



THE POWER OF MOMENTS THROUGH NIRTZAH AND THE STEPS OF THE SEDER

One of my favorite parts of the Leil Seder is the Nirtzah experience. Whether it's the resounding L'Shana Haba'a preceded by Chasal Siddur Pesach (cue Abie Rotenberg's tune), or Chad Gadya replete with sound effects for each stanza, I have fond memories as a child staying up well past my bedtime, singing together around the table with family and friends. It was almost a rite of passage to see who from the family could remain awake until the end (not only kids, there were adults falling asleep on the couches too!). So why do we have this section of Nirtzah (or post-Nirtzah¹) at the end? What purpose does it serve, other than as an opportunity for a few more songs

and a chance to stretch out the Seder a few more minutes (because you know that's what everyone will be talking about in shul the next day — whose Seder went the latest)?

While we're at it, let's rewind to the beginning of the Seder for a second. Many families start off by singing the fifteen steps of the Seder: "Kadesh, U'rchatz, Karpas, Yachatz..." (cue the tune almost everyone learns in kindergarten). Why do we start the Seder that way? Granted, every Friday night we begin the meal with songs (Shalom Aleichem and Eishes Chayil), but Pesach night this is a song whose words seem to have little more meaning than opening a road map and listing the names of the cities you're

about to drive through! So why do we make such a big deal about it?

Truth be told, Nirtzah doesn't even appear in the earlier Haggadahs of the Geonim² and early Rishonim.³ Instead, their Haggadah ends with Hallel and *Nishmas*. It's only in the works of later Ashkenazi Rishonim (e.g. Maharam M'Rotenberg in *Tashbetz Katan*, Rabbi Israel Isserlain — the Terumas HaDeshen — whose practices are recorded in *Leket Yosher*) where we begin to find several Nirtzah piyutim like *Ki Lo Naeh* and *Ometz Bigevurosecha*.⁴ This only strengthens our original question — what was so special about Nirtzah that these piyyutim were added at the end of the original Seder? Also, why do most

people have the custom to sing these *piyyutim* of Nirtzah? Finally, in the Arizal's siddur, there is a special *Lshem Yichud* to say before reciting Nirtzah, which is meant to help focus our thoughts on the mitzvah about to be performed. At this point, after having already basically finished the whole Seder and the mitzvos of Pesach night, what's the point of the *Lshem Yichud*?⁵

The Power of Moments: The "Peak-End Rule"

Several years ago, Dan and Chip Heath wrote a *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Power of Moments*, where they tried to understand what organically makes moments in our lives memorable, and how we can manually engineer situations to replicate the process and create memorable moments. They break it down into four

categories (see sidebar), the first of which is *Elevation*. One such example of elevating a moment is what is referred to as the "Peak-End Rule." The Heath brothers present the following example: Imagine a family that goes to Disney World for the day and is asked to rate every hour on a scale of 1 to 10. As they leave the hotel room with the kids, and the anticipation and excitement build, they rate it a 6. They ride Space Mountain, everyone has a blast; it's a 10. They wait in line in 100-degree weather for an hour; it's a 2. Finally, as they head out of the park, they buy the kids Mickey ears; it's a Kodak moment that will go in the Bat Mitzvah slideshow, an 8. On average, their day appears to have been a 6.5 rating. However, if we ask this family several weeks later how they would rate their Disney trip, they would most likely rate it a 9! Why? Because the

Peak-End Rule research proposes "that in recalling an experience, we ignore most of what happened and focus instead on a few particular moments... rating the experience based on two key moments: (1) the best or worst moment, known as the "peak"; and (2) the ending."⁶ They also note the importance of beginnings,⁷ with 40% of a person's college memories coming from events in the month of September (i.e. the beginning of the school year).⁸ In other words, transition times are most ripe for creating moments and lasting memories, be it in a job, life cycle events, or the beginning and end of the Seder.

Nirtzah in Jewish Thought

Most of the Seder steps clearly describe their intention: Kiddush — we make Kiddush, Magid —

The Power of Moments: 8 Ideas to Create Moments at Your Seder

In their *New York Times* bestselling book, *The Power of Moments*, Chip and Dan Heath share four methods for creating moments in our lives. (Shared with permission from the Heath Brothers, *The Power of Moments 1 Page Summary* (EPIC) Resource at <https://heathbrothers.com>)

ELEVATION: Moments of elevation are experiences that rise above the routine. They make us feel engaged, joyful, surprised, motivated. To create them, we can (1) boost the sensory appeal; (2) raise the stakes; and/or (3) break the script.

INSIGHT: Moments of insight deliver realizations and transformations. To produce moments of insight for others, we can cause them to "trip over the truth" by revealing (1) a clear insight; and (2) is discovered by the audience on their own.

PRIDE: Moments of pride commemorate people's achievements. We can use three strategies to deliver pride: (1) Recognize others; (2) Multiply meaningful milestones — reframe a long journey so that it features multiple "finish lines"; and (3) Practice courage by

"preloading" our responses in advance, so we're ready when the right moment comes.

CONNECTION: Moments of connection bond us together. Groups unite when they struggle together toward a meaningful goal. A responsive interaction can bring people together very quickly.

Applying these methods (listed parenthetically after each entry), here are 8 ideas for you to try at your Seder to create moments:

1. Kittel-Bearing Ceremony: The Baal HaSeder wearing a *kittel* is often a wasted opportunity to create a moment. Yes, one reason it's there is to get children to ask questions, but instead of coming in already wearing the *kittel*, appoint a child as "kittel bearer" and have them bring it in folded on a pillow, with the rest of the Seder members singing a tune (e.g. humming a tune from Sheva Brachos or the song of the Seder steps). (elevation)

2. Grandparent Pesach Facts Research: Come up with 4 questions (it is Seder night after all) for Seder

we tell a story, Hallel — we praise Hashem. But what about Nirtzah? Most mefarshim interpret it to mean “acceptance” or “atonement” (see Yeshayahu 40:2), yet it can also mean “we want.” Other than maybe wanting to go to sleep, what is it that we are supposed to want at this point of the Seder night?

In order to understand the purpose of Nirtzah, let’s examine several explanations surrounding this step of the Seder.

Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov teaches:

סיימנו את הסדר. אבל האם באמת סיימנו?
האם יכול האדם אי-פעם להתחיל לעשות דבר
כלשהו למען הבורא האינוסופי? או האם הוא
יכול רק לרצות כך לעשות? ה' מבקש את
הלב. אנחנו מבקשים את ה'. רוצים לעבוד
אותו, אך יודעים שאין במעשינו די.
*We have finished the Seder. But have
we finished? Can man ever begin to do*

*anything for the Infinite Creator? Or
can we only want to? God desires the
heart. We desire God. We want to serve
Him, but we know that our actions are
inadequate.*⁹

According to this, Nirtzah is not about appeasing Hashem (having gone through the *Seder k'hilchaso*), as it is more commonly translated; instead, it is about leaving this night wanting more, continuing to grow, and developing our relationship with Hashem. This is not the end, but the beginning, and we hope this moment stays with us and propels us higher as the year unfolds.^{10 11} In a similar vein, the Baal HaTanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, did not include the paragraph of *Chasal Siddur Pesach* (literally, “the end of the Seder”) in his Haggadah, because he felt the message and impact of the Seder doesn’t end, but continues on throughout the

year.¹²

Alternatively, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook¹³ notes that many of the Seder steps are written in imperative grammar form, *tzivui* (e.g. Kadesh, Urchatz, Yachatz, Bareich), yet Nirtzah is written in the passive form, *nifal*.¹⁴ Why? What can we learn from this?

By the end of the Seder we have hopefully gone through an internal transformation and have achieved great heights of *kedusha* and *cheirus*, to the extent that we can now even passively feel the holiness around us. We are completely enveloped by the moment, and singing the lofty *piyutim* praising Hashem helps amplify the experience and become more attuned to Hashem’s involvement in the world.¹⁵

One final thought on Nirtzah from

participants to ask their grandparents, parent or other family member in advance to then share at the Seder. Sample questions: Favorite Pesach food, favorite part of the Seder, favorite Seder song, a Pesach memory as child. (connection)

3. Seder Memory Round Robin: This is an alternative to #2 for those of us less organized or who have adults and multiple families joining the Seder. Have each member at the Seder share a Seder memory. Can be done before each step of the Seder, all at once during dinner, or interspersed in Maggid. (connection)

4. Pictures of Family on the Table: Seder night is a time of family gathering, but there are often family members logistically unable to attend or unfortunately no longer with us. Printing out or placing pictures of these members on the Seder table or sharing something about the person you were named after creates family connection and can be a trigger to share family stories. (connection)

5. Using Only Hebrew Names for Place Cards: One of the reasons listed for the Jews meriting redemption from Egypt was their steadfastness in keeping their Jewish names. Especially powerful elevation (think breaking the

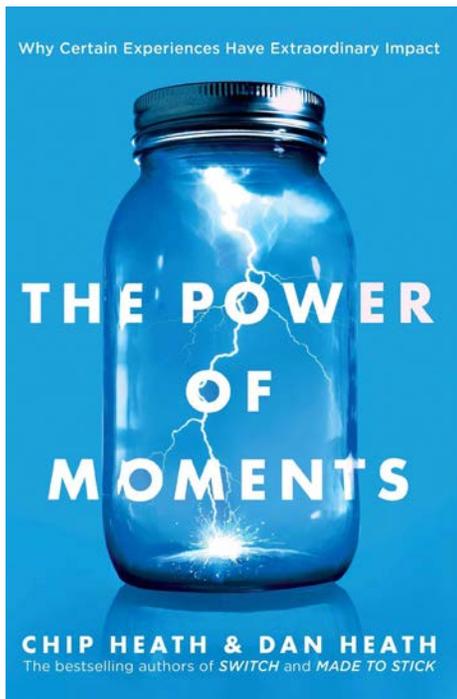
script) for those who don’t regularly go by their Hebrew name. (pride, elevation)

6. Seder Soapbox: Everyone likes to have their 15 minutes of fame (although Seder night we try to limit it to two minutes!). Have a shtender or other makeshift pulpit so they feel special when sharing a Dvar Torah at the Seder. (pride)

7. Practice Songs Ahead: The tunes of the Seder are just as much a part of a family’s mesora, and not all children know the different songs (especially younger children). On Shabbos HaGadol, sing some of your family’s tunes at the Shabbos table to familiarize them with your favorites. (pride)

8. Pesach Personalities: Give out names of different people mentioned in the Haggadah or Pesach story for Seder participants to research in advance and share an interesting fact, insight or Dvar Torah related to that person. (insight, pride)

These ideas were created with the goal of engaging children, however many are transferable for all ages and audiences. Thank you to Rabbi Dovid Bashevkin and my father Rabbi Stuart Lavenda for help with some of these ideas.



By breaking the script, and changing the way people expect something to occur, it creates “strategic surprise” and elevates the moment making it memorable. Examples during the Seder are: the Mah Nishtana and the questions they represent, the lifting up of the wine and covering/uncovering of the matzah, the Yachatz breaking of the middle matzah and putting part of it away.

Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik. The Rav highlights the comparison between the word “*nirtzah*,” the last step of the Seder, and “*nirtzah*” as it appears in the Torah (Vayikra 1:4) regarding the sacrifices in the Temple: “*v’nirtzah lo l’chaper alav*” — that it will be pleasing to God. Similarly, in the daily Amidah, we have the prayer of Retzei, which comes from the same root as *nirtzah*. That bracha

of Shmoneh Esrei also speaks of our hope of returning to the Temple and our service to Hashem. In concluding this thought of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s, Rabbi Aaron Goldscheider writes:

*We mark the final step of Seder night by using this unique term, Nirtzah, which is meant to stir our soul with a feeling of longing for Zion and our hopeful vision of celebrating the festival of Passover in all of its splendor in Jerusalem, with a rebuilt Temple. How fitting it is that the Seder then follows and culminates with the soaring words L’Shana Haba’a b’Yerushalayim.*¹⁶

Rav Soloveitchik, too, connects the conclusion of the Seder and *Nirtzah* as a means of awakening latent emotions and elevating the Seder to leave us with a memorable experience to carry with us throughout the year, and really every day, recalled through the memory trigger of Retzei in the Shemoneh Esrei.

Back to the Beginning: Breaking the Script

Let’s go back now to the beginning of the Seder and the recital of the Seder steps (Kadesh, Urchatz, Karpas, etc.). Rabbi Alexander Ziskind writes in *Yesod Shores V’Avodah* that we should say aloud each of the steps of the Seder because they contain deep and lofty Kabbalistic meaning.¹⁷ Perhaps this is the source for the custom so many of us have to sing the steps of the Seder together at the beginning, to ensure that everyone metaphysically taps in to the mystical meaning the words represent, whether we realize it or not. However, returning to *The Power of Moments*, we could offer another explanation based on a different technique of elevating the moment — “Breaking the Script.”

The Heath brothers write¹⁸ that a script is “*our expectations of a stereotypical experience... [and] explains how our brains store and access knowledge.*”¹⁹ By breaking that script, and changing the way people expect something to occur, it creates “strategic surprise” and elevates the moment making it memorable.²⁰ This is essentially the reason behind many of our actions Seder night, to break the script! Here are just two examples from the Gemara and Rishonim:

למה עוקרין את השולחן אמרי דבי ר' ינאי
כדי שיכירו תינוקות וישאלו.

Why do we uproot the table? The House of Rabbi Yanai said in order that children will see and ask questions.

Pesachim 115b

ואמאי מטבלי תרי זימני כדי שיראו התינוקות
וישאלו.

And why do we dip two times? In order that the children will see and ask questions.

Rif, Pesachim 25a

Other examples of “breaking the script” during the Seder are: the Mah Nishtana and the questions they represent, the lifting up of the wine and covering/uncovering of the matzah, the Yachatz breaking of the middle matzah and putting part of it away, and so many more familiar actions. These are all programmed within the Seder night to get the children’s attention, using strategic surprise and elevating the Seder experience. Perhaps the same can be said of singing the Seder steps together at the beginning. It’s an unusual way to begin a meal, to sing a song before Kiddush, but as we mentioned above, there is precedent from Shabbos night. However, the song of the Seder steps, singing the steps of the journey we are about to embark on, is using strategic surprise

and breaks the script.²¹ Coupled with the fact it's the beginning, and is already ripe for elevation, singing the Seder steps helps set the tone for the whole Seder, creating a memorable night.²² The same holds true for the end of the Seder. Just when we thought the Seder was over — we ate the matzah, we recited Birkas HaMazon and Hallel, drank the four cups of wine and even sang L'Shana Haba'a B'Yerushalayim, a song that usually marks the end — the Seder is not over. We go “off script” and sing a few *piyyutim*, concluding with one about a goat that was eaten by a cat who was then bitten by a dog. This is the ultimate strategic surprise.

Leaving the Kotel, Leaving the Seder

*Rabbi Eliyahu Pardes was the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem in 1967 during the Six Day War. He remembered roaming the alleyways and Kotel area as a youth and yearned to return. As soon as he heard those fateful words of Motta Gur, “Har Habayit Bayadeinu!” he rushed out to return to the Kotel. When he arrived, he ran to the wall, first kissing the stones, and feeling the familiar, comforting touch on his hands, and finally choked out a heartfelt Shehechyanu blessing. After spending an hour in prayer, Rabbi Pardes slowly walked backward away from the wall, never turning his gaze away. He paused, eyes wandering over the bushes and cooing pigeons, as if they had never left the wall. He wanted to remain longer, just as he had years ago as a child, but his attendants urged him along. Rabbi Pardes broke away, running back to the Kotel to give it one more kiss, and then once again slowly made his way walking backwards, his eyes never leaving the Kotel.*²³

Nirtzah is our leaving the Kotel backwards. That one last turning around and looking at the Kotel on our way out, after once again going through the familiar Seder from years past, to elevate the moment as we end the sacred night. May this year's Pesach be one where we create moments and lasting memories, breaking the script to add to the family narrative, and elevating the end to leave the taste of Pesach fresh in our minds, and our hearts, throughout the year.²⁴

Endnotes

1 See Rav Moshe Yaakov Weingarten's *HaSeder He'Aruch* Vol. III pg. 359, for a discussion about what part of the Seder “Nirtzah” actually includes, if any part at all.

2 For example: Rav Amram Gaon, Rav Saadiah Gaon, Rav Natronai Gaon.

3 For example: Rashi, *Machzor Vitri*, Rambam.

4 Rav Yosef Zvi Rimon, *Haggadah Shel Pesach Shiras Miriam* (Hebrew), Yerushalayim 5771 p. 368. As an aside, in *Leket Yosher* Rav Israel Isserlain's practice seems to have been to recite these *piyyutim* before the fourth cup and then *Adir Hu* was recited together with what we call Nirtzah.

5 Rav Elimelech Biderman, *Haggadah Shel Pesach Be'er Miriam*, p. 263.

6 *The Power of Moments*, Dan and Chip Heath, 2017, p. 6-8

7 This is also essentially the concept of *hischadshus*, any time we get something new or start a new activity, there is an extra excitement and energy surrounding the beginning.

8 Ibid., p. 9, based on research by David B. Pillemer, *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories: How Unforgettable Moments Help Us Understand the Meaning of Our Lives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000. p.126.

9 Hebrew taken from *Haggadah Shel Pesach MiToraso Shel Rebbe Nachman MiBreslov*. English from *The Breslov Haggadah*.

10 See Sivan Rahav Meir, “*HaLaila SheBo Nolda HaCheirus*,” available at, <http://leeba.org.il/7083>, who alerted me to the comment of Rebbe Nachman's piece and explains his comment this way.

11 Perhaps this is also demonstrated by singing L'Shana Haba'a B'Yerushalayim at the beginning of Nirtzah, immediately looking ahead to carry the hope of this night with us as we look to the future.

12 Rav Ron Sarid, *Nesivos HaChasidus — Pesach*, Divrei Shir.

13 *Haggadah Shel Pesach*, Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook pg. 63.

14 Rav Rimon, p.369.

15 Rav Rimon, *ibid*.

16 Rav Aaron Goldscheider, *The Night that Unites Haggadah*. Urim Publications, 2014. p. 254.

17 *Yesod VeShores HaAvodah*, Chovas HaMoados 9:6.

18 Based on research by Roger Schank and Robert Abelson written up in their 1977 book *Scripts, Plans and Knowledge*.

19 *The Power of Moments*, Dan and Chip Heath, 2017, p. 70-71.

20 Ibid. 71-72.

21 After completing this article, I came across a similar idea in Rav Moshe Yehuda Katz's *Vayaged Moshe* no. 14, to say all the steps of the Seder in the beginning “to make sure that the children are aware of everything that will happen this night.”

22 This could also explain why we continue to note or sing the individual Seder steps throughout the night. Not only is it another beginning (of that individual step), but it provides peaks throughout the night which refer back to that initial burst of “creating moments” energy at the beginning of the Seder.

23 From <http://www.chabad.org.il/Magazines/Article.asp?ArticleID=2049&CategoryID=687>, based on a biography of Rabbi Pardes by Menachem Michelson.

24 Thank you to all family and friends who reviewed the article in advance.