

The Importance of Preparation, and Planning Your Seder 'Lesson'

Dear Parents,

Many years ago, when I was teaching in a synagogue cheder one mid-week afternoon, I got onto the subject of preparing for Shabbos. I was explaining to the children that the quality of their Shabbos will very much depend on the quality of their preparations leading up to it.

During my exchanges with the children it occurred to me that a useful metaphor was in order. So I began to build a comparison with the endeavour of baking a cake, and the necessary preparations for that, without which the fine baked product would certainly fail.

I began by pointing out the need to have that favourite recipe on hand, and then to ensure that all the ingredients were available, and in their correct quantities. Weighing scales were likely to be an important accessory, as well as the right size bowls, the food processor and that indispensable spatula – for obeying the instruction to fold the ingredients together rather than stirring them.

Too much margarine or too little sugar would lead to a veritable culinary disaster, and if the recipe requires for the oven to be preheated then that's what needs to be done – and at the correct temperature for the right length of time. A teaspoon of this, a tablespoon of that, a pinch of the other.

And if all these vital ingredients and processes are followed precisely, and lovingly, then the cake will be a winner – beautifully baked and delicious.

Now, as I had been speaking, I had noticed a little girl looking a bit dreamy. I was sure she had been completely switched off during my inspirational monologue. In fact, her head had been down for a good few minutes, her face in her arms and her mind probably in some distant location – perhaps her family's next holiday destination – that is if she hadn't simply dropped off altogether. "There's no way she has a clue what I've been saying," I thought.

I decided to wake Goldie up and bring her back into the lesson by seeing if she could make the link between my metaphor and the point I was trying to make about Shabbos.

"And so," I continued, "if we also put that much careful preparation into Shabbos, it'll end up being... um... Goldie?"

To my surprise, but also my delight, the little head of wavy brown hair arose from its apparent slumber, and with a knowing, broad smile, Goldie said, "... a piece of cake!"

It was at that moment I learnt you can never underestimate how much a child may be absorbing even when, to all appearances, the lights are off and no one's at home!

But what is true regarding Shabbos is certainly true in respect of Pesach, too. Yes, of course, good preparation is vital for the other Chagim as well; but our focus here is Pesach, and not only because it's fast approaching but also because I think there's a certain aspect to Pesach which makes appropriate and timely preparation all the more essential.

For sure, in many ways Pesach probably outstrips other Yomim Tovim in terms of the preparation that's critical to the demands of the chag: most of all, the hard work that goes into clearing the house of chometz – all the tidying, clearing, cleaning, scrubbing, kashering and so on, covering or kashering kitchen surfaces, kashering ovens, switching pots, pans, crockery and cutlery to the Pesach equivalents

and putting all the year round utensils away; and then ensuring any remaining chometz is sold, and then of course Bedikas Chometz – the search for Chometz the night of Erev Pesach, followed by the Biur Chometz – the burning of the last of our chometz the next morning. And don't forget to say 'Kol Chamira' after the search and following the burning, to nullify any chometz that may still be left.

And that's not yet saying anything about all that needs to be done to prepare for the seder nights – or one seder in Eretz Yisroel – for example having all the symbolic foods ready for the K'oro, the Seder Plate, and on, and on.

But there's a very unique and important aspect to Pesach which singles it out from the other special moments in the Jewish year. All the Mo'adim, all the festivals have their particular mitzvos and ceremonies, but the Seder night is an extraordinary shared immersive learning experience, often several generations participating, which is an annual intake of sparkling oxygen for the national Jewish heart.

But there's the point – the Seder is an interactive learning experience, and as is true for any learning experience, its success very much depends on the thought and preparation that precedes it.

Although we have a text and structure in place in the form of the Haggadah – of which there are hundreds of versions too – every family's Seder will have its own style, its own minhagim, traditions, its own unique character. But in addition to all that, indeed underpinning all that, is the fact that the Seder needs to be led – be it by the father, grandfather, perhaps a son, or the Rabbi at a communal seder.

Now, leading a Seder is akin to teaching a lesson, or delivering a shiur. Yet a Seder takes place on many more dimensions than either the best lesson or most inspirational shiur. We can't possibly expand on the nature of those different dimensions here and now, but what that means is that the person leading the Seder needs to have thought very carefully about how the evening is going to proceed, taking many things into account and really paying attention to detail.

Let's just mention four aspects of the Seder (four is a theme at the Seder – four questions, four cups, four sons) that the person who is going to lead it would do well to think about and plan in advance:

1. The Introduction

Once everyone is finally situated around the table and ready to begin the Seder, what are you going to do? Just make Kiddush and get the ball rolling? What a missed opportunity! No, of course this is not the time for long speeches, but perhaps a short one. It might be an enhanced form of "Welcome everyone to our home and to our Seder," with a thought or two about how you would like things to run. You might wish to say a solemn word about those who are missed and are no longer present, then follow that up with a more upbeat hint to some of the fun things you have planned for the evening. Or you might decide to very briefly clarify the key Halachic aspects of the Seder and then give it some context with a very short few words about "...what we are all doing here," emphasising the importance of Yetzias Mitzraim throughout Judaism. We are shortly going to discuss the importance of planning how the theme of the evening will be maintained during Shulchan Orech, the meal, and this would be a great time to flag up how you intend that to work.

2. Participation

Are you going to read the whole Haggadah by yourself in Hebrew? Or some in translation? Are you going to get others involved in reading parts of the Haggadah? Are you going to check in advance of the Seder whether participants will be happy to be asked to read, in order to avoid any potential embarrassment when the time comes? How are you going to involve the children? Which child or

children will be singing Mah Nishtanah? What other fun things are you going to do to add spice to the evening for children and adults alike? Do you plan to have, for example, toy animals and other props available for some fun when recounting the Ten Plagues – and have you bought these yet? What balance are you going to aim for between contributions from the children, from what they have learnt at school, and from the adults; remember that one of the most important mitzvos of the Seder is for the adults to teach the children, so this is a very important consideration. It *can* be difficult to achieve, especially when, BH, the children come armed with reams of Divrei Torah, but the balance *should* be in favour of the parents teaching the children and not the other way around.

3. The Mitzvos and their Shiurim (sizes and measures)

This is in many respects the most important part of the Seder leader's role.

In order to fulfil the mitzvos of the Seder correctly it is important to be aware of the technical requirements demanded by the Halochah. How much wine do we need to drink for the four cups? May we use grape juice instead of or together with wine? How much matza do I need to eat for 'Motzi Matza,' 'Korech' (eating the matza and maror together – known also as the 'Hillel Sandwich') and 'Tzafun' (the Afikoman)? Which vegetable is best to use for Maror, and how much should be eaten at 'Maror' and at 'Korech'?

The person leading the Seder needs to think about these questions well in advance in order to ensure, firstly, that the right items will be available at the Seder and in the right quantities, and then that during the Seder itself he will be supplying participants with what they need for fulfilling the mitzvos correctly.

The point here is that, in addition to all the things that give a Seder its unique and special feel – the traditional minhagim and family customs, the songs, the toys and the prizes, it is crucially important to remember that there are actual mitzvos to be done and to be done properly. And only advance study and planning will enable the leader of the Seder to lead on these aspects, the Halachic aspects, as well.

4. Shulchan Orech

During the meal it is important not to let the theme of the evening slip away as conversation turns to current affairs, politics, sport, and perhaps even, Chas veShalom, gossip. Moreover, since Hallel begins before the meal and then continues afterwards, it is correct to ensure the praises of Hashem for His miracles and wonders, for the events of Yetzias Mitzraim, continue through the meal, Shulchan Orech, in order that the meal forms a bridge in Hallel rather than a break in it. And this certainly won't happen without specifically planning for it. In fact, it might be worth outlining this aspect of the Seder in your introduction, which is why we included it above when we discussed the introduction.

And so we see that, while every Seder in the world follows the same – yes, Seder, order – as found in the Haggadah, nevertheless, every Seder is different, unique, special, but it's the careful planning and attention to detail that will really make the Seder the most powerful, memorable experience for everyone present.

Thank you, and...

Behatzlochah!

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