

## “And Here the Child Asks”: Passover and the Pillars of Jewish Parenting

Rabbi Michael Zion | Pesach 2015 | Text and the City

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Tonight is the most important night of the Jewish year. It isn't Yom Kippur, Holocaust memorial day or Hanukah. And it doesn't take place in your Synagogue, or in Israel, or anywhere where you aren't. It is Seder night, and it takes place in your dining room.

Seder night has a radical claim at its heart: that before Judaism is a religion, or a people, or a culture – it is a story; one that is told in a family context, in the first person. It is a story that is to be questioned, but also experienced, celebrated, dramatized and eaten. It is a story that is turned from narrative into nomos, from fable into values and practices – as we open the door for others. And it takes place at home, around your table.

If we were to choose a National Jewish Parenting Day, it would be Seder night (both of them!). Already in the Torah, before the Israelites even left Egypt, God and Moses fast forward to the quintessential moment of parenting: “*And when your children asks you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?'*” (Exodus 12:26). This scenario is repeated three times, which – with the addition of one unasked question – will become the basis of the midrash about Four children at the Seder table. And it is upon this basis that the Rabbis turned Passover from a Temple based holiday – one which takes place *there*, away from home – to a home-made holiday, which always begins *right here*.

Passover Night puts into focus the two pillars of Jewish parenting: **Calendar and Table**. Nothing new here, it might be trite (“we’re all wise, we all know the story”), and yet I find it worth repeating: Calendar and Table are the two vehicles through which Jewish parenting takes place. And they both begin at the home, not with the outsourcing institutions of Jewish education we’ve become so dependent on.

**Calendar**. The Jewish story is first of all conveyed through the calendar, and that has remained its strongest suit to this day. Families who do not shape their lives around the daily observances and commandments of Halakha, nevertheless tie their family life to the Jewish calendar. Stories are thus woven into the temporal rhythm of the family, like birthdays that come around whether we like it or not. Awkward rituals containing memories demanding to be told, repeated. At its best, the very experience of time reminds us of the story, such that creation itself seems

to be repeating the tale: the smells of spring herald the retelling of the Exodus; the darkness of winter beckons for the candles of Hanukkah; the falling leaves invites the reflectivity of Rosh haShana. As Heschel would put it, Judaism builds palaces in time, allowing the stories to reside not only in locations and institutions, but wherever we are. And as Yosef Haim Yerushalmi and Mircea Eliade taught us, what matters in the Jewish calendar is not history but memory. Did the stories “happen”? They exist not in the past, but in mythic time which repeats itself every year. In our modern technological life, as time has become an ever scarcer resource, the power of shaping time around our stories – even just a few times a year - cannot be underestimated, for our children and for ourselves.

**Table.** “As long as the temple existed – the altar would atone for Israel. Now – a **person’s table** atones for him.” (Talmud Brachot 55a). Faced with a dislocated Judaism, the Rabbis turned the family table into the central location of Jewish practice, and this continues to be the most powerful invention of Rabbinic Judaism. It was often trumped by the synagogue and the house of study/school, and has recently been sidelined by an era in which Jews sought to reclaim the public sphere and political space. And yet the family table must be the central altar, nothing really rivals it. Around the family table stories are told, conversations are had, and values are put into practice. Tables are always places of rules and mores - Parents try and teach their children how to “behave like human beings” and children challenge and undermine their parent’s authority – but can be so much more than that. Hospitality, that Abrahamic Jewish practice, challenges us to expand our table to people of all stripes and backgrounds. Passover night is THE night of Jewish table, creating a constitutive moment that can then be translated into year round rituals, as we reconvene on a smaller scale around the table on Friday nights and other holidays. On Seder night, wrote Philo, even as the altar in Jerusalem still stood, “every home takes on the semblance of the Temple and receives its glory, the main course becomes the holy offering, and the participants are invited to purify themselves. Every other day of the year ritual is led by priests – on this night every family become the practitioners of the holy of holies.”

#### **Four Questions, which are One: From Theory to Practice**

All this sounds great in theory, and is most challenging in practice. Here are four questions raised in a recent conversation among parents in preparation for Passover. All four are different renditions of the question: Who am I doing this for?

The focus on children and parenting can often make the ritual **feel empty and boring to parents**. How do we avoid the infantilization of Jewish rituals to the point that grown ups – or teenage children – feel left out?

**I’ve become more observant once I had children**, creating a strong culture of Jewish calendar and table practices in the absence of much Jewish community around me. The desire to raise my children within the Jewish story becomes stronger the more I see it as a healthy antidote to a vapid consumer culture. Yet each year as I clean I wonder – if I’m mostly doing this for my children, why

practice these rituals when they're not watching? How much effort should I then spend on the pieces that don't feel like they are particularly relevant - or noticeable - to children? **Will they know that that I'm "only doing it for them"?**

It's all well and good to talk about storytelling at the Passover Seder, but **the ritual itself allows very little room for it.** Between the order of the Haggadah and the desires of the various guests and hosts, and the fact that everyone basically knows the story too, what exactly are we aiming for on this night? Getting the children to focus for a few minutes is hard enough, and rarely happens "in the right moment", so how do I know that we've "performed the ritual as it should be" and be able to relax my grip the rest of the time?

**I am not a parent**, and have little interest in a night that is so child-oriented, when I am not one. What of all this relates to me?

Like on Seder night, these questions are deeper than any answers one can give.

But a good sounding board for these questions can be found in Maimonides' discussion of Seder Night:

One must make changes on this night, so that the children will see and will be motivated to ask: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" until he replies to them: "This and this occurred; this and this took place."

What changes should be made? He should give them roasted seeds and nuts; the table should be taken away before they eat; matzot should be snatched from each other and the like.

When a person does not have a son, his wife should ask him. If he does not have a wife, [he and a colleague] should ask each other: "Why is this night different?" This applies even if they are all wise. A person who is alone should ask himself: "Why is this night different?" (Maimonides Code, Hametz uMatza 7:3)

-וצריך לעשות שינוי בלילה הזה כדי שיראו הבנים ושאלו ויאמרו- מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות, עד שישב להם ויאמר להם, כך וכך אירע וכך וכך היה וכיצד משנה--מחלק להם קליות ואגוזים, ועוקרים השולחן מלפניהם קודם שיאכלו, וחוטפין מצה זה מיד זה, וכיוצא בדברים; האלו. אין לו בן, אשתו שואלתו אין לו אישה--שואלין זה את זה מה נשתנה הלילה הזה, ואפילו היו כולן חכמים. היה לבדו, שואל לעצמו מה נשתנה הלילה הזה

Maimonides', based on the Talmud, grounds Passover night in a series of games, surprises and changes - which are all aimed at eliciting spontaneous, real questions from the audience. "Snatching matza" is the afikoman game, "seeds and nuts" are the desserts of old. Give out candy, do strange things - anything to keep this night alive, fun and relevant.

But a moment before Passover night turns into a child-oriented circus, Maimonides pauses to ask: what if the classic imagined audience is not there? What remains of Passover without parenting? "A person who is alone should ask himself: Why is this night different?"

I find the image of a person, sitting along and asking themselves questions on Passover night, to be the most poignant image of ideal parenting. Anything we

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do with our children, ideally, would be something we would do on our own, for ourselves, if we could. And when we do it with our children, the engine for it should not just be in them – our desires, fears, or hopes for them – but in something in ourselves. This is not about being self-serving, but about integrity, acting from a place of existential grounding, from our best selves. Children sniff it out immediately if it does not emanate from such a place.

Granted, we are rarely our best selves when we are alone in a room. So much of early parenting is trying to regain best practices which we allowed slide during adulthood (clean language, no snacking between meals, limiting screen time, making time for what really matters). In fact, it is far easier to do things for our children and to expect of them the highest behavior – while struggling to reach those bars ourselves. In response Maimonides' offers an image of parenting as a series of concentric circles – ideally we should be having the same conversations with our children as we have with our spouse, our friends, ourselves. Parenting allows us to put on a mask of our best self, or a mask of an ideal world which we want to give our children – but we must make sure that the mask is never too distant from who we are by ourselves, with our friends and with our spouses. And the relationship should work both ways: the stories we tell our children, the questions they ask of us, must shape who we are as adults as well. In that sense, talking about parenting is just a way of talking about who we want to truly be. Turning that into practice, well for that we need a whole bag of tricks up our sleeve – for our children as for ourselves.

Hag Sameach,  
Mishael

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