

## Model Seder – My One and Only

A model Seder, ideally, should occur once a year (twice, outside the Holy Land). It is a little different every year, because we keep changing and evolving. We can choose to learn from our mistakes, ignore them or fix them. We hopefully grow more intelligent, sensitive and understanding with each passing year, although it is becoming ever so difficult to do so in a society which gives little respect to age and to the wisdom acquired with it. We might have been learning, or reading, or asking ourselves tough questions during the year, questions not there last Pesah. Our Seders will also vary because of the participants. Do we get along with all of them, or do some give us anxiety attacks? Are we celebrating the Seder at home with close family and friends, at a shul with hundreds of somewhat familiar people, or at a resort with close family and friends and hundreds of total strangers? The ingredients of the Seder night are so varied and volatile that as a result, not all of our Seders can be created equal. (For me, two Seders stand poles apart, on one hand the first Seder, as a teenager, without my beloved grandfather, and on the other, 31 years later, the first Seder with my youngest daughter who was born just a day earlier).

In light of the infinite possibilities for a real Seder to evolve, the whole notion of a Model Seder, whether for kids at school or as a community event, seems to be counterintuitive. The power and energy of the Seder stem from the people, their experience, knowledge, curiosity, place in life, history, past and future. It hinges on how excited are the participants to be Jewish and to observe the Seder or, conversely, how detached they feel from the rituals and the lore of this wonderful night. How can one anticipate and prepare for all these unknown factors which will unfold only at the moment of truth? I really want to know who thought that this is a good idea. Who came up with the idea of a Model Seder? My google search for the “first Model Seder” retrieved many interesting matches which made me rethink the concepts “model” and “Seder”, but it did not provide the name of that man or woman who are responsible for this now ubiquitous practice.

It seems, unfortunately, that the Model Seder, alongside the fire, the wheel and the first written alphabet, would join the great inventions which forever changed the course of human civilization, without giving us the opportunity to thank the anonymous inventor. According to most researchers in the yet not fully explored field of Model Seder sciences (especially the renowned scholar Dr. Manish Evitz) the practice was either the intellectual brain-child of a

frustrated, authoritarian teacher who wanted to make sure that even when away from school, the students would march to the tune of his military style, or the frustration was for lack of educational materials to feed the students, a problem beautifully solved by preparing them, for one whole month, for a one night event which was supposed! to be! a SURPRISE! (sorry for yelling, got carried away). Model Seder as Dress Rehearsal? Dress rehearsals are indispensable before a show or a presentation, and they could be tolerated and maybe even understood before a wedding, but would you have one before a surprise birthday party, with the birthday boy or girl in attendance? I think not! I have a feeling that such a move would somewhat diminish the element of surprise.

But let me approach the problem from a more levelheaded perspective. I think that there are three problems here: one is that we focus all of our attention on the children, the second is that our attention is dedicated to what WE think they need to know or ask, and the third is the taming of the Haggadah. (If I would follow the pattern of the Haggadah I would add a fourth problem, but I leave that to you).

### **First problem: focusing on the children**

The ancient Exodus marked the beginning of a covenant between God and the Israelites. God delivered the Israelites from Egypt and gave them their freedom and independence. In return, all He asked of them was to fulfill their part of the covenant, to walk in His ways. It was, as a matter of fact, a unilateral covenant, because the only beneficiary were the Israelites, but it was still a commitment, and for thousands of years there were those who chose to remain in the fold and do great things in the name of Judaism, others who opted out, and yet others who despite defining themselves as non-observant went on to accomplish great deeds for humanity in the spirit of Judaism. The Seder is a reenactment of the covenant between us and God, into which we bring each year the new generation, each year a little more mature and ready than the previous. Obviously, we cannot recruit new members and enjoin them in the covenant if we are not fully committed, so what the Seder requires from us first and foremost is to ask questions and find out if we have answers:

- What does it mean to be Jewish?
- What is my slavery? What is my freedom?
- How am I different than my father or grandmother?
- How am I different than the younger me, the “me” of last year or ten years ago?
- Does the Exodus still have an impact on me, 3,500 years later?
- What do I expect from my sons, my daughters, my family, and friends to do as Jews?

The list can go on and on, and every question is important because it engages us in a dialog with God and with ourselves. By asking, we are willing to recognize challenges and doubts and when we do we might be able to face and overcome them.

The Four Sons of the Haggadah? They are us, or in us, all of them, at different junctures in life. We are at times inquisitive and curious, seeking spiritual awareness and personal improvement, and at times brash and cynical, seeing only suffering and futile religious ritual which we want to avoid. At times we would feel that something is wrong but we would not be able to put our finger on it, not knowing what to ask and how to address the situation, or we might just turn our sensitivities off and sail through events apathetic and indifferent.

This whole process of asking why (why the Exodus? now what? what does God want from me? God, why don't you leave me alone? God, why do you leave me alone?) cannot be rehearsed in a model Seder. It must coalesce with the smell of the food and the taste of the wine and the sight of the people and the thoughts rushing through your mind and the things you want to forget and the moments you want to remember forever and... get you ready to impart all these in a real personal way to those you bring into the covenant, your children.

### **Second problem: Letting them be!**

A couple of things we tend to forget when we think of children, especially when they are with adults: Children are smart. They love to learn. We do know, however, even if only subconsciously, that they can tell if we are genuine or not, and we are therefore careful not to let them have an advantage by pointing out our faults.

We understand that because they read us, we must be really connected to what we do and not be superficial or hypocritical, and that is probably why many adults, when "teaching" children, are actually training them. Treading the terrain of content, message, emotions or thoughts is deemed dangerous because when these are applied to the intricate and unique soul and persona of each human being, their versatility is manifested and they become very difficult to manage and control. It is much easier to stick to mechanical motions. Do this, don't do that, measure this and write that. This is true in a regular school setting, and much more so when we are dealing with religious rituals. God forbid I should try to explain to a kid the ethical implication of being a slave or owning one. This might lead him to question suffering, social justice and even Divine justice. No, the drill sergeant approach is much safer: Say HaGefen; Wash hands; No blessing; do not talk; eat celery; No more than 2 ounces and so on and so on. The model Seder, then, becomes a dress rehearsal for preparing the airplane for takeoff. You could check lights, fuel, visibility, weather, but the plane will never take off if the pilot is not there. Teaching your kid to

fly, to spread her wings and take off on her own does not happen in one model Seder, going through the motions. It happens throughout the year by grooming curiosity and being a role model for spiritual, wholesome and purpose driven life.

Children are the most awesome learning machines. They learn to crawl, fall, talk and rationalize without being instructed. They are always on the look for new and exciting adventures, whether in mom's kitchen or the great outdoors. Children learn by observation. They watch, absorb and emulate, and when they encounter something they don't understand they touch it, turn it and roll it over, the toddler will put it in his mouth and the teenager will put his mind to it. In short, kids do not stop learning, at least not until we step in and suffocate their curiosity by over-instruction. The best way to kill a kid's curiosity, says Peter Gray in *Free to Learn*, is to hover around him and offer ways to enhance knowledge. For example, on a field trip a kid sees an interesting rock and comments on it. The teacher gets all excited: so you like rocks? Great, let me recommend this book, and this kit, and why don't you write a paper on rocks or start a rock collection and, hey, you can do a presentation. The kid learns one important lesson: next time, if he is interested in something, he'd better not tell anyone about it.

Imagine, just imagine, what would have happened if you never told your kids anything about the Seder and its weird practices until it was actually here. What a surprise would that have been! Hearing the word Pesah or Seder before the holidays the brain will get active and retrieve memories from an earlier age, and they will be the kid's own memories, the moments that stood out for her last year and not the ones we choose to highlight. At the actual Seder table these memories will merge with the current experience and will add another dimension to the personal and unique perception of the Holiday, helping the young participant to own the moment and join the covenant on her own volition.

### **Third Problem: Taming the Haggadah**

I would like to go back to the adults now. Generations of legal discussions by scholars and religious anxiety of those who observe the Torah, have taken away from the Haggadah its flexible and unexpected nature. The Haggadah, as I previously explained, was meant to be a natural and organic process. It was supposed to interact with us in a slightly different way each year and to provide us with new insights and incentives to immerse ourselves in the redemptive power of the Torah which will eventually bring us to the end of the journey started with the Exodus. The elements surrounding the narration of the Haggadah were put there in order to connect the intellectual experience with a palpable one, touching and igniting all our senses. And what have we done with it? Just as we drill the kids, so we drill ourselves. We dwell so much on the technical and quantitative aspects of the Seder while letting the redeeming and personal aspects of it be hidden away, perhaps with the Afikoman. Our Seder has become

compartmentalized, a collection of self-contained units, each with its set of rules, with no intrinsic progression and connection. The obsession with the proper quantities, the duration of time allotted for consumption, the recitation of every word and the forced participation of all in a D'var Torah ritual distract us from the main goal of the Seder night:

בכל דור ודור חייב אדם לראות את עצמו כאלו הוא יצא ממצרים

Am I a slave now? To what? How do I break free? How do I help others break free?

I'd like to conclude by sailing back on the waves of nostalgia to my grandfather's Seder table. Around his table there was never tension. He would not remind anyone how much wine or matza they must consume. When we washed for Karpas, there would be mountains of celery to dip in a mix of lemon and orange juice, fresh boiled fava beans in their shells, fluffy Persian rice, sliced cucumbers and hard boiled eggs (which we dipped, of course, in the sour-sweet juice). We were never hungry during the Haggadah, which we sang through, taking turns, translating the fun parts to Arabic and just basking in the beauty of the moment, the unforgettable experience of being with someone who embodied the covenant and waiting for him to bring us in.

You see, my grandfather was the model of my true Model Seder. He was a passionate Zionist, a living Bible, a poet and philosopher who, despite having a rabbinic ordination and being a descendant of eight consecutive generations of rabbis, dedicated his life to social service to the physically and mentally ill and to education through books he published. I still look up to him, 31 years after he left this world, knowing that he was the center of my Seder, and as such, also the focal point of my religious life and my own perspective of our ancient, living covenant. At the end of the Seder he would put his head between his hands, and sing with us, the grandchildren who were still awake, a traditional Babylonian Piyyut:

נכון לבו, איש הוא ירא, כל נתיבו מצות בורא

נאמר בו, כתוב אשרי, כל חוסי בו אשרי שומרי

*The pure of heart is the one who reveres God, whose life leads to his Creator*

*It is regarding him that it is written: all those who trust in HaShem are joyous*

As he sang it, I knew, deep in my little kid's heart, that the poem was written about him.

Let us be the Model of our Seder, for our children and others to emulate.

פסח שמח

