

THE SEDER AS A LESSON IN EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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THE TORAH ISSUES a clear mandate to adults at the Seder,

שמות יג:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעֶבְרָא זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם:
לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם:

Shemot 13:8

And you shall tell your child on that day, "It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt."

But what exactly does this *mitzvah* entail? And how is it different from this very similar injunction?

שמות יג:

זָכוֹר אֶת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יִצְאָתֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים כִּי בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוּצִיא ה' אֶתְכֶם מִצֵּרָה.

Shemot 13:3

Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, from the house of bondage, how God freed you from it with a mighty hand.

Many commentaries understand the *mitzvah* of "telling" to be anchored in time.¹ It is on this night in particular that we must tell our children the story of Pesah, as opposed to remembering it, which is something that we are meant to do every day.

Beyond an issue of timing, the *mitzvah* of "remembering" (*zekhirah*) and the *mitzvah* of "telling" (*sippur*) differ in other key ways. R. Hayyim Soloveitchik mi-Brisk² offers three distinctions between *zekhirah* and *sippur* in his selected commentary on the Talmud:

R. Hayyim mi-Brisk on the Talmud #40

- 1 To fulfill the *mitzvah* of remembering one only needs to remember themselves. However, with retelling the Exodus, the *mitzvah* is to tell the story by way of question and answer, as it is written "it will be, when your child asks" (Shemot 13:14). ... The child will ask "what is different about this night?" (Mishnah Pesahim 10:4), the parent will answer "we were slaves" (Devarim 6:21). ...
- 2 In retelling, the storyteller starts with shame and concludes with praise. But to fulfill the *mitzvah* of remembering sufficiently, you only have to remember the Exodus from Egypt itself.
- 3 The nature of the commandment to tell is about the *mitzvot* of Seder night. As we said, "Rabban Gamliel said: All who do not say these three things on Pesah do not fulfill their obligation. These things are *pesah*, *matzah*, *maror*" (Mishnah Pesahim 10:5).

ר' חיים מבריסק, חידושו על הש"ס, סימן מ

לקיים מצוות זכירה אין צריך להזכיר אלא לעצמו, אבל בסיפור יציאת מצרים המצוה היא לספר לאחר דרך שאלה ותשובה, בדכתיב "והיה כי ישאלך בנך" (שמות יג:יד). ... הבן שואל "מה נשתנה" (משנה פסחים יד:), והאב משיב "עבדים היינו" (דברים ו:כא). ...

1 See, e.g., Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Positive Mitzvah #157.

2 1853-1918, ancestor of the famous American rabbinic family.

ב בספור צריך המספר להתחיל בגנות ולסיים בשבח,
ולקיים מצוות זכירה סגי בזכירת יציאת מצרים לחוד.

ג מצוה לספר טעמי המצוות של אותו לילה, כמו
שאמרנו: "רבן גמליאל היה אומר – כל שלא אמר
שלושה דברים אלו בפסח לא יצא ידי חובתו, ואלו הן
פסח, מצה ומרור" (משנה פסחים י:ה).

With these three answers, R. Hayyim maps out what it means to fulfill the *mitzvah* of “telling” on Pesah night. His ideas make a strong case for what we call experiential education, and have implications for how we think about education broadly, beyond our Seder table.

R. Hayyim’s first point is that one must engage in a back-and-forth, a dialogue, a question and answer, with others. We might have thought that a frontal presentation on the story of the Exodus would be sufficient, but without active participation from those around us, we cannot successfully fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sippur*.

He then demands that our retelling follow a narrative arc, a journey from beginning to end, from shame to praise. Between the shame and the praise lay a great deal of pain and suffering as well as miracles and redemption. This narrative arc serves the goal of dialogue; the deeper we go into what really happened, the more we share, the more material the children have to engage with. This process cultivates curiosity and, crucially, questions.

Finally, R. Hayyim claims that in order to fulfill the *mitzvah* of telling our children the story of the Exodus, we must not only speak, but act. Our explanations are accompanied by pointing and (in the cases of *matzah* and *maror*) eating. The Seder offers ample further opportunity for experiential education—from leaning to one side when we drink wine to dipping our potatoes in salt water. In order to completely fulfill the *mitzvah* of *sippur*, our telling must involve acting out the very things we describe.

R. Hayyim mi-Brisk helps us understand that we can hold our sacred memories through life in two

different ways. While the experiential education of *sippur* is performed once a year, the act of *zekhirah* is ongoing. Indeed, the Haggadah quotes Mishnah Berakhot 1:5 to remind us that we need to remember the Exodus every day:

"למען תזכר את יום צאתך מארץ מצרים כל ימי חייך" (דברים טז:ג). "ימי חייך" – הימים. "כל ימי חייך" – הלילות.

“In order that you remember the day you came out of the land of Egypt all the days of your life” (Devarim 16:3). “Days of your life”—the days; “all the days of your life”—the nights.

But then, occasionally, we must not only remember what happened, but curate an educational experience for others. We are not only remembering for ourselves; we are teaching those around us about what happened, and without taking shortcuts. We go question by question and answer by answer, as we embark on the entire journey of the Exodus, all while taking action as part of the telling.

Beyond the Exodus, each of us carries foundational stories that we remember every day. How might we transform our own personal and family *zekhirot* into careful and intentional observances of telling and transmission? If we can overcome shyness and embarrassment, we can curate experiences that, like the Seder, encourage questions, face the shame and disgrace head-on, invite us to live out our own redemption, and cement the story in deep gratitude.

How might this act of experiential education change each of us? How might it change our relationships with loved ones? As you retell the Exodus this year, I invite you to identify another place in your life where you can go beyond *zekhirah* and emulate the *mitzvah* of “telling your child.” ♦