



The Answers are Also Important

Pesach is our “Festival of Questions.” On four separate occasions, the Torah instructs us regarding the questions posed by our children relating to the Exodus from Egypt.

Our tradition considers it a sacred task to inspire children to ask, probe and explore. We take their questions seriously. In the central *Maggid* section of the Seder, we respond by drawing upon the healthy debates of our Sages over many centuries; vibrant arguments that continue to challenge our intellect.

To question is not a rejection. It is seen by our intensely discursive tradition as a way of refining our understanding of the truth. And, if you understand how to ask the right question, you are more than halfway to the answer.

It is not always easy to ask. We sometimes worry that it might make us look weak, ignorant or unsure. In response to such concerns, Pirkei Avot teaches: לֹא הַבִּישׁוֹן לְמִדָּה, “one who is shy will not learn.”

In fact, asking questions is a sign of strength and intelligence. The greatest leaders are those who constantly ask questions because they recognise that they cannot know everything. The confidence to ask simple, penetrating questions can make all the difference to our capacity to grow and develop. The more challenging the question, the more we stand to succeed.

Maieutics is the name given to learning through asking challenging questions. The term comes from the Greek meaning “midwife.” Socrates argued that inquiry is the greatest tool we have to give birth to knowledge.

The bestselling author, Warren Berger, in his book, *A More Beautiful Question*:

The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas, demonstrates that the most creative and successful people tend to be expert questioners. By mastering the art of inquiry, they raise the questions no one else is asking, and find the answers everyone else is seeking.



Significantly, questions also benefit those who are responding. This is beautifully articulated in the Talmud (Ta’anit 7b): “Just as a small piece of wood can ignite a large piece, so too, minor Torah scholars can sharpen great Torah scholars and enable them to advance in their studies. This is what Rabbi Chanina taught: I have learned much from my teachers and even more from my friends, but from my students I have learned more than from all of them.”

But it is not only the questions that are important.

At the commencement of the Seder, we raise the *matzah* and declare: הָא לֶחְמֵי עֲנִיָּה – this is the bread of affliction! This is followed immediately by the questions that our children ask.

Intriguingly, in the Talmud (Pesachim 115b), Shmuel understands the term עֲנִיָּה to mean “answers.” According to

his view, the statement now takes on a very different meaning: this is the bread over which we give answers!

From Shmuel we learn just how important it is to hone the skill of providing suitable answers. To do so, we need to listen respectfully and carefully to the question. We need to take care to understand what exactly it is that is being asked. We need to communicate our answer effectively and involve the questioner in the response. Most importantly of all, we need to let the questioner know we are pleased that he or she has made the enquiry and how delighted we will be to field more questions at any time.

In this spirit, when the great Sage, Hillel, was asked ridiculous questions time and again, his response, always keen to encourage, was “My son, you have asked a great question!” (Shabbat 31a)

Just as much effort should be invested by parents into the answers they will give to their children’s questions, as the effort put in by the children who pose them.

Emerging from this realization, there is a crucially important lesson for educational programming in our communities. Alongside the great Jewish schools that provide a solid foundation in education for our children, we need to provide outstanding educational opportunities, both formal and informal, for the adults in our communities.

In addition to training our children to ask the right questions, we need to be ready to respond with the right answers.

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