

# Pesah (Lesson 1)

by Rabbi Ralph Tawil

**Value: Encourage questioning.** Questions are the way that we seek information from the world. It is an important aspect of an aware and cognizant approach to the world. Questioning takes courage; it means being able to admit that you are seeking information that you do not know. This admission can be hard for some and therefore some are embarrassed to ask. Our sages have taught us that “the bashful pupil cannot learn.” For the same reason, the “quick-to-anger teacher cannot teach.” Real teaching and learning must include a free and open dialogue between the students and their teacher. Just as much as it is the teacher’s obligation to teach when we see that our students do not understand, it is the student’s obligation to ask when something is unclear. As parents, our obligation is even greater. We are our children’s primary source of knowledge about the world. We must take the time to explain carefully, to probe their understanding, and most importantly to encourage questioning.

## **Text: Masekhet Pesahim (p. 116a)**

The text that defines the Pesah Seder is the Haggadah. The Mishna and Talmud in the tenth chapter of Masekhet Pesahim record the guidelines for conducting the Seder.

Mishna: The second cup is mixed (poured), and here the child asks. And if the child doesn’t know to ask, the parent teaches him—how different is this night (*Ma Nishtana*) from all the other nights...

Gemara: If the child is wise—he asks. If he is not—his wife asks. If not—he should ask himself. Even two sages who know the laws of Pesah ask one another.

**Analysis:** Asking is the mainstay of the evening. The parents do things that would arouse the children’s questions, like removing the tray (table) before the meal, like breaking the massah, etc. If the child does not ask, then the parent has to encourage the child to notice the unusual aspects of the evening in order to ask questions. (According to this understanding, the *Ma Nishtana* are not the questions that the children ask, but the way the parent encourages his children to observe the unusual aspects of the evening. But let your young children recite it anyway—they worked so hard to learn it!).

Interestingly, a person who is alone for the Seder must ask himself questions. Questions are a way of seeking knowledge. The person who has no one to ask him questions must still find new questions to ask. This rabbinic directive encourages everyone, no matter how learned, to explore the exodus from Egypt anew, in order to seek more information from it. Thereby deepening and renewing our understanding of these miraculous events.

Therefore, in addition to the reciting of the *Ma Nishtana*, encourage your children to ask other questions. Rambam, based on the Talmud advises:

One must make a change in the routine on this night so that the children will take note and ask, and say, “How different this night is from all other nights!” and the father will answer them and say to them “such and such happened, such and such took place.” How does one make a change? By distributing parched corn or nuts, or by removing the table before them before they eat, or by snatching things from one another’s hands, and similar things. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Hames umassah 7:3*)

Giving candy (parched corn and nuts) at the beginning of the meal, along with the other practices, are meant to break the routine—to encourage the children to notice the difference. Other things can be done to create surprise and difference (Idea: ask your adult guests to think up some unusual things to do. See below for some ideas.) Of course, the best way is by asking your own new questions about Pesah.

Ideas of how to stimulate questions: 1) place unusual items around the seder table that are connected to the haggadah and have the children match the item with the appropriate part of the seder. For example, put a clock set to midnight—when Hashem began to kill the firstborn; place a card that has the mathematical examples  $5 \times 10$ ,  $5 \times 40$ ,  $5 \times 50$  (this represents the derasha about how many plagues happened at the splitting of the sea.) and other ideas. 2) Have a “jeopardy” kind of game, where you give the answer and the child supplies the question. For example, “when we eat this seder item we do not recline”—“What is Marror?” 3) Pack suitcases for the journey out of Egypt.

The following letter to the editor about the importance of questions appeared in the *New York Times* (January 19, 1988):

To the Editor:

Isidor I. Rabi, the Nobel laureate in physics was once asked, “Why did you become a scientist, rather than a doctor or lawyer or businessman, like the other immigrant kids in your neighborhood?” “My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: ‘Nu? Did you learn anything today?’ But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. ‘Izzy,’ she would say, ‘did you ask a good question today?’ That difference—asking good questions—made me become a scientist.

(Donald Sheff. The source of this letter and other ideas contained in this article is an excellent haggadah *A Different Night* by Noam Zion and David Dishon. I recommend the Leader’s Guide to this haggadah as well.)

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