

# The Power of Questions

by Rabbi Arye Sufrin



In *Sefer Shemot*, the verse clearly teaches us the importance of speaking to our kids about the story of *Pesach*, as it says, “*V’Higadeta L’vincha – Speak to your children*” (Ex.13:8). However, a few verses later we are given insight on how to properly tell the *Pesach* story. As the Torah continues:

And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then

tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’” (Ex. 12: 26-27)

Furthermore, it says that:

In the days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Ex. 13: 14)

Specifically on *Pesach*, not only should we discuss the story with our children, but the Torah teaches us to relive the experience through asking questions.

The *Gemara in Pesachim 109a* teaches the importance of asking and prompting children to ask questions at the Seder. The example cited is of Rabbi Akiva, who would hand out to the children parched grain and walnuts on *Erev Pesach*, precisely so they should not fall asleep and be able to ask questions. It continues by mentioning the tradition of Rabbi Eliezer who would snatch the matzot on the night of *Pesach* on the account of the children so they should not fall asleep. How would snatching the matzot help prevent children from falling asleep? The famous 11th century commentator, *Rabbi Shmuel Ben Meir*, better known as the *Rashbam*, suggests that food induces drowsiness, so Rabbi Eliezer snatched the *matzah* to prevent children from getting tired. This way, they were able to ask questions throughout the Seder.

The *Rambam* codifies this concept into *Halacha* in the 7th chapter of *Hilchos Pesach U’Matzah* by saying that a parent must mix things up a bit in order to prompt questions by the children so they can say “What is the difference between this night and every other night - *Mah Nishtanah Halaylah HaZeh MiKol Haleilot?*”

There is no doubt questions engender active engagement and participation by everyone no matter what age each participant is. But why the focus on asking questions? Why not spend the evening fulfilling the mitzvah of *Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* by simply telling over the story and reading the Haggada?

Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger, Rosh Yeshiva at Yeshiva University, explains that the *Gemara in Bava Metzia* on 33b teaches that a person who learns one chapter, one *Halacha*, or even one letter from someone else must treat that person with the same respect one would treat their teacher or *Rebbe*. It is amazing to realize that one simple teaching of a letter completely transforms their existing relationship into one that is now considered to be a *Rebbe-talmid* (Rabbi/student) relationship. As the relationship in learning continues, the ultimate goal is to have the student learn and strive to be a *Talmid Chacham* (wise student). What does it mean to be wise? Our Rabbis explain by dividing the letters from the word *Chochmah* (wisdom), it spells *Koach* (*Chaf, Chet*) and *Mah* (*Mem,*

*Hey*) which literally means the “power of what,” which teaches us that true wisdom is based on the power of asking questions, not just on content knowledge attained by listening.

By always referring to a wise person as a *Talmid* (student), we want to create in our children *anivut* (humility). Humility should not be confused with low self esteem, but rather the feeling of “I want to know more.” Our brightest scholars and great *Talmidei Chachamim* always want to learn more. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes about Nobel Prize winner in Physics, Isadore Rabi, who was once asked as a child why he became a scientist. His response was simple yet insightful, “my mother made me a scientist without ever knowing it. Every other child would come back from school and be asked, ‘What did you learn today?’ But my mother used to ask: ‘Izzy, did you ask a good question today?’ That made the difference. Asking good questions made me a scientist.”

Perhaps now we can understand the importance of asking questions at the Seder. The *mitzvah of Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* needs to be more than just a summarized story reminding us of the great miracles and the *yad chazakah* (strong hand) used by G-d to take us out of Egypt. *Sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* needs to be an engaging, captivating, and inspirational experience filled with learning that emulates the way a *Rebbe* and *Talmid* (rabbi and student) would engage in learning. The phenomenon of asking questions is something that is part of our DNA as a Jewish nation.

The *Rambam* emphasizes the importance of asking questions on Seder night by teaching that if a child is not present at the Seder, then the wife should ask the questions. If the wife is not present, then let the guests and friends ask questions, and if you are alone, then verbalize and ask the questions to yourself. I can understand based on the answer above the importance of engaging in questions with one’s spouse or guests, but why ask yourself questions?

Perhaps one lesson is to teach us not to underestimate the value and importance of the process of asking questions, even if it is to ourselves. Because the process of asking questions without known answers is very much an effective way to grow and learn. In fact, many famous educators explain the ideal way for students to learn effectively is simply by questions alone. Dr. Al Siebert and Mary Karr in *The Adult Student’s Guide to Survival & Success*, supports this by saying the most effective learning technique of all is to study through asking and answering questions.

Additionally, many of the *Baalei Mussar* explain that asking questions is a true sign of *cheirut* (freedom) which is the main theme of the holiday. It is easy to understand this as we see how people in Iran and other foreign countries are restricted from speaking their mind and afraid for their lives to ask important questions about fairness and equality. The process of asking questions does not just symbolize the invigorating and inspirational *Talmud Torah* experience explained above, but it also serves as an important reminder to appreciate the freedom we have, which is part of the goal of the Seder experience.

But we must always realize that the ultimate freedom has yet to come, and we must strive to work hard every single day one mitzvah at a time so we can merit the ultimate redemption and freedom *Bimheirah V’yameinu*. **BJ**