

Your Handy Guide to a Meaningful Seder

Juicy Questions for the Seder

by Rabbi Joel M. Finkelstein

Questions for the Seder

What are some questions that are not asked in the *mah nishtana* questions?

There are three models for a successful seder; A. Questions and answers; This seder thrives on pure discussion. B. Story telling; This seder is energized by the power of the story tellers. and C. Acting out. This seder model is based on group involvement in the telling process. Parts can be given out and people can be asked to act in character. One can be the wise son, one Rabbi Akiva, etc. I have a few plays on hand for those who wish to use them. Below are some questions to get discussion going.

1. Are we free today? What does it mean to be free?
2. G-d did most of the action during the exodus, while the Jews did very little. Is it possible to save yourself? Why is it hard?
3. What makes people be a rasha, the wicked son?
4. What sort of answer is the wise son looking for?
5. Is the bentching part of the hagadah? How is that?
6. What is the point of recounting the woes of the Jews in Egypt and through the ages?
7. Why did G-d send us to Egypt only to come out 210 years later?

Kiddush; How is the Kiddush part of the Hagadah? Or isn't it?

Ha lachma anya; Why is this invitation to all to join, the only one paragraph in Aramaic?

How is matza a "bread of affliction"?

Where is the bracha over the Hagadah? Where is the Shehechiyanu for the Matza and the Hagadah? Where is the She-asa nissim that we make on Hanukah and Purim?

Before the meal, we say "asher ge-alanu, who redeemed Israel.. and helped us reach this day (ve-higiyanu) to eat matza and maror..." This may be seen as all of the above, the beracha of the Hagadah, the shehecheyanu, and the blessing of miracles.

The kiddush is the bracha of the Hagadah.

The phrase: Baruch Hamakom, blessed is the Omnipresent, before the 4 sons- is the beracha.

We don't make berachot on things that have no limit or which depend on another person such as charity and Hagadah telling.

We don't make berachot on things which are themselves words of thanksgiving and praise.

Find 5 places in the Hagadah that Israel or the Land (referring just to Israel) is mentioned.

1. In the section known as "at the beginning, our ancestors were idol worshippers- Metechilah.
2. In the dayenu several times.
3. Toward the end of the Magid, after "in every generation..." before Hallel.
4. In bentching, several times.
5. It is not overemphasized since the entry to Israel was not on the night of Pesach.

How many times is the story of the Exodus told in some form in the Hagadah? (find 3)

1. Avadim hayinu, we were slaves
2. Metichilah, at first we were idol worshippers and now we are close to You...
3. In Baruch shomer havtachato... Blessed is the One who keeps his promises to Israel..
4. In the Aramean section Tze Ulmad... Arami oved avi...
5. In the Rabban Gamliel section re. Pesach, matza, and maror.
- (6. It is alluded to in the story of the rabbis who told the story all night. see A2.)

It is repeated so many times because the more you tell, the better.

When is Moshe mentioned in the Hagadah?

1. Generally, we don't wish to emphasize Moshe in the Hagadah since it takes away from the central theme of G-d's exodus, but Maimonides does mention Moses. Rabbi Soloveitchik says that Moses comes into the Hagadah as the master teacher, not the redeemer.
2. He is mentioned in some optional parts of the Hagadah, after the ten plagues, in the section known as Rabbi Yossi Hagelili.

I. The Four Stories

Story A. Avadim Hayinu, We Were Slaves and Then We Were Redeemed

1. If He had not taken us out we would still be slaves

Is this really true? Can't we take

ourselves out of Egypt? Can't we cure ourselves?

Without a miracle, can the meshiach come in our time?

Can't we take ourselves out of Egypt? Can't we cure ourselves?

R. Yisrael Tchorchtov: Only we can save ourselves but the Exodus opened the door for us to help ourselves. On the one hand we say, everything is in Heaven's hands except for the fear of Heaven, meaning that moral decisions are made by us. However, in our morning prayers we ask that G-d save us from the evil inclination, as if He were in charge of that aspect of life. The Talmud in Shabbat 53b states that Reuben prayed to avoid sinning and was heard. Joseph conjured up images of his father and avoided sin. He was able to master sin on his own.

Similar issues have been raised vis-a-vis the redemption of the Jewish people. Can we redeem ourselves or must G-d do so for us? There is a dispute as to whether the Temple of the future will be built by Messiah (Rambam) or by G-d who will send a fiery image of the Temple from heaven (Rashi).

2. We Need To Tell the Story Even if We Are Wise

What is the point of telling the story if you know it already?

What is the role of the wise man? Is he to find new meanings or to repeat what others say?

One of the Ponovich Yeshiva Rabbis writes that there is an obligation to tell the story even if there is nothing new. Is that the message? One school of Yeshivahs emphasizes the attainment of new ideas. Others support the study of what is. What did the rabbis discuss all night, old stuff or new? The fact that each of the stories of the Hagadah must be accompanied by either a way of personalizing it or by interpretation could be seen to mean that new ideas and views must be expressed.

3. The More We Tell the Better

4. A Story of Rabbi Akiva and Friends

Why is this so significant?

- a) It is an allusion to an out of body experience by these mystics. That's why they didn't know what time it was.

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b) Just as we read passages of Mishna on a daily basis in order to be as if we had brought all the actual sacrifices, so do we hope that by telling the story of those great scholars who had lengthy discussions of the Seder that it would be as if we did as well.

c) Sefas Emes: It is possible they actually did nothing else, forgot to eat the matzo and maror. Nowadays the most important thing is the story. The words were in place of the actions.

d) Symbolically, says Reb Yehoshua of Belz, it means that the time has come for the Torah of these hidden Rabbis to come forth like the morning to allow all to hear of the Torah and of redemption.

5. Rabbi Elazar Ben Azaryah is Prematurely Gray

Why is this mentioned? Is the question of how old he looks really pertinent?

6. The Four Sons

In what way do we all have a little of each in us?

What is it better to be, wise and questioning or simple and accepting?

The reader of the Hagadah first reacts by saying, "I'm too smart to reread the same old stories." The Hagadah informed him that no one is too smart to engage in Hagadah. The evil inclination then says, "fine, if I'm not too smart for the Hagadah then I must be too simple. I can't keep up with Rabbi Akiva and friends all night. Besides, I don't have any learned questions. My questions are more along the lines of, "What? Are you kidding? I am not worthy of being part of the Hagadah process." To answer these concerns, the Hagadah tells of the four sons.

What do they represent?

a) They represent four levels of Exodus. Exodus means to be removed from the physicality of Egypt. One son is totally immersed in spirituality. One son makes the Torah the center of his life with some engagement with the world as most should. One makes work the center, but thinks about G-d occasionally. One is still in Egypt.

b) They represent four questions (Sefas Emes). The righteous wants to know what the response to evil is (mitzvot). The wicked wants to know what he gets out of it. He is locked in physicality, so he cannot get out. The simple son wants to know what benefit anyone gets from it. The simple son thinks evil can be eradicated but it

cannot in this exile, so he has nothing to say.

Knock Out

The Hagadah's response to the wicked son seems very harsh and futile. It tells us to "weaken his teeth," or perhaps to "blunt his teeth," or to "set his teeth on edge" or rebuke him. Isn't that a little harsh? How can we explain this?

Story B. We Used to Be Idol Worshipers and Now We Worship G-d

"Then G-d brought us close to His worship." Who makes us close to G-d? Can I thank G-d for making me close with him?

We start the story from slavery, from Terach, father of Abraham, and from Laban, oppressor of Jacob. Which start makes more sense and why?

1) This is the Hagadah of the wicked, but the Rasha, the wicked, can also spell Shaar, a gate to repentance, to go from idolatry to G-d as our ancestors did.

2) "Then G-d brought us close to His worship." Again, is it G-d who changes our spiritual state, or is that solely in our hands? Shmuel, who advocated telling the story only of slavery, says that we can only thank G-d for the physical exodus. Our spiritual strides were of our own making. Rav says that we can thank G-d even for our spiritual exploits. The Talmud says that G-d forced us to accept the Torah at Sinai. Accepting the Torah is just accepting the responsibility. The actual performance is up to us. We call G-d the Giver of the Torah. We are the ones who choose to perform it or not. Perhaps that's why Rav says, G-d brought us close to His worship. He brought us close. It is our job to do something about our closeness.

Story C. 400 Years of Slavery and Then the Great Spoils

Why was it all worth it? To remove the souls who were locked into captivity (the converts).

1. Vehee She-amdah, in every generation they try to destroy us

It has stood for us all these years, for not one has stood up against us, rather in every generation they try to destroy us. What has stood for us? What has sustained us for so many centuries?

Sefas Emes: It has stood for us all these years. What has? The exile and the redemption. The trials of Egypt prepared us for later exiles, and the redemption gave us hope for a future redemption.

Story D. Laban and the Wandering Aramean

Part of the Hagadah is the midrash on a passage from the book of Devarim, Deuteronomy. "My father was a wandering Aramean" Why can't we just

read the passage? Why do we have to interpret it? Why must we interpret every word of this passage as the Mishnah mandates?

Sefas Emes: we need to look beneath the surface in all of our sufferings to interpret it for the good, to find G-d in times of sorrow. We must find the anti-Semite beneath the calm exterior, as with Laban, and we must find in the "hand of G-d" not one miracle or ten but 250 or more.

You Shouldn't Know From Such Things

Rabbi Akiva said, how do we know that every single plague that the Egyptians had was really five plagues?... Why did Rabbi Akiva attempt to find extra plagues? Weren't the 10 plagues enough?

II. Another way to tell the story

A. Rabban Gamliel: One Needs to Explain These Three Things, Pesach, Matzah, and Maror

Rabban Gamliel says you have to tell the story through the Pesach, Matzah and Maror. Why?

1) Exodus means to remove words from exile, from obscurity and hiddenness. At the Seder, by answering questions, we redeem ideas from latency and murkiness.

2) Why is Pesach the name of this holiday and why does that aspect of the holiday overshadow other miracles? (Sefas Emes) Because Pesach means to skip over, meaning that redemption may not be linear. It can take leaps and make skips. We can elevate ourselves at a breakneck speed.

Hallel is the praise of G-d after we tell the story. Is this part of the story? Explain.

The last cup; Shefoch Hamoscha: Pour out Your wrath on the gentiles who know you not. Isn't this a little harsh?

Chad Gadya

R. Nasan Adler, Frankfurt: The cat is wrong, so the dog is right, so the stick is wrong, G-d turns out to be wrong?! What is going on? People have argued that Israel is engaged in a cycle of violence. What is our response to that?

Acting out

How would it feel to be an old person going out? A young person? An Egyptian convert to Judaism? What would the bones of Joseph, which Moses carried out, say if they could talk?

Comments on the Hagadah, From the Desk of the Rabbi

We were slaves to Paro, Avadim hayinu lefaro be'mitzraim.

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, pointed out that it does not say that we were slaves of Paro but that we were slaves to Paro, and there is a difference. Paro's slaves implies that we were existentially, fundamentally, internally, intrinsically simply his slaves. Slaves to Paro connotes that we were indeed slaves, but only extrinsically, externally, by trade and legally we were slaves, but inside we remained true to ourselves, free to serve G-d. When Moshe was shown the burning bush, says the Rav, G-d was telling him that the Israelites may seem consumed by the fire of slavery, but inside they are not consumed. The human soul burns bright. Human freedom is always there, if even buried deep inside each person's façade of servitude. This is why, says the Rav, we say at the end of the haggadah, that one day we will thank G-d for our redemption, geulateinu, and for pedut nafsheinu, the redemption of our souls, because he not only do we look forward to getting out of exile physically, but we hope to save our souls, to show that we had not lost our souls, to find our inner selves again! The goal of Pesach, indeed of all of the Torah, is to find our souls under the clutter of foreign cultural, and outside noise.

The Four Sons, the one who cannot ask, you open for him

Our job, said the Kotzker Rebbe, is not to solve all the problems but to open others to the Torah. That is why, he says, that the Torah tells us to put the Torah on our hearts and not in our hearts. We can't always put the Torah in our hearts because our hearts are not always open. What we can do is put the Torah close to our hearts so that on the occasion that the heart opens up, it will be there for the taking. So too with the son who cannot ask, we can't necessarily put the Torah in his or her heart, but what we can do is open her up to the torah, and hopefully the Torah will come in. Our job on Pesach is to be open to the torah, to put ourselves in the proximity of Torah and hopefully the Torah will fall into the open the door, the open mind.

It was for this (the Matzah) that we went out of Egypt

Rav Velvel Soloveitchik, the Brisker Rav wrote that while most people read the sentence one way, it is actually the opposite. It does not mean, because of our eating matza in Egypt, G-d took us out of Egypt then, but rather that because of this now, that we are eating matzah, G-d took us out of Egypt. As Rav Jonathan Saks points out, the Brisker Rav was saying that we don't act today because of history. History was there to bring us to this day, to actuate the halacha, the Jewish practices of today. We are not driven by history. History is driven by its anticipation of the glorious present and future.

Baruch Hamakom, Blessed be is the Omnipresent (the Place)

Why does the Seder use this expression to describe G-d, as the Place, the Makom? The Rav explains that in our daily Kedusha, we say two main lines; Kadosh Kadosh Kadosh, Hashem tzvakot.. That G-d is holy, holy, holy... all the earth is filled with His glory. And we also say Blessed is Hashem from His place, makom. What is the difference? Isaiah who lived in the days of the Holy Temple said that G-d was here on earth, all over. But Ezekiel who experienced exile saw G-d as distant and yet present. At the Seder, as we describe the exodus but also the exile in Egypt, we speak of G-d who was distant and yet present. For this reason, at a Shiva, G-d forbid, we say to the mourners, Hamakom, The Place, the Omnipresent, may He comfort you. Why this expression on this occasion too? Because when we feel that G-d is distant, be it at a time of personal or communal tragedy, we are reminded that although He may not be imminent, and He may feel more distant, He is always with us from His place. Pesach is all about G-d being with us in redemption, but in Egypt as well.

Once our ancestors were worshippers of idols, Metechilah ovdei avodah zarah...

The Rav said that a Jew must remember that we were not chosen because we were special, because we were so smart or so good. Our ancestor, Terach, worshipped the idols like the rest of them. In fact, he sold the idols to everyone else. Our relationship with G-d is a gift, a present, a grace from G-d for which we need to be grateful that He gave us the chance to find Him. Pesach is about being thankful for the gift of Torah, of being shown the way.

Arami oved avi, My father was a wandering Aramean

It also translates as, An Aramean tried to destroy my ancestor, and then it goes on to say, and he (Jacob) went down to Egypt. What is the connection between Laban the Aramean and Jacob going to Egypt? Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, of early 20th cent. Jerusalem said, because we made a pact with Laban never to come back to Aram, Jacob was forced to go to Egypt and not Mesopotamia to get food. Our roots are in the Fertile Crescent. When a Jew goes to Egypt he is going the wrong way. It was Laban who forced us to go in the wrong direction! Pesach is about finding our way back to our roots!

We could not linger

We all know the bread had no time to rise. What was the rush? Well, say the rabbis, if we stayed in Egypt even for another moment, we would have been so assimilated, so lost that we would never be able to get out of Egypt. Rav Sorotzkin asked, why were we so close to total assimilation? What happened? Well, says the Midrash, in

Egypt we didn't change our language, our clothing or our names. Sounds good, right? No, that was all we did. Our whole Judaism was cultural. We had our own language and style of dress and unique Jewish names. Says Rav Sorotzkin, common culture can preserve us, but not for long. Had the Jews been in Egypt more than their 210 years, we would have been completely lost, but in the last 2,000 years, with not just culture, but with Torah, we have been able to survive not 210 years, but 2000 years because Torah preserves us more than simply a Jewish culture could ever do.

Dayeinu, Enough!

Rabbi Norman Lamm of Yeshiva University said that we emphasize the idea of Dayeinu, that if we just had this or that we would have been thankful and appreciative because in the desert, the Jews had the opposite attitude. We got manna from heaven but we complained we didn't have meat. G-d protected us but we longed for the good old days in Egypt. To counter this attitude of old, we try to be extra thankful for every step of the way on Pesach. Pesach is about being thankful for what we have, even if it is not until next year that we will be in Jerusalem!

We are so particularistic, so parochial, so tribal!

Well, yes, says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, we do our own thing. Our story is ours. But this story of Exodus and freedom has inspired everyone since the American Revolution to Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King. Our job is not to be Universalists. Our job is to be the best Jews we can be. This will in turn inspire other nations to follow our path. Seems unlikely? Well, the last 3,000 years have proven it to be true. Our tribal culture has changed the whole world.

Opening the door, Shefoch Chamatcha al hagoyim, pour out Your wrath against the nations that know you not

What are these verses of wrath doing in the midst of Hallel, Psalms of praise? Rather, since we are talking about the Exodus whose purpose it was to make G-d known in this world, and today we live in a world in which there are still pagans in the world, and it was the pagans, the Romans who destroyed the Temple, so we pray for the wrath to be poured on those uncouth nations that do not acknowledge the story we have told tonight. But, said Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi, we do not refer to the Christians and Muslims among whom we live, since they accept the story of the Torah.

Question: We say "next year in Jerusalem." Does this refer simply to our location or does this mean something else?

"Blessed is the One Who Keeps His Promise to Israel, Blessed is He. For the Holy One Blessed be He figured the end (of our exile) as He told Avraham our forefather in the Covenant of the Parts, For your children will be slaves in a land which is not theirs, four hundred years...."

How could G-d say we would be slaves for 400 years when it was actually 210?

1. That's what it means that He 'figured out the end.' He gave us a discount, based on a different calculation. What is that? To count from the birth of Isaac who was a stranger in his land, though not a slave.
2. According to Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer, Ephraim and Menashe were born in Egypt 5 years before Jacob arrived so they were in Egypt for 215 years, and since Jews worked day and night, it totals 430 as the verse says in Exodus 12, 40.
3. The Tzalach says that the servitude was so hard that it counts as 400.
4. The Chidah says that since we multiplied so surprisingly, we were able to do the work of 400 years in 210.
5. The Chatam Sofer writes that once we became G-d's 'property' and slaves, our sanctification removes us from our bondage and we went out early.
6. G-d said 400 years but he also said we would be there only 4 generations. He generously granted us to be there only according to the latter formulation.
7. The Steipler Rav wrote that He was forced to redeem us sooner so that we would not be completely assimilated.

It was a matter of 400 years worth of humiliation. But due to the lowered morality of Egypt, it was so degrading to work for such a degenerate society, that it counted as the degradation of 400 years.

"Kosherizing" Your Kitchen for Pesach

- Countertops of artificial materials such as formica should be koshered; boil water in a pot which has not been used for 24 hours and pour it on the counter. Then cover the counter.
- Countertops of natural stone, smooth wood, metal should be koshered and need not be covered.
- Stovetops should not be used for 24 hours, then turned on high and the areas between burners should be covered.
- Self cleaning ovens should be left unused for 24 hours, then set on self clean.
- Regular ovens should be thoroughly cleaned, left for 24 hours and then turned on high for one hour. Best to continue to cover racks afterwards or kasher those racks in the self cleaning oven.
- Microwave ovens must be cleaned thoroughly, and not be used for 24 hours. Then boil a cup of water in it for over 5 minutes. Remove the glass tray. It cannot be used. Cover all foods prepared during Pesach in the oven.