



*shema bekolah hear her voice*  
שְׁמַע בְּקוֹלָהּ

**Pesah—Hag HaHinuh:  
The Holiday of Education**

by Yaffa Epstein

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# Pesah— Hag HaHinukh: The Holiday of Education

Yaffa Epstein<sup>1</sup>

Jewish tradition has four names for the Passover Holiday—*Hag HaAviv* (the Spring Festival), *Hag HaMatsot* (the Holiday of Unleavened Bread), *Hag HaPesah* (the Holiday of Passing Over), and *Hag HaHerut* (the Festival of Freedom). Each of these names represents a different aspect of the holiday.

However, there seems to be an additional name that would be fitting for Passover — *Hag HaHinukh* — the Holiday of Education. Indeed, no other ceremony in Jewish life is as dedicated to educating the next generation of Jews as that of the Seder. The educational mission of Seder night begins in the Torah itself, in three different verses,<sup>2</sup> which instruct us to educate our children about the story of the Exodus from Egypt.

The key verse in this educational paradigm can be found in Exodus 13:8:

וְהִגַּדְתָּ לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בְּעִבּוֹר זֶה עָשָׂה יְקֹוֹק לִי  
בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרָיִם:

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

What this verse seems to be stating is that while you are eating matsah, you should explain to your child all that happened to you while you were leaving Egypt.

The same educational call is found in the Mishna, Tractate *Pesahim* 10:4:

מִזְגוּ לוֹ כּוֹס שֵׁנִי וְכֹאן הֵבֵן שׁוֹאֵל אֲבִיו וְאִם אֵין דַּעַת בְּבֵן

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 12:26, 13:8, 13:14.

אביו מלמדו....

ולפי דעתו של בן אביו מלמדו.

A second cup of wine is poured out; and the son should then inquire of his father. If the son doesn't have *da'at* (understanding) to do this, *aviv melando*—his father teaches him.... And according to the *da'at* of the child should the father teach him.

This Mishna describes the moment at the Seder when the child's curiosity should be piqued. After all, why are we suddenly having a second cup of wine when we normally have only one? Here, the expected response of the child is depicted. However, in the event that the child does not ask, the parent is obligated to teach. The Mishna delineates an additional requirement: that the parent teach the child according to the child's *da'at* — the child's understanding, or intellectual capabilities. It is a remarkably modern approach, that of individualized education. The Mishna here is communicating that the one-size-fits-all educational model doesn't work; education must be child-specific.

It is interesting to note that this is the only place in the entire Mishna where the words אביו מלמדו (his father teaches him) appear. We have no other direct command to teach our children in the Mishna, and here our Mishna states this phrase not once, but twice! Seder night is a unique moment in Jewish life where parents have the potential to see their children for who they are, and must educate them accordingly.

The Gemara that explicates this Mishna, in *Pesahim* 116a,<sup>3</sup> chooses to go in a different direction altogether, and focuses on the case where there are no children at the Seder. Here, the Talmud requires that a person must recount the Passover story to him or herself in the case where he or she does not have a child.

This raises a critical question about the true

<sup>3</sup> "The Rabbis taught: One who has an intelligent son should be asked by his son; if he doesn't have one, the wife should inquire, and if he doesn't have one, he himself should ask those questions."

nature of Seder night. To whom are we obligated to tell the story of the Exodus? Is it for ourselves, or for our children? What is the ideal situation of a Seder?

A careful examination of Maimonides' Mishna Torah, Laws of Hamets and Matsah 7:103, illuminates the matter. In Law 1, Maimonides writes,

It is a positive commandment of the Torah to relate the miracles and wonders wrought for our ancestors in Egypt on the night of the fifteenth of Nisan.... The mitzvah applies even if one does not have a son.

In other words, there is a primary mitzvah on each individual to relive and retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, regardless of audience. Put differently, the educational moment here is an internal one — a sort of self-education.

In Law 2, Maimonides states,

It is a mitzvah to inform one's sons **even if they do not ask**, as [Exodus 13:8] states: "You shall tell your son." "A father should teach his son according to the son's knowledge:" How is this applied? If the son is young or foolish... If the son is older and wise....

Maimonides combines two elements that we have seen above, that the verse in Exodus focuses on the telling of the story, without needing the question of the child, and the Mishna's demand that the education of the child be related directly to his or her capabilities.

In Law 3, Maimonides teaches us what level of effort we demand of the parent. He states

[The parent] should make changes on this night so that the children will see and will [be motivated to] ask.

What, then, is the *hinukh* education model according to the Mishna and Maimonides?

First and foremost, people must make sure that they themselves are educated and aware of the miraculous nature of God's salvation of the Jewish people.

Next, we have the obligation to teach our children the story, and to make sure they are educated, even if they have not asked us. Indeed, the fact that a child has not asked does not absolve a parent of the obligation to tell the story; and yet, the telling should be according to the intellectual capabilities of the child — *lefi da'ato*.

Furthermore, included in the obligation to tell the story is the duty to instill in one's children a natural curiosity; to entice them to explore their intellectual capabilities and strive for greater knowledge. Of course, this comes as a result of a deep understanding of the child — *lefi da'ato* — according to his or her understanding. In other words, parents must know and understand their child, and deeply internalize what will allow for, and bring about their child's natural curiosity — so that the child will be hungry to learn, hungry to hear the lessons of the past.

Interestingly, there is another instance of this phrase *aviv melamdo* — his father teaches him — in rabbinic parlance, in the *Tosefta* in *Haggiga* 1:2:

יודע לדבר אביו מלמדו שמע ותורה ולשון קודש.

As soon as a child knows how to speak — *aviv melamdo* — his father teaches him to recite the Shema, Torah, and the Holy Language (i.e., Hebrew).

Here, too, we see that a parent's education of a child must be related to and consistent with the child's abilities. Yet, there is another message here as well, that as soon as the child capable, we immediately begin the process of her education; the fundamentals are instilled in her.

In a recent address at Ewha Womans University in South Korea, Harvard University President Drew Faust pointed out, "The challenge is not only to educate females, but to create opportunities for their skills and talents to help build better and

more prosperous societies to improve everyone's lives as we improve women's lives."<sup>4</sup>

Here President Faust is echoing *Hazal*, in that she points out that we need both education, and also recognition of the unique talents of each individual, and the importance of allowing all of the members of our community the opportunity to utilize these talents.

The issue of women's education is far from solved in the Orthodox community today. Although we have seen incredible, and some might say miraculous strides in women's Jewish learning and scholarship, there is still much to be desired and achieved. Shorter learning days, less time dedicated to Jewish legal texts — both Talmud and halakha — less-educated teachers, and lack of dedication of the students, are just some of the issues that plague our learning programs for women.

It behooves us to support and strengthen the existing Torah institutions that exist for girls and women, but we must also demand that these Torah institutions achieve a level of excellence that is on par with male institutions. We cannot allow standards to be lowered for girls and women, despite the very real needs of childcare and finances. We as a community need to face the challenges that exist, and create support for our daughters to achieve the highest levels of *limmud Torah* (Torah study), including supporting existing female leaders and scholars. For this is what the Mishna is trying to teach us, that we must not squander the *da'at* (knowledge and intellectual abilities) of our children.

The salvation of the Jewish people will come when all of our children are encouraged according to their abilities. For surely, the job of the parent, and in lieu of the parent, the community, is to understand each child for who he or she is; to see each child's potential, to see what awakens his or her questions, and to teach each child accordingly. Only then will we experience the true *geulah*

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.harvard.edu/president/speech/2013/educate-women-change-world-ewha-womans-university>.

(redemption) that is the legacy of Pesah, *Hag HaHinukh*.

*Hag Kasher V'Sameah!*

חג כשר ושמח!

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## וְכֹל הַמְרִבָּה לְסֵפֶר

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