

Continuing the Chain

Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Pesach is a Yom Tov of chinuch. The Gemara derives the concept of the Seder from the posuk of "vehigadeta levincha," which instructs us to tell our children the story of our redemption from Mitzrayim on the night of Pesach. It is all about speaking to our children in a way they can accept and believe.

Thus, we proclaim in the Haggadah that the Torah speaks to all types of children, "Kenedeg arba'ah bonim dibra Torah."

We begin the recitation of that section by discussing the wise son, who asks an intelligent question. "Mah ha'eidus vehachukim vehamishpotim asher tzivah Hashem Elokeinu es'chem." He asks, "What are the mitzvos and laws that Hashem commanded you?"

You would think that Chazal would prescribe that when dealing with a wise son who asked a question such as that one, we should give him a detailed response. But instead, the Baal Haggadah instructs his father to respond to him, "Ein maftirim achar hapesach afikoman. It is forbidden to partake of any food following the consumption of the afikoman."

We wonder why that is. How does knowing this halacha enlighten him? What is there in this halacha that is so all encompassing that it answers the son's question?

It is apparent in the Gemara (Pesochim 119b) that the reason we do not eat anything after the afikoman is because we want to keep the taste of the korban pesach on our palate. In our day, as well, when we do not merit the korban, we

don't eat after the afikoman so that its flavor remains with us. (See also Rambam Hilchos Pesach 8:9)

The Baal Haggadah uses this response of afikoman as a message that when a son asks us about all various halachos, mitzvos, chukim and mishpotim, we should take care to explain them to him in a way that the sweet taste of Torah will remain with him. We should answer his questions in a way that will bring on an appetite for more knowledge and understanding so that he will grow in Torah.

This is the message of vehigadeta levincha. Speak to them in a way that will inspire them to yearn for more. Speak to your children and grandchildren, to your students, and to anyone you speak to in a way that engenders love and interest in the message of the Torah. Speak to them in a way that will have a lasting effect.

You hear people talking, and they say, "This one is a big rov," or, "That one is a small rov." How do you determine who is a big rov and who is a small one? The Brisker Rov told his children that a big rov is not someone who has a large shul, or a large yeshiva, or many followers. A large rov is one who has a large connection to Hashem in the depths of his heart. And one who has a small connection is nothing more than a small rov.

Similarly, a parent and a mechanech who speak to a child in a way that the child is motivated to learn more and better and to deepen his attachment to Hashem, Torah and mitzvos is a good parent/rebbi/morah and one who should be praised and emulated.

That is accomplished through love.

Rav Elazar Menachem Man Shach addressed a gathering of teachers. He told them that all the pedagogical systems are not what establish success in a classroom. What a mechanech must seek to do is find the right words and act in a way that the student will love and trust him. The mechanech who accomplishes that is able to teach and influence his students not only in that they will want to learn, but that what they learn will remain with them for the rest of their lives.

I had many good rabbeim as I was growing up, but two of them had a really strong impact upon me, and that impact remains until this day, many decades later. They were Rav Mendel Balsam, who was my third grade rebbi, and Rav Hershel Mashinsky, who was my rebbi in the seventh grade. Their devotion to their students and the love and caring they displayed enabled them to reach the neshamos of their young charges and impact them in ways that were long-lasting.

An elementary school principal once approached Rav Shach and said that there was a certain melamed in his school who was proficient in the material he taught and gave a good class, but he had no love for his students and never displayed any feelings for them. The principal asked the elderly rosh yeshiva if he was justified in being bothered by the rebbi's conduct. Rav Shach advised him to replace the rebbi.

Someone who teaches without empathy is unable to impact his students. The purpose of chinuch is not only to teach the material, but to have a lasting effect on their neshamos, conduct and behavior.

Rav Shach believed that not only a teacher of young children must act that way, but also someone who teaches much older students, as he did in Ponovezh, must relate to his talmidim as if they are his children, displaying the type of closeness, feeling and connection usually attributed to parents.

It happened at the wedding of a grandson of Rav Shalom Shwadron, who was a talmid of Rav Shach in the Ponovezh Yeshiva. The chosson asked Rav Shach to be his mesader kiddushin at the wedding in Yerushalayim. Though the trip from Bnei Brak to the wedding hall was arduous, Rav Shach readily agreed, as he would do anything for a talmid.

When Rav Shach arrived at the hall, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, who was a brother-in-law of Rav Shwadron, ran to greet him. Rav Shach immediately said that had he known that the boy's uncle, the great rosh yeshiva, was going to be there, he would not have accepted to be the mesader kiddushin and would not have come.

Rav Shlomo Zalman wouldn't hear of it. He told Rav Shach that he would not be mesader kiddushin under any terms. Rav Shach remained adamant that the uncle should be the mesader kiddushin and it was out of place for him to accept the honor in place of the uncle. The debate went on for a while.

Finally, Rav Shlomo Zalman said to Rav Shach, "You are correct in what you are saying that I am the uncle, but you are the father, and therefore the honor goes to you." With that, Rav Shach acquiesced, for in fact he viewed – and treated – each talmid as a son.

Treating a talmid as a son involves doing so with love and compassion, not as a detached, doctrinaire teacher, for every parent instinctively loves their children and seeks to teach and influence them in a way that will have a lasting impression.

The night of the Seder is no different. When we sit at the Seder and recount the story of our exodus from Mitzrayim, we must do so in a way that impacts our children and leaves a lasting impact. For by teaching us the obligation of recounting Yetzias Mitzrayim on Pesach from the posuk which states "vehigadeta levincha," the

Torah is telling us that the essence of Pesach is all about transmitting our mesorah to the next generation. Naturally, that must be done in a way that ensures that the son will himself continue the passing of the tradition on to his children.

To accomplish that, we must be tuned in to our children.

A rov was visiting Rav Shach when the elderly rosh yeshiva's young grandson entered the room. Rav Shach made a show of selecting the right color lollipop for the youngster. Finally, he selected a red one and handed it to the boy, saying with a broad smile, "I am giving you the red one because I am sure that is the one you want."

The rov turned to Rav Shach. "Rosh yeshiva," he said, "with all due respect, aren't you encouraging the child to become like Eisov, who saw everything superficially? Why is choosing a red candy over a green one and making the distinction important different than Eisov asking Yaakov to 'pour me this red soup'?"

Rav Shach smiled. "You need to understand the mind of a child," he said. "A child sees the world on a shallow level. He has not yet matured to the point where he can see deeper than the color of a candy. He inhabits an imaginary realm. To him, the color of candy is very important. The problem with Eisov was that he was already a grown person, yet he maintained a child-like, superficial view of the world."

Rav Shach looked back at the contented child. "He is doing exactly what he should be doing. Remember, he is just a child."

Our great leaders, inhabiting the peaks of spiritual grandeur, never lost sight of the obligation of “vehigadeta levincha,” reaching children in a way that they understand and appreciate that you care for them and their needs.

Children who are treated justly recognize what is expected of them and seek to ensure that the confidence in their abilities and loyalty is not misplaced. When they have to be disciplined, they are better able to accept the tochacha, knowing that it emanates from parents who love them and want the best for them, not merely from rigid elders who possess a need to dominate and control.

Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman would say that even when a child is falling spiritually, he must be related to with kindness. Somebody once approached him and remarked that doing so seems to be rewarding the child for making bad choices. Is the intention of the rosh yeshiva, the questioner wondered, that when a child begins acting in a bad way, his parents should stop disciplining him?

Nothing of the sort, Rav Aharon Leib responded. They should have always been kind to the child, and especially after they see the effects of being overly strict and restricting with their child, they should forgo their misdirected parenting theories.

The author of sefer Minchas Shmuel writes that his rebbi, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, said that in our day, in order for tochacha to be accepted, it has to be delivered calmly and softly. Someone who angers easily and speaks harshly is freed from the obligation of hochei’ach tochi’ach, rebuking those who act improperly. (See a similar quote in Sefer Keser Rosh, 143.)

One year, when the Chasam Sofer’s son, Shimon, was seven years old, he asked his father to explain the custom of children hiding their father’s afikoman. To Shimon’s

great surprise, his father ignored his question and continued with the Seder as if the question had not been asked.

It is said that the Chasam Sofer's face glowed with an otherworldly brightness at the Seder and his family members who sat around the table were unable to gaze at him. One year, a family member who had just joined the family and wasn't familiar with the phenomenon looked up at her new father-in-law and immediately looked away. She said that she felt as if the sun itself was burning through her eyes. "He had the look of a malach," she commented.

It is no wonder that the young boy didn't press his father for an answer to his question, as would be expected. He moved on.

When the Seder ended at 4 a.m., the Chasam Sofer turned to his son. "You asked me a very good question," he said. "At the Seder, we do many things to remind us of what took place in Mitzrayim. The Torah recounts that on the evening of the first Pesach, as the Jews were removing belongings from the homes of the Mitzriyim, their dogs should have barked at the thievery that was going on in front of their eyes. But Hakadosh Boruch Hu made a miracle and not one dog barked. The custom to steal the afikoman was instituted to remember that miracle that took place many years ago on this night, which Hashem orchestrated to allow the Jews to retrieve things from the Mitzri homes."

The boy accepted the explanation, but asked his father a question. "I asked my question many hours ago, during yachatz. When did you think of the answer?"

"As you were asking the question," the father answered.

“So then, dear father, why did you wait until the end of the Seder to tell me the answer?”

The Chasam Sofer responded, telling the boy who was to grow up to be the famed rov of Krakow that the night of Pesach is all about emunah. The explanation of emunah is to fulfill the wishes of Hashem, whether or not we understand the reason we were commanded to do it.

“Sometimes,” said the Chasam Sofer, “a person will say, ‘I don’t understand it, so I won’t do it.’ That is why I did not answer you. I wanted you to take the afikoman even though you did not understand why you were taking it. Now you have seen that it is possible to do an action that you do not understand, and you have experienced a facet of emunah that is fundamental to our existence as the Jewish people.”

The Chasam Sofer took advantage of the opportunity to use the question of his brilliant son - “Vehoya ki yisholcho vinchu,” as the posuk says - to teach him a lesson that remained with him long after the Seder ended.

We should follow his example.

Pesach is a Yom Tov that requires much preparation. By the time we get to sit down at the Seder and take it all in, we may feel fatigued. But in the world of Torah and mitzvos, there is no time for weariness. When we sit down as kings about to recite the Haggadah and partake in all the many mitzvos hayom, they should energize us as we ponder the feelings of someone who was just freed from a lifetime of servitude.

We need to view ourselves as if we have now been let out of Mitzrayim as free people and keep in mind that this night is all about our children, infusing them with joy, happiness, knowledge, and the beauty of our mesorah. Let us not lose sight of our obligations and enjoy the kiyum mitzvos halaylah together with our families and children, keeping our traditions alive and continuing the chain that began at Krias Yam Suf and continuing through the midbar, Eretz Yisroel, Bavel, Spain, Portugal, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Morocco, Germany, Lithuania, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Russia, England, France, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the United States, until our current homes.

May this be the final year of the exile. Next year in Yerushalayim.