

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

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## TRANSFORMING YOUR SEDER INTO THE IDEAL EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Every year, as we prepare for the Pesach Seder, we think about what we could do to make *“this night different from all of the other nights.”* To some, the Haggadah seems like a dry and drawn-out document full of unrelated details. On a night when we should be talking about *yetzias Mitzrayim*, some feel like they are spending an inordinate amount of time talking about ancillary events in Jewish history.

Therefore, every year, as we come closer and closer to the month of Nissan, many of us make an internal commitment to transform the upcoming Seder into the best one the children have ever attended. The question is — how?

As we look back at Parashas Bo and the early stage of Bnei Yisrael’s

journey to freedom, Moshe Rabbeinu continuously addresses the Jewish nation, focusing on the children and their education.

וְהָיָה כִּי יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֵבֶדָה  
הַזֹּאת לָכֶם. וְאָמַרְתֶּם זָבַח פֶּסַח הוּא לֵה' אֲשֶׁר  
פָּסַח עַל בְּתֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת  
מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת בְּתֵינֵנוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד הָעַם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ.  
*When you enter the land that HaShem will give you as He promised, observe this ceremony. And when your children say to you, “What does this ceremony mean to you?” then tell them, “It is the Pesach sacrifice to HaShem, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our home when He struck down the Egyptians ...”*

**Shemos 12:26-27**

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה  
ה' לִי בְצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם.

*On that day tell your son, “I do this*

*because of what HaShem did for me when I came out of Egypt.”*

**Shemos 13:8**

וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁאֶלְךָ בִּנְךָ מָחָר לֵאמֹר מָה זֹאת  
וְאָמַרְתָּ אֵלָיו בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם  
מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים.

*In days to come, when your son asks you, “What does this mean?” say to him, “With a mighty hand HaShem brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”*

**Shemos 13:14**

Moshe’s messages seem quite clear. Education is the key to ensuring that the lessons and the ideals of *yetzias Mitzrayim* are not lost. To meet that goal, Seder night has to be converted into an educational environment.

Thus, it pays for us to look at some of the criteria used to measure a successfully run classroom.

### **A. An effective classroom lesson and environment begins with the culture of the room.**

The teacher must establish the classroom as a pleasant and inviting environment.

The most inviting classrooms are decorated with posters and educational materials that correlate with what the children are learning. The decor helps students learn and gives teachers visual aids that enhance the learning. Like the classroom, for the sake of the children, the Seder table should not look like an ordinary Shabbos or Yom Tov table. While some have traditionally pursued the very elegant look, the Seder table, and the entire room, for that matter, could be transformed to reinforce all of the messages of the evening: the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Sea, the Four Sons, the Four Cups, the Exodus. All of these concepts can be used to develop a decorative theme in the dining room.

### **B. It should be a place where the teacher recognizes and accepts individual differences.**

In elementary schools we often find assigned roles and responsibilities in the classroom. There is the line leader, the door holder, the snack helper and the board eraser. The same should hold true for the Seder. Each child should have a role in the Seder. A child can pick who is going to say the next dvar Torah. A child can decide who will fill whose cups with wine. A child can be assigned to call on people to read. This is truly ideal for those children who can't participate in the textual part of the Seder in a meaningful way.

There should be different Haggadahs to choose from. The younger children need Haggadahs with pictures while the older children may value

the Haggadahs with questions and answers attached to text.

Younger children should be seated next to someone who can assist them, guide them, and keep them focused.

### **C. The lesson begins by giving the students clear instructions and stating the desired quality of work.**

The Seder always begins by singing the stages of the "Seder." It is at that point where we state our expectations for the evening. However, to raise the bar a little more, we could begin the Seder with questions that will be answered over the course of the evening. The questions can be general, such as, "How many times is the number four presented in the Haggadah?" to more thought-provoking, like, "When and why is Rabbi Akiva brought into the Pesach Seder story?"

### **D. The teacher must do whatever possible to ensure that everyone is paying attention, and begin with a highly motivating activity.**

Stories or midrashim that highlight the actual redemption are ideal. This is what the children came to the table to discuss! The "parsha questions" from Shemos, Va'era, Bo and Beshalach can be used, and themed treats handed out to those who know the answers. The key is to remember that children want to be active and involved. Costumes or role playing can bring the experience to life! The child can be responsible for arguing the positions of R. Akiva, R. Eliezer and R. Yosi HaGelili on the strength of the Plagues. Finally, depending on how the room is decorated, children can be invited to view the visual aids during the Seder, as in the classroom.

### **E. The children's attention is sustained by varying who is called on, using appropriate pacing,**

### **reinforcing their efforts with praise and showing enthusiasm in their delivery.**

The leader of the Seder must be wise in determining how to involve the children and how quickly the group reads the Haggadah. It is valuable to read some portions slowly with explanations, while other portions should be read and moved through at a quicker pace.

Here are some sample divrei Torah<sup>(\*)</sup> that will meet the needs of elementary school children. There is a halacha that we must start preparing for Pesach thirty days in advance. Our Pesach preparations should include every parent preparing what to share at the Seder table. It's important to spend time looking at the Haggadahs designed for children to gather ideas.

### **2nd & 3rd Grade The Makkos: Measure-for-Measure (Middah K'neged Middah)**

HaShem punished the Mitzrim based on how they made the lives of the Jewish people miserable. How do each of the makkos relate to what the Mitzrim did?

- **Blood/Dam:** The Mitzrim killed many Jews and drowned the boys in the Nile.
- **Frogs/Tz'farde'a:** The Mitzrim hollered and screamed at Bnei Yisrael, never letting them rest.
- **Lice/Kinim:** Bnei Yisrael were forced to clean and sweep the dirty streets in Mitzrayim.
- **Wild Animals/Arov:** Bnei Yisrael had to hunt wild animals for the pleasure of the Mitzrim.
- **Death of Animals/Dever:** Bnei Yisrael were sent to the deserts and mountains to shepherd the Egyptians' animals.

- **Boils/Shechin:** The Mitzrim would beat Bnei Yisrael until their bodies were covered with blisters.
- **Hail/Barad:** Bnei Yisrael were forced to plant crops and orchards for the Mitzrim.
- **Locust/Arbeh:** Then these crops were battered by the hail and consumed by the locusts.
- **Darkness/Choshech:** The Mitzrim darkened the lives of the Jewish people.
- **Death of the First Born/Makkas Bechoros:** The Mitzrim enslaved Bnei Yisrael whom HaShem called “My first born.”

### Dayenu and Gratitude

When we say “Dayenu,” “it would have been enough for us,” do we mean to say that leaving Mitzrayim would have been enough for us? How can we imagine not having received the Torah or Eretz Yisrael and all other acts of kindness HaShem did for us?!

What we are really saying here is that any of these gifts would have been enough to make us sing praise to HaShem. How much more grateful we must be that HaShem has given us all of these precious gifts.

### Mah Nishtanah and the Four Cups

Question: Why aren't the Four Cups mentioned in the Mah Nishtanah?

**Answer #1:** Abarbanel and R. Lazer Ginzburg suggest that the four questions of Mah Nishtanah are really one question. The children see contradictions at the Seder table and they want to understand them. Two concepts (matzah and maror) symbolize *avdus* (slavery) and two concepts (reclining and dipping) symbolize *cheirus* (freedom). We answer the question with *Avadim*

*Hayinu* — “we were slaves” but “HaShem took us out...” The wine of the Four Cups doesn't represent either one exclusively. Both wealthy people and poor people, happy people and sad people drink wine. Therefore, the wine is not included in Mah Nishtanah.

**Answer #2:** Chasam Sofer suggests that the four questions of Mah Nishtanah all refer to items that have already been seen at the Seder table (either actually performed or set out on the table). The children see the matzah on the table and know we have rid our homes of chametz. They see the maror sitting in front of them, they have already dipped the karpas in water, and everyone has already leaned to the left while drinking the cup of wine at Kiddush. Thus, when Mah Nishtanah is recited, the children have only seen the first cup of wine at Kiddush. Having wine on the table is not unusual at a Yom Tov meal. That is why it isn't included in the four questions.

### The Ten Plagues

Question: Why do we pour out a little wine when mentioning the Ten Plagues?

**Answer #1:** The Vilna Gaon suggests that the removal of the wine from the cup highlights the fact that after each plague the Egyptians lost a little bit more of their strength, power and ability to resist.

**Answer #2:** As we came out of the Yam Suf, we were dealing with two very different emotions. On the one hand, we desired to praise HaShem for saving us. On the other hand, we had compassion for those who perished. We spill some wine at the Seder to recall HaShem's instruction to the angels that they should not sing as the Egyptians were drowning in the sea.

Why do we begin and end the Haggadah in Aramaic (*Ha Lachma Anya* and *Chad Gadya*)?

Aramaic is not understood by the angels. Usually we want angels to help our prayers go to Heaven, but tonight we start the Haggadah with Aramaic to show that we speak directly to HaShem, not through angels. Hashem is here at our Seder listening to every word we say! (*Emes L'Yaakov*)

### Mah Nishtanah Halayla Haze?

The term *layla*, night, is a sign of *tza'ar* (hardships) and exile. We ask: How is this night — this exile — different from all other nights — from all other exiles?

If we take a trip from New York to Eretz Yisrael, although the trip will take many hours, it is manageable since we know how long it should take. However, if we were to get on a plane not knowing the destination, the trip would seem very long and a lot less manageable since it appears that there is no end in sight!

Similarly, with all of the other exiles, we knew the length of the exile and it was therefore more manageable. However, we have been in this exile for over 2,000 years and we have no idea when Mashiach will finally come, bringing it to an end. And that is exactly what makes this exile different and much harder than any previous exile — it appears as though there is no end in sight! Still, the greatness of the Jewish people is that we await Mashiach each and every day as if we know exactly when he is coming.

### Dayenu

Question: Why are HaShem's acts of kindness referred to as “*ma'alos*” (levels)?

Answer #1: Abarbanel suggests that these acts were “above and beyond” what was necessary to simply redeem the Jewish people from Egypt. They went beyond what was promised to Avraham Avinu.

Answer #2: Maharal suggests that of the 15 items, each one is greater than the one before it. That is why they are called “*ma'alos*,” which is the word used for stairs.

## **Baruch Shomer Havtachaso — Blessed is the One Who Keeps His Promise.**

Why are we praising HaShem for keeping His promise? We just mentioned that He was the one who sent us down into slavery. What are we thanking Him for?

HaRav Mordechai Willig once answered this question with a *mashal*: Imagine two classmates fighting and as a result, one falls, hits his head and has to be sent to the hospital. We would think that he would be mad at his classmate for the injury. However, while in the hospital, doctors discover that he has a more significant illness that would not have been detected early enough to treat had he not been sent to the hospital by his friend.

This is what the Jewish People went through. We were suffering from an “illness,” a *tumah*, and didn’t know it. If HaShem didn’t put us through the *avdus* to purify ourselves, who knows what would have happened to us?

### **5th Grade The Rasha**

Question: Why is the Rasha’s question considered wicked?

Answer #1: Abarbanel suggests that the problem is his use of the word “*mah ha’vodah hazos lachem*,” which

could be translated as “what is this service by you.” The Rasha is implying that the mitzvos were established by **man** and not HaShem. This further implies that not only were they inspired by man and that there are no *eidos*, *chukim* or *mishpatim* — laws, ordinances and statutes — but they were created for our own self-interests. The korban Pesach is not a service, but rather an excuse to eat meat.

Answer #2: The Malbim suggests that the Rasha views mitzvos as “*avodah*” — hard work, a burden.

## **Chad Gadya**

At the end of the Haggadah, we sing *echad Elokeino shebashamayim uva’aretz* — our Lord is One on Heaven and Earth — followed immediately by a seemingly violent and almost senseless tale. What possible message can the story of *Chad Gadya* provide and why is it in the Haggadah? Furthermore, what is the significance of praising the oneness of HaShem and then immediately transitioning to *Chad Gadya*?

On Shabbos, we sing a beautiful prayer that seems inherently contradictory.

אֵין כְּאַלְקֵינוּ, אֵין כְּאַדְוֹנֵינוּ, אֵין כְּמַלְכֵנוּ,  
אֵין כְּמוֹשֵׁיעֵנוּ. מִי כְּאַלְקֵינוּ, מִי כְּאַדְוֹנֵינוּ, מִי  
כְּמַלְכֵנוּ, מִי כְּמוֹשֵׁיעֵנוּ. נוֹדָה לְאַלְקֵינוּ, נוֹדָה  
לְאַדְוֹנֵינוּ, נוֹדָה לְמַלְכֵנוּ, נוֹדָה לְמוֹשֵׁיעֵנוּ.

*There is no one like our Lord ... Who is like our Lord ...*

What does it mean that we initially say there is no one like HaShem, yet the very next question is Who is like HaShem, as if there is a possible answer to that? Are we proclaiming his oneness or are we doubting it?

Rav Moshe Tuvia Lieff explains that this teaches us a very valuable life lesson. When we are sitting at our

Seder table rejoicing with our family and enjoying Yom Tov, it is easy for us to declare and praise the oneness of HaShem. We have just spent an entire evening reflecting on the many miracles displayed on our behalf and instructing our children to remember these miracles and the statutes that come from within our Torah.

However, after we get up from our Seder, and “regular” life settles back in, there are times in our daily routine that seem senseless and chaotic, times when it is harder for us to see and declare *echad Elokeino shebashamayim uva’aretz*. Jews as a whole have suffered throughout history. Individuals go through many challenges in their lives. We see instances of righteous people suffering within our communities.

The job of a Jew is to constantly declare and recall Ein K’Elokeinu or *echad Elokeino shebashamayim uva’aretz*. Even when questions arise and there are instances in life that lead us to ask why, we must never forget that there is no G-d like HaShem, and that He is One in the Heavens and Earth.

We end our Seder reminding our children that life is like an EKG. It is full of ups and downs, and that is fine. What is not good is when life is a straight line. That is tantamount to death. So even when things aren’t going as we planned or hoped, *echad Elokeino shebashamayim uva’aretz*, HaShem is watching over us and doing what is best for us. May we merit to see the goodness in our lives and rejoice in the final redemption, *b’mheira b’yameinu*.

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