven days without food. The Chassidic scholar known as the Avnei Nezer says that we see from this statement of Maimonides that in the physical world, seven days can kill. The physical world parallels the spiritual world. Therefore, when we go seven days without chametz, we too can “kill” the negative energy that feeds off chametz. After Pesach is over, we are ready to go back to chametz because at that point we have obliterated the darker symbolism of bread.

They can Find Everything, Except for Chametz!

Legend has it that Reb Levi Yitzchok of Berditchever once asked one of his pupils at the Seder if he could locate some Andalusian tobacco. The student quickly went and came back with the exceptionally rare Andalusian tobacco. The next day the Rav asked another student to bring him some rare Devils Pup-fish. The loyal student came back within fifteen minutes with this precious fish. Then he turned to another trusted student and asked him to find some chametz, any chametz anywhere. The student searched and searched and couldn’t find a single bit of chametz. Reb Levi Yitzchak, who was always known as the great defender of the Jewish people, cried out to the Heavens, “G-d look at your people, they are always able to find anything anywhere like nobody

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else can, but if you ask them to find a morsel of chametz in their homes on Pesach — no way, no Jew can find it.”

The laws of proper Pesach observance are complicated and detailed. There seem to be so many limitations.

Judaism recognizes that constraints, when understood properly, enable creativity. Without constraints the options are unlimited and in that blinding way nothing gets done. But when we work within the framework of the Seder — with all of its measurements and restricted recipes — we learn to create a symphony of ideas and dialogues.

When the Night Comes Down

The formal search for chametz begins the night before Pesach. At night, we commence our search and the next morning we begin to burn the crumbs. Why do we wait until the morning to burn our chametz? Reb Yisroel of Rizhin says that it reflects the reality of the world as it is. We don't have the power to entirely eradicate evil. But we must try. And sometimes the best that we can do is recognize what is good and what is bad. That is the significance of the search at night. It is our attempt to call out the dark. But one day, once upon a not-to-distant future, when the night comes down and day breaks, then we will be able to banish the darkness forever.

Tough Decisions

Chametz happens when we wait too long and allow our bread to rise.

Isn't patience a virtue? The Stichiner Rebbe says that the notion of waiting too long when it comes to chametz alludes to our indecisiveness. Should we eat it as matzah or should we eat it as bread? We were wishy-washy. This deliberation finds its root in primordial man eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Before we ate from the tree we knew what was right and what was wrong. We intuited the correct behaviors. The moment we partook of the tree, all of our decisions going forward become a battle ground. Should I or shouldn't I? Burning chametz is our attempt to restore clarity.

Remove the Candle

After the search for chametz, the custom is to burn the bread and to burn the searching candle as well. Why do we burn the candle? Even if it may have touched a little bit of the bread, that wouldn't make a difference because chametz is not transferred this way. Rebbe Chaim Meir Hager of Vizhnitz refers back to a concept we mentioned previously, that chametz symbolizes our darker impulse. It follows that the search for chametz ritualizes our introspective search for the shadow side of ourselves in order to expel it. Within this schema, the candle's main function is to assist in looking for the darkness within. The Vizhnitzer Rebbe says that any device whose main function is to exploit or expose evil needs should be destroyed as soon as we are finished using it. In thinking of a proper analogy,

surveillance comes to mind. A limited curbing of our freedom is acceptable if it's going to promote greater safety. But once the primary threat has been dealt with, invasive surveillance quickly becomes the enemy. One more analogy. The surgeon may use a scalpel to fissure out diseased bacteria. Once the problem has been neutralized, the surgical equipment is discarded because it now may carry the infection.

The Little Three

We are obligated to check every hole, nook and cranny. In every corner of our homes we need to look for chametz. In Jewish numerology the value of chametz is 138. The numerical value of matzah is 135. The difference between them is 3. What does the 3 stand for? Reb Yankele Galinsky says that the 3 symbolizes the three ill character traits that remove a person from this world (*Pirkei Avos* 4:21) — jealousy, thirst for honor, and lust. That's the difference, that little 3. Those three struggles are exactly what we are trying to eliminate.

What is specific in our battle against jealousy, chasing honor, and lust? All three problems express a will to have something beyond what is ours. It reflects a lack of faith in the crucial notion that everything we need is right in front of us.



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