



SIMCHAT SHMUEL

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PESACH



Perhaps my earliest memory of our family's annual *Pesach Sedarim*, was the daunting moment when I was called upon to recite for the first time, the *Ma Nishtana*, the segment of the *Haggadah* text commonly referred to as the "Four Questions." This year (More than 40 years since my personal four questions debut), I look forward to once again hearing those very same words from my adorable nine year old daughter .

What exactly is the origin of the custom for the youngest child who is capable of reciting this section of the *Haggadah*? Might there be a specific educational and pedagogic rationale for this long standing tradition?

The *Mishna* in *Pesachim* (116 A), introduces the basic premise for our familiar custom:

"Mozgo lo kos sheini, v'kaan haben shoel Aviv. V'im ein daat b'ven, Aviv melamdo- ma nishtana halaila hazeh, mikol haleilot... ulefi daato shel ben, Aviv melamdo..."

"A second cup of wine is poured and the child should then inquire of his father (the reasons for the Seder ritual). If the child is intellectually incapable of doing this, the father is bound to instruct him as follows: 'What differentiates this night from all other nights...?' A father should instruct the child in accordance with his capacity to understand..."

It seems from this teaching that upon pouring the second of the four cups of wine, a child should ask regarding the purpose of the many aspects of the *Seder*. If the child is not intellectually capable to ask those questions then his father should demonstrate for him,

meaning he should recite the *Ma Nishtana* text to instruct his child in the proper *Seder* protocol, and should in general begin to cultivate the curiosity of the child, and engage the child in a manner that is consistent with his capacity to understand.

Our *Chazal* explain this teaching further:

Tanu Rabanan: Chacham beno, shoelu, v'im eno chacham, ishto shoeloto. V'im lav, hu shoel l'atzmo, v'afilu shnei talmidei chachamim, sheyodiin b'hilchot haPesach shoelin zeh lazeh..."

"The rabbis taught: One whose child is intellectually capable, should be asked by his child; if the child is not capable, the wife should inquire, and if the wife is not capable, he himself should ask those questions; and even if two scholars who are well versed in the laws of the Pesach should sit together at the Pesach-meal, one should ask the other the above questions..."

The Sages introduce a new wrinkle to this entire teaching. Ideally we should be asked by our children, but if no child present is capable of asking, or if there is no child present, then the adults should still ask these questions of each other!

Perhaps, then there is an important educational idea being introduced through this teaching. Even if no child is present, we as adults still must ask these questions, to reiterate the value of verbalizing a question, of articulating our intellectual curiosity. One cannot truly grow intellectually if he/she does not have the capacity to seek, inquire and probe, to look for answers and

understanding. The mechanism of the question is perhaps the most vital and fundamental of pedagogical tools.

The **Rambam** also addresses this Talmudic teaching in two entries in his *Hilchot Chametz UMatza*.

In Chapter 7 (the third entry):

“V'tzarich laasot shinui balayla hazeh, kidei sherau habanim, veyishaalu, v'yamru 'Ma nishtana halayla hazeh mikol haleilot'...”

“It is necessary to make changes on this night (the many rituals which are unique to the Seder evening), in order that the children will notice these differences, and ask saying: ‘What differentiates this night from all other nights?’...”

In Chapter 8 (the second entry), we read a slightly different scenario concerning these four questions:

“...umozgin hakos hasheini, v'kaan haben shoel, v'omeir haKorei: 'Ma Nishtana halaila hazeh mikol halailot...’”

“And you should pour the second cup of wine, and here the child asks. And the Reader (the one leading the Seder-) says: ‘What differentiates this night from all other nights?’...”

In our first entry from Chapter 7, the *Rambam* explains that all the symbolic food and actions of the *Seder* are meant to peak the child's curiosity so that he will notice and ask the familiar questions, while in Chapter 8, seems to contradict himself, suggesting that once the second cup is poured, the children ask whatever questions they wish, and then the person leading the *Seder* states our familiar questions.

This of course leaves us to ask, which is it? Does the child ask or does the leader ask? How are we to understand this apparent contradiction?

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Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook zy'a explained that really this entire section of the *Ma Nishtana*, is meant for the *Sheayno Yodea LiShole*- the child who does not know how to ask, the child who does not yet understand the value in asking questions. For the other children they see all that is going on in the ritual of the *Seder*, in the symbolic foods, in the discussion, and they are naturally inclined to ask, but sometimes there is the child who does not yet know how to formulate a question, so as the *haggadah* text tells us 'at *ptach lo...*' we give him the script- begin the process for him, teach him how to ask questions.

Perhaps though there is something more profound in the words of the *Rambam*, beyond Rav Kook's suggested interpretation. Perhaps, the *Rambam* is teaching us in Chapter 7, make all these changes on this night-create a laboratory-to encourage and cultivate our children's innate curiosity.

However, sometimes that innate curiosity, if not properly channeled can lead to inappropriate queries and mischief. In Chapter 8, the *Rambam* teaches us that sometimes we need to not only encourage the precocious nature of each and every child, but sometimes we need to acknowledge and harness that inquisitiveness by demonstrating how to ask the right questions, how to properly apply that curiosity for pursuit of timely and appropriate knowledge.

Our *Chazal* introduced to us that the goal of this evening is to encourage our children to ask questions. The Sages of the *Talmud* explain that even if no child is present and the adults ask each other these questions, the *Seder* serves an incredible educational experience. Yes, adults should teach children the intrinsic value of asking questions; but on the

Seder night, even adults sitting together with no children present become re-acquainted with the most fundamental, yet powerful tools for growth, the capacity to ask an articulate question, to seek an answer to that which seems strange, confusing, or challenging.

Pesach is referred to as *zman cheiruteinu*, the Festival of our Freedom. The *cheirut* (freedom) which we commemorate each and every *Pesach* is so much more than freedom from the physical servitude of ancient Egypt. *Cheirut*, true spiritual freedom is the capacity to learn, probe and grow, to cultivate the penchant for knowledge and identity which is innate within each of us. True *cheirut*, is the capacity to seek the answers to life's challenges and questions, so that ultimately each of us may become who we are destined to be!

May those familiar questions which we'll recite and reply to in just a few days, inspire within each of us the capacity to continually thirst for answers, to continually probe, to continually seek to become exactly who each of us was meant to be.

Chag Kasher V'Sameach. ■

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