

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, “It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt.” (13:8)

No religious ceremony focuses more on the inclusion of children as does the *Seder* meal. Cloaked in profound esoteric meaning, the *Seder* is brought down to an elementary level in order to engender youthful participation. Indeed, we have activities and traditions that cater to youthful imagination, all for the purpose of motivating a child's questions and the adults' reply. The reason for this display is that *Pesach* commemorates our liberation and the path to nationhood, which we embarked on at *Har Sinai* when we accepted the Torah. In order to ensure that *Pesach* and its eternal message remains an integral part of Jewish life, we must see to it that its significance be inculcated in our children. The only guarantee of their continued commitment is our transmission of the message and its significance to the next generation. When children grow up realizing that something, a tradition, holds great significance, it becomes a part of them and they see to it that they observe its message and transmit it to the next generation.

Pharaoh was acutely aware of this verity. Thus, he instructed Moshe *Rabbeinu* to take only the adult men on their “three day” trip to the wilderness. Without the children to impress and inspire, the trip would have a low success rate. Moshe's response was immediate: “We are all going...the old and the young...for, without the young, the trip will have no enduring meaning.” Therefore, every *Pesach Seder* night, we follow the *halachah* and do everything to motivate youthful participation, but does it succeed? Just doing the right things and following the presumed prescription for success does not guarantee success. Do we have a general recipe that works?

Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz relates the following story. A distinguished Torah scholar had a young son who was not successful in his learning. His problem was retention of the material. Regardless of the number of times that he reviewed the *Chumash* and *Gemarah*, he proceeded to forget what he had been taught. His father visited with professionals who specialized in this field, but they were baffled by this case. One day, father and son walked together through the fruit market and noticed the watermelon peddler calling out, “Watermelon on the knife, watermelon red and lusciously sweet!” over and over again. Half an hour later, as they continued to walk, the young boy began to call out, “Watermelon on the knife, watermelon red and lusciously sweet.” It dawned on the father that his son, who had a severe retention problem, did not seem to have a problem remembering what the fruit peddler had been calling out.

The father began to wonder. Perhaps his son's retention problem was exclusive to Torah, but he would have no problem remembering mundane education. He would seek the sage advice of a *gadol*, Torah giant. That night he met with a holy Torah giant, a *Rosh Yeshivah* whose knowledge of Torah was without peer, but whose wisdom also traversed secular disciplines as well. The *gadol* said, “I could tell you that there is a *klipah*, (spiritual) shell wrapped around your son's soul which prevents him from learning. If you persevere, your efforts will ultimately penetrate this shell and

your son will become a *talmid chacham*. I do not, however, think that this is your son's problem. The reason that your son remembered what the fruit peddler called out is that his shouts emanate from the deepest recesses of his being. The watermelons that he sells represent his family's livelihood. He is not simply shouting; his heart is screaming, "Buy watermelons!" Obviously, your son's educators are not teaching from the heart, but from the mouth and the mind. Unless his *rebbe* teaches passionately, your son will continue to have a retention problem."

As a follow-up to this notion about passionate teaching, imparting the lesson from the heart, he related another story of a father whose last words to his son remained with him throughout his life and served as his lodestar for raising and educating his own children. A Jew who was born in Austria was able to leave as a young child and make his way to Germany – on his own – alone in the world, without his parents. While in Germany, he was able to connect with one of the *Kinderstransports* ferrying children to England. From there, he finally made his way to *Eretz Yisrael*, where he settled in Petach Tikva. Since he spent most of his youth on the run, without parents, he was unable to have the "luxury" of a Torah education. He knew how to *daven* and could learn *Chumash*. Aware of his limited background and acknowledging the fact that he was not going to become a Torah scholar, he decided to devote himself so that others could learn. To this end, he became a *shamash*, caretaker, at a *shul*, handling all the maintenance, both physical and spiritual. He saw to it that the *shul* provided an array of *shiurim*, Torah classes, to satisfy the needs of its growing, diverse crowd. He lived a full life, and he merited to see each of his sons become a solid *talmid chacham*, and each of his daughters marry a Torah scholar of note.

How did it happen? How did a person who grew up with no solid Jewish education become such a Torah-devoted Jew that he raised a family that would be the envy of a *Rosh Yeshivah*? This question was posed by a *Rosh Yeshivah* who was close with one of the sons: "How did your father achieve such Torah *nachas*? What motivated/inspired him to seek such *nachas*?"

The eldest son explained, "We grow up taking our parents for granted. Do we bother asking them, 'How was your life growing up? Did you have challenges? How did you achieve such success? Who helped you? Who guided you?' One day, I decided to ask my father how he – without parents, spending most of his youth on the run – remained a Torah observant Jew who raised such a family? This is what he told me:

"When I left Austria, I left alone. It was not supposed to be that way. My father was supposed to travel with me to Germany and attend to my arrangements. At the last minute, he had a problem with his passport which precluded his accompanying me. Instead, he took me to the train station to see me off. I never saw him again.

"I will never forget my father as the train pulled out of the station. He started running alongside the car I was in to say goodbye. He waved to me and called out, *Zei a gutten Yid*, "Be a good/observant Jew." He continued to run as the train picked up speed, yelling, *Zei a gutten Yid, zei a gutten Yid!* At the last minute, he tripped and fell, but he still yelled out to me, *Zei a gutten Yid!*

“This was my father’s parting message to me. I knew that whatever happened in life, this was one thing I had to do: be a good Jew!”

The son continued, “My father’s life revolved around those four parting words. This is why our family and the *shul* we grew up in looks the way it does. He never forgot his father’s plea: ‘Be a good Jew.’”

We now understand the significance of our participating with the children during the *Seder*. This is the night that we impart *Pesach* to them: *Pesach*, its meaning; our nation, its meaning; Judaism, its meaning. There is, however, one stipulation: We must teach with heart; our children must feel the passion. If we teach dispassionately, if we are hungry and rush through the *Seder*, so that we can eat, this is what they will remember. We will have only ourselves to blame. If we want to make an enduring impression, we must feel as if these are the most important moments of our lives. This is the lesson that they will take from us for the rest of their lives. How we present the lesson determines the student’s ability to retain the message. This is something to take to heart.