

Dear Community,

Over the past centuries, the Jewish people have spread far and wide across the breadth of the planet and across the landscape of theological theory and religious observance. Yet from east to west, right to left, the Pesach Seder still has a place in the vast majority of Jewish homes. Whether we look to the Torah for the meaning, custom, and ritual of the Seder, or we appropriate from the current social and political zeitgeist, the Seder is deeply entrenched in the identity of the Jewish people. Pesach seems to be hardcoded into our national fiber, no matter how stretched and frayed it maybe. What is it about Pesach that allows it to resonate within the Jewish soul to such a degree that it demands attention even from those who would deny the very soul's existence?

At the start of this week's Parsha, G-d prepares Moshe for the final act of the Exodus. Yet in a conversation that should revolve around the current state of matters, G-d tells Moshe "so that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am the LORD." Why does G-d mention the eventual retelling of the Exodus to one's children as one of the primary motivations behind the wonders of the plagues that G-d wrought over Egypt?

The second conversation in the Parsha also seems to revolve around children. After Pharaoh servants get mutinous, Pharaoh seems ready to acquiesce to Moshe's demands, with one caveat "who will go with you?". Moshe responds "our young and our old, our sons and daughters... for it is a festival for G-d", to which Pharaoh takes exception and responds "No! Your menfolk can go and worship the LORD, since that is what you want." Pharaoh's response seems strange, 'since that is what you want'? Moshe explicitly asked for all the Jews to be allowed to leave and Pharaoh doesn't simply refuse, rather he claims to be satisfying Moshe's true desire. What is this conflict between Moshe and Pharaoh?

The Sefas Emes points out that this is the first moment that Moshe refers to the divine service in the desert as a 'festival' until that point it was always a 'service'. The reason for this change is the children. Moshe was explaining to Pharaoh that the children, the future of the Jewish people, are at the forefront of such an event. When the Jews become a people, a divine nation under G-d, it is the children who will bear witness to the next generation of the truth of G-d dominion over creation. And it will be each Pesach that this event is reenacted and the children who have since grown will pass this on to their children, and so on until we witness the final redemption.

Pharaoh asks Moshe “how can children appreciate an act of service? We have all been in synagogues where children are allowed to roam feral?” While this is a paraphrasing of what Pharaoh said, his intention was clear, you wish to serve G-d, what can children grasp of divine service, surely their intellectual faculties are too weak to appreciate what they are seeing.

But Pharaoh missed the one word which made all the difference. Moshe did not describe it as a service, but rather a festival, an emotional, sensory experience, a time of joy and celebration. Moshe rejected that this was an event solely dedicated to the intellect, rather it was an event celebrating the life of faith, a life of Judaism. If we could show our children the beauty and joy in living such a life, the meaning and truth of this faith can be entrenched into their souls for all time, no matter the intellectual tribulations that will arise in adulthood.

Pesach, the festival where for centuries, millennia, Jews have been reliving the Exodus throughout the Seder. Children are placed on a pedestal and the experience, faith, and history of our people celebrated in a way that they can appreciate. Pesach has worked its way so deeply into our souls that no matter our intellectual states, we now all feel a deep connection to this holiday and the importance of the Jewish people.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein