

Seder q&a

Transforming the Seder from baffling ritual into inspiring relevance.

By Aish UK

q: How can this Seder be different from all others?

a: Through asking relevant questions and delivering inspiring answers. For too long Jewish education has been about 'you should', 'you must', 'this is the way' etc. But people invariably want to know 'why?'

And 'what's the point?'

We hope that the following is an engaging and inspiring set of questions and answers that can assist you in providing a truly stimulating Seder.

The Seder should be turning them on to the beauty of Judaism, its intellectually challenging nature and its potent contemporary relevance.

This is not another Haggada to add to the pile, nor a comprehensive guide to the Seder. Due to constraints of space it cannot even attempt to do full justice to the issues raised. We do however hope that it will provide a starting point, some food for thought to make this Seder night a little different for you and your family.

q: Why should we bother with Seder night?

a: Throughout the millennia, in all circumstances, Jewish families in every corner of the globe have gathered together around the Seder table to reaffirm their personal and familial link in the chain of Jewish tradition. The mere fact that our Seder is so similar to that of our great grandparents attests to the unique endurance of our heritage.

Tonight we go back to the events surrounding our formation as a people 3,300 years ago. We retell how God Himself intervened to free our ancestors from slavery. In return the Jewish people committed themselves to what freedom is really about - the ability to transform ourselves and the world around us in an eternal partnership with God.

The purpose of the Seder night is to strive to connect to this reality; to internalize for ourselves and for our children a palpable sense of confidence and trust that no matter what, the Jewish people, its message and our own personal place within it will remain vibrant forever.

q: What's with all the seemingly meaningless ritual?

a: There is no meaningless ritual in Judaism.

The more we make an effort to examine the reasons behind the actions we do on Seder night, the more we will be able to appreciate the richness and meaning behind each step.

The word 'Seder' means 'order.' The traditional sequence of 15 incremental stages is specifically designed to catalyze our critical thinking and to prompt important questions of Jewish identity, and what freedom means to us.

Jewish tradition teaches us that our attitudes are shaped by our actions. As a result we engage in what could be described as a series of behavioral stimuli that comprise the traditional Seder service.

The multifaceted experience of eating, drinking, dipping, reading, discussing, questioning, leaning and singing of Seder night presents us with an interactive educational framework within which we can begin to take a fresh look at our own personal freedom.

Kadesh: making kiddush

q: Why does every Jewish occasion seem to involve wine?

a: Wine can be used for base drunkenness, but it can also be used for joy and elevated consciousness. Like so much in this world, it all depends how we use it. For the Jew, holiness is not withdrawal from the world. Kiddush involves taking the worldly and making it holy.

The Hebrew word *kadosh* means 'holy' in the sense of something set aside, designated or special. The text of the Kiddush prayer articulates the concept of specialness.

Each aspect of creation has a unique role. This applies to individuals as well as to nations. As in sports where each individual player expresses their own talent while abiding by the same rules of the game, Judaism provides a framework for spirituality and personal growth designed to enable our unique nature and talents to flourish.

Urechatz & Karpas: washing hands & eating a vegetable

q: Why do we wash our hands for just one little vegetable?

a: We dip and eat one solitary vegetable solely in order to pique our curiosity and to begin to engage our minds.

The Seder is about questions. In stark contradistinction to those cultures that idealize blind obedience, Judaism has always demanded an active participation of the mind. The Talmud itself takes the form of an extended debate of piercing questions and thought provoking responses.

Jewish tradition encourages dialogue and questions, not just 'how?' but 'why?'

By stimulating questions in a curious fashion, the Seder hopes to awaken the inquisitive, searching side within each of us.

Seder night is an evening to break free and to dedicate time to question, to debate and to discuss. The Haggada has a standard 'four questions' that come as a result of these peculiar practices, but in fact these are just a starting point.

Yachatz: breaking & hiding the middle matzah

q: Why are we hiding the matzah?

a: We're putting it aside for later. In a sense we are choosing to invest in the future.

Although we live in a world where instant gratification is so readily available and even encouraged, the desire to have something NOW can often be childlike. It can enslave us and lead us to do that which we later regret. A mature person is able to choose to defer the immediate fulfillment of desire for a greater or more long-term good.

Our choice to hold back the matzah both provokes the 'four questions' and simultaneously teaches us an important life lesson.

True freedom includes becoming free from the enslaving drives of immediate gratification, allowing investment in the future for ourselves, our families and the world.

Maggid 1: the four questions / 'we were slaves'

q: 'We would still be slaves'? Surely we'd have got out eventually?

a: Freedom is far more than political emancipation. Even though we might feel free, we can still be trapped by all sorts of forces that prevent us from actualizing our potential and from leading fulfilling lives. We can be enslaved by the social pressure of living like others; by our own animalistic lusts, cravings and drives; by our egos, bad tempers, jealousies, guilt-complexes... any of a host of negative traits, addictions and habits that can hurt us, control us, and prevent us from becoming who we truly want to be.

Many sources point out that the word Egypt in Hebrew - *Mitzrayim* - is spelled with the precise same letters as the word '*Metzarim*' - limitations.

If we don't get the messages of the Haggada then we could still remain slaves to those limitations.

Maggid 2: the Rabbis talking all night / the four sons

q: Rabbis up all night? Didn't they know it all already?

a: Even some of the greatest Rabbis in history could find new insights and ideas worth discussing all night. Despite having 'done it all before' there is so much to absorb.

Put differently, how much we will get out of the Seder, depends on how we approach it, which leads directly to the four sons - four possible attitudes.

Perhaps we can even find within ourselves elements of each of the four. At times wise, curious, fascinated and probing; at times cynical. Sometimes we are just simple, and sometimes we don't know how to ask; we have lost the curiosity, we are no longer interested.

True freedom comes from a genuine openness to learn and discover. If we can just shed that cynical or 'know it all' blockage, we can gain so much tonight. We'll have already attained one giant leap away from slavery, towards freedom.

Maggid 3: 'originally our ancestors were idol worshippers...'

q: Why hark back to Abraham? Aren't we meant to be discussing Egypt?

a: The Jewish journey began in a pagan world, where infanticide was widespread, where might meant right, and where the masses were kept illiterate.

It was a world of biological instinct, a world of tribes and groups cooperating internally and competing viciously against others.

Abraham and his family began a revolution. But it was only through the Egypt experience that there finally emerged an entire people committed to bringing an alternative vision to the world: A vision of Godly values, of a universal right to life, of equal justice, of peace as an ideal and of a deep belief in, and commitment to, the dream of bringing Heaven down to Earth. We have the choice to permit ourselves to be enslaved by our animal instincts, or to become something far greater; to let all that is wrong with the world 'just be', or to commit ourselves to making it better.

Maggid 4: - 'vehi she'amdah - in every generation'

q: Why do we raise our glasses and sing about anti-Semitism?

a: We are celebrating the unshakable bond between Creator and creation that has allowed for the otherwise inexplicable survival of the Jewish people against all the odds.

In the words of Tolstoy:

'The Jew is the emblem of eternity. He whom neither slaughter nor torture of thousands of years could destroy, he whom neither fire nor sword nor inquisition was able to wipe off the face of the earth, he who was the first to produce the oracles of God, he who has been for so long the guardian of prophecy, and who transmitted it to the rest of the world - such a nation cannot be destroyed. The Jew is as everlasting as eternity itself'. (*What is a Jew?* Leo N. Tolstoy. 'Jewish World' periodical, London 1908.)

It is not only about the Jewish people, but about the whole of mankind - if we recognize that God is really with us, then we realize that in the end what is good and right will survive and triumph.

Maggid 5: - 'arami oved avi'- the four verses

q: Are we meant to be getting something from all these verses?

a: The crux of the Haggada is four verses that recount the predicament of the Jewish people, and our redemption.

The Talmud says that these verses should provoke discussion and analysis. What follows is a summary of each verse and some points to ponder and discuss...

1. How the Jews got stuck in Egypt in the first place... Are we truly free? How did we get to where we are in life?

2. How they gradually became enslaved... What are the areas we are not free? To what extent are we 'slaves' to social pressure? To other compelling forces?

3. How they finally cried out to God against the slavery... Do we just accept those areas where we lack freedom? What pains us most in the world? What would we like to change about our lives and about the world around us? What's stopping us?

4. How the impossible became a reality and God pulled us out of slavery... Do we really believe we can make those changes? What limiting beliefs are stopping us?

Maggid 6: - 'Dayeinu'

q: What's that Dayeinu song all about?
Surely it's enough already?

a: '*Dayeinu*' means 'it would have been enough' - having recounted the wonders of the miraculous birth of the Jewish people, we respond with gratitude. It is difficult to be truly grateful.

Would we trade our eyesight for a million pounds? If not, then we are walking millionaires - we have blessings worth millions to us. What about hearing? A functioning body? Legs that walk? Family? Friends? We have gifts worth billions... but do we wake up each morning realizing how lucky we are?

If we don't consciously focus on the good that we have, we take it for granted, and end up focusing instead on the little that we are lacking.

Dayeinu is an exercise in appreciation. Step by step we focus on each episode of the Egypt saga, realizing how privileged we are.

Rachtzah, Motzi & Matzah: washing hands, blessing & eating matzah

q: What can we learn from a flat piece of matzah?

a: Matzah is literally free of all additives, externalities and superficial good looks - it is bread without the hot air. It represents the bare essentials.

Everything we pursue in life can be divided into necessities and luxuries. To the extent that a luxury becomes a necessity we lose an element of our freedom by being enslaved to a false need.

Jewish thought teaches that we should not submit to peer pressure, viewing ourselves as competing with others. It is far better to focus on our 'personal bests' rather than 'world records'; life is an arena in which we do not need others to lose in order for us to win.

On Passover we can focus on the essence and leave the externalities behind. It is a time to get rid of the ego that powers our self importance and holds us back through distracting us from our true goals.

Maror & Korech: bitter herbs & Hillel's sandwich

q: If it's all about freedom, why focus on pain and enslavement?

a: Freedom and pain are inexorably linked. Our approach to the 'bitter' times is neither to deny nor to seek escape but to face up to the challenges and embrace the opportunity they offer.

The key is to recognize that pain and suffering emanate from exactly the same source as joy and pleasure. The self same God that redeemed us from Egypt was the One who allowed us to be enslaved there in the first place, because, painful though it was, it was necessary for us to go through it as a nation.

Without an appreciation of pain and hardship, with all the inherent challenges that life entails, there can be no true sense of joy and fulfillment. Without connecting to the trials and tribulations that are woven into the tapestry of Jewish history, we will be unable to fully appreciate the majesty that forms Jewish destiny.

Shulchan Orech: eating the festive meal

q: Why is this meal different from any other meal?

a: Do we choose to satiate our hunger by grabbing a TV dinner out of the freezer, sticking it in the microwave and wolfing it down, all before the end of the commercial break?

God created a beautiful world for us to enjoy. Human beings have about 10,000 taste buds, the eye is sensitive to millions of shades of colors, and there are literally thousands of varieties of natural foods.

When we eat we can grab and gobble, or we can taste the goodness of God's world. We can just fill our stomachs, or we can provide ourselves with the energy to go out and do so much good. Whether our meal is an animalistic activity or a truly meaningful endeavor is in our hands.

God wants us to take pleasure in the world. But we need to know how to take control of ourselves to be able to really use the world in the most meaningful way.

Tzafun: eating the afikomen

q: Why do we hide and seek a broken piece of matzah?

a: We invested by putting aside something for later and now we can enjoy the dividends. The Afikomen is designed to be the dessert of the meal, to end the evening with the taste of matzah - the symbol of freedom.

The word *Tzafun* means 'hidden' as we are now eating the matzah that was hidden away. The Hebrew word for Universe is *Olam*, which comes from the word *Ne'elam*, meaning concealment. The world, so to speak conceals its true meaning. It takes time to start to see beyond the superficial, to cease to accept things at face value, to discover the Source of this complex world.

And we traditionally hide the Afikomen and have the children search for it because we know that our collective future lies in our ability to transfer our Jewish values to a generation that is searching.

Barech & Hallel: blessings & praise

q: Does God really need our blessings and praise?

a: As an Infinite Being, God lacks nothing, and most certainly does not need our blessings.

When we make a blessing we are becoming greater ourselves. Instead of taking all of our blessings for granted, we are recognizing them for what they are - a gift. Judaism views God as a loving parent, one who wishes to shower all of life's blessings upon us. In making a blessing we are developing the art of appreciation and gratitude, thereby deepening our relationship with God.

The Hallel that follows is comprised of some of the most joyous passages from the books of Psalms. A dominant theme is love of life. Not as an end in itself, but a meaningful life - a life of making a positive difference to self, family and society.

Nirtzah: conclusion

q: Is anyone still awake?

a: The finale of the Haggada is a series of songs that subtly allude to the end of history.

The Jewish nation has always had deep faith in history, and that if we do the right thing, in the end good will triumph. *Nirtza* expresses that profound statement of thought. Tonight we have done what we can, we have played our part. The journey may be short or long, it may be easy or hard, but things are moving towards an end too magnificent to be grasped by us yet.

The symphony of creation is an ongoing composition, orchestrated by the Master Conductor but played out by man on Earth. We long for the grand finale when these dreams will be realized.

**LeShana Haba'a BiYerushalayim Habenuya -
Next year in Jerusalem!**