

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny

(Portion of Bo)

Most people are not aware of the fact that the success of the Entebbe mission was born of a question.

In July 1976, an Air France airliner was hijacked and eventually taken to the Entebbe airport in Uganda. After separating the Israelis and passengers with Jewish sounding names, the Arab and German terrorists announced they would soon begin murdering hostages unless their demands were met.

A small group of commanders of the elite Israeli commando units, desperate to find a way to save the hostages, were sitting in a briefing room in Tel Aviv as a mission began to form. The plan was to parachute commandoes with fast attack dinghies into Lake Victoria from where they would come ashore and take the airport terminal.

Effie Eitam, who would ultimately command one of the units that participated in the rescue raid that would stun the world, was sitting in the briefing room discussing the options, when an Israeli who had spent some time in Uganda happened to walk in to see if he could help.

Noticing the map with Lake Victoria in the center and hearing a part of the discussion he asked a simple question: "Are you guys thinking about jumping into Lake Victoria?"

When heads nodded affirmatively, he explained that the rumors when he had been in Uganda as part of an agricultural mission years earlier, was that Idi Amin (the infamous dictator of Uganda) would get rid of his enemies by taking them out for a ride on his yacht and throwing them overboard.

He explained: "That lake is swarming with alligators; if you drop commandoes there none of them will ever reach the shore...."

Effie recalls there was a moment of total silence in the room, and then they began exploring other options....

What is the secret of Jewish continuity?

This week's portion of Bo relates the story of how G-d, in a flourish of the last of the plagues, sees the Jewish people ready to leave Egypt: the great Exodus which will be spoken of for millennium has begun.

In the midst of the drama of the Exodus, there is a fascinating emphasis not on what is happening now, but rather how to ensure it will not be forgotten later.

"Ve'higad'ta le'vincha bayom ha'hu..."

"And you shall tell your children on that day..." (Shemot (Exodus) 13:8).

Hidden in all the glory of the Exodus is the imperative that we remember to educate our children never to forget the story not only of *how* the Jewish people were freed, but *why*.

One would thus expect a command to tell the story or educate future generations, which seems to be what we do on the night of the Pesach Seder. Indeed, some of the verses in this week's portion are the basis for the famous passage in the Passover Haggadah, of the four sons.

“And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ tell them ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to G-d, who passed over ... and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians’.”
(Exodus (Shemot) 12:26-27)

“In days to come, when your son asks you ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘with a mighty hand G-d brought us out of Egypt’...” (ibid. 13; 14)

Why does the Torah emphasize the fact that the children need to **ask** us about the story of the Exodus? Why is it not enough for them to simply be told?

Truth is, if you ask most people what the most important component of a good learning experience is, they will often suggest comprehension or understanding; after all, if a student does not understand what he or she is being told, what is the point of the learning exercise right? But Judaism suggests it's really all about the **question**. It's when something bothers you, that you become determined to find the answer; the **question** is the essence of healthy educational experience.

In the Talmud, often questions are asked which cannot be answered, and the sugya (topic) concludes with the word: '**Teiku**' which stands for: *Tishbi* (Elijah) *Ya'aneh* (will come and answer) *Kushyot Ve'she'eilot* (difficulties and questions). And the Talmud seem quite satisfied leaving the question unanswered, because the secret to good education is really in teaching and motivating our children how to ask good questions....

One year, months in advance of Pesach, I finally got up the nerve to ask Rav Amital, our Rosh Yeshiva (head of the entire yeshiva) if I could join his Pesach Seder. He simply said: “Betach”; “Sure!”

So, a few weeks before Pesach I found myself getting more and more nervous as I prepared for the Seder: what if he asked me a question I should know and could not answer? What if I was asked to perform some part of the ritual and was not sure which ruling we accepted?

The night of the Seder there were a few of us students who had been lucky enough to be included at Rav Amital's Seder table. It was a large table and Rav Amital was at one end surrounded by what I soon realized were his grandchildren, then came all of his adult children and family, with us, the students all the way at the other end.

And as we began the Seder, Rav Amital looked at us and reminded us in a loud voice: ‘This Seder is all about the children; the rest of you (and here he included his adult children) are not important tonight; later if and when they all go to sleep we can talk.’ But ‘later’ never came; I watched as Rav Amital masterfully, with trays of nuts and treats arrayed before him, cajoled, bribed and joked with his grandchildren as they went through the Seder which we all joined... as spectators!

It was a powerful educational experience, which informs and guides my own Pesach Seder table to this day.

In fact, when discussing the four questions we are meant to ask at the Seder, based in part on the verses in this week's portion, the Talmud in *Pesachim* asks what a person should do if he is alone on the night of

the Seder? After all, what is the point of asking yourself questions you already have answered? But that is precisely what the Talmud says we should do! Because education begins with a good question.

Indeed, in possibly the first real dialogue a Jew has with G-d, Avraham begins by asking (as a way of challenging) G-d: “*Will the Judge of the entire world not do Justice!?*”

And when Iyov (Job) finally can take no more, G-d responds to his great question ... with four chapters of Questions! ‘*Where were you when I brought forth the calf to be born... and when I caused the sun to rise...?*’

And in the Haggadah, when relating to the only one of the four sons who does not know how to ask questions the passage reads: *Ve’at petach lo*”: “*You must open him*” which may mean: ‘You must find a way to open him up to get him to ask the questions ...’

On one level, freedom was never the goal; Judaism has always believed that freedom is simply a means to an end. Freedom newly gained demands the question: Freedom for what?

And if we ever stop appreciating and understanding that freedom is a responsibility to make a better world, then we will most surely lose it. And children who ask questions, are engaged, they care and are curious and will continue seeking and engaging to find the answers.

Too often, we stifle our children and students’ and even sometimes our own questions. We need not fear the questions, we need only ignite our passion to find the answers often waiting around the corner, which of course, will simply lead... to new questions.

Shabbat Shalom, from Jerusalem

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