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What Can We Learn From Our Children?

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WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM OUR CHILDREN

LISTEN, ADULTS: WHERE'S YOUR CHILDLIKE WONDER?

ABSTRACT

Who is closer to the truth – adults or children? Ostensibly it would seem that a mature adult, whose mind and emotions are fully developed, would be able to access the truth more than an undeveloped child. Indeed, for many years, until just recently, secular psychology saw a child as a “dumb” adult in the making. Religious Puritans even saw children as “born in sin” and as little savages that needed strong measures to keep them in line!

The holiday of Pesach – as illuminated by a few beautiful narratives about the Baal Shem Tov – sees things, shall we say, a bit differently. Actually, quite differently; a perspective which is the exact opposite than the secular view:

A child is the closest possible thing to the truth. The simplicity of the child touches – far more than any adult – the simplicity of the Essence of all existence! Indeed, it is the developed mind of the adult that conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth...

Let us discover the moving way the Baal Shem Tov describes himself as a child... A powerful story – and a beautiful analogy of a pauper and an aristocrat – captures the life-altering words of the Baal Shem Tov to a great scholar who was left confused in his ponderings on the existence G-d.

Above all, we will learn how to tap our single most powerful resource: Your inner child.

Pesach teaches us a revolutionary new way to look at our children, and at our child within. And tremendous lessons we can learn from our children.

1. So That The Children Should Ask...

Two little boys, Berel and Schmerel, ages 8 and 10, are excessively mischievous. They are always getting into trouble and their parents know all about it. If any mischief occurs in their town, the two boys are probably involved. The boys' mother heard that a rabbi in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if he would speak with her boys.

The rabbi agreed, but he asked to see them individually. So the mother sent the 8-year-old Berel first, in the morning, with the older Schmerel to see the rabbi in the afternoon.

The rabbi, a huge man with a massive beard and booming voice, sat Berel down and asked him sternly, “Yingele, do you know where G-d is?”

Berel’s mouth dropped open, but he made no response, sitting there wide-eyed with his mouth hanging open. So the rabbi repeated the question in an even sterner tone, “Where is G-d?”

Again, Berel made no attempt to answer.

The rabbi raised his voice even more and shook his finger in the Berel’s face and bellowed, “Where is G-d?”

Petrified Berel screamed, bolted from the room, ran directly home, dove into his closet, slamming the door behind him. When Schmerel found him in the closet, he asked, “What happened?”

Berel, gasping for breath, replied, “We are in BIG trouble this time. G-d is missing, and they think we did it!”

2. Children vs. Adults

As with all good jokes, a profound truth is conveyed in its humor. Children are literal, simple, and straightforward. Adults are complex – and have complexes – but children are uncomplicated.

When an adult, a rabbi no less, asks the child, “Where is G-d?” the innocent and faithful child takes it literally and believes that the rabbi thinks he stole G-d. When an adult is asked the same question, the adult starts waxing poetic, “What do you mean by G-d? Who said G-d ever was here?”

When he was a child the Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk – the Kotzker Rebbe – was once asked: Where is G-d? His response: Wherever you let Him in.

A second version: I will give you a ruble if you tell me where is G-d. Reply: I will give you two if you tell me where He is not.

Who is closer to the truth – adults or children? Ostensibly it would seem that a mature adult, whose mind and emotions are fully developed, would be able to access the truth more than an undeveloped child. Indeed, for many years, until just recently, secular psychology saw a child as a “dumb” adult in the making. Religious Puritans even saw children as “born in sin” and as little savages that needed strong measures to keep them in line!

The holiday of Pesach (and Torah in general) sees things a little differently – actually quite differently; a perspective which is the exact opposite than the secular view.

The festival of Pesach can be called the festival of the child. This Yom Tov is all about children. Especially the Seder, which is centered on making deliberate changes in order to provoke the children to ask questions.¹

¹ See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim Siman 471-472.

Ki Yoshalcho bincho: “When your child will ask you”.² *Mab Nisbtanob* – “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Indeed, the Haggadah is so named after the verse³ *V’bigadeto l’vincho*: “And you shall tell your child.”

In fact, the mystics and Chassidic masters teach⁴ that upon leaving Egypt all the Jews, including the adults, were in a “childlike” state. They were called *na’ar*: *Ki Na’ar Yisroel v’oibavayhu*. For, when Israel was young, I loved him, and from Egypt I called My child.⁵ G-d redeemed the Jewish people from Egypt due to His deep essential love to them as His children.

What is special about children that Pesach – and Judaism in general – centers around them? What can we learn from children about freedom and faith? And how can our children inspire us to access our inner children, so even as adults we maintain the childlike wonder and innocence of the child?

3. Childlike Qualities

The focus on children on Pesach teaches us that from a Torah point of view – in stark contrast to the secular view – a child is the closest possible thing to truth.

As the mystics explain, the simplicity of the child touches – far more than any adult – the simplicity of the Essence of all existence! Indeed, it is the developed mind of the adult that conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth...⁶

We will understand this with a fascinating, initially perplexing Midrash, and a beautiful story with the Baal Shem Tov.

The Midrash bafflingly refers to Moses as a “child.” As it is written: “A *pesi* believes everything”.⁷ What is the meaning of *pesi*? A child. Because in Arabia, they call a child a *pasia*.⁸

In this context the Baal Shem Tov once told his students:⁹ “After all the profound levels of understanding that

² Exodus 13:14.

³ Exodus 13:8.

⁴ See Siddur im dach Shaar Chag HaMatzos 290c. Maamorei Admur HaEmtzoi Vayikra volume 1 p. 293 321. 331.

⁵ Hosea 11:1.

⁶ See Likkutei Dibburim vol. 3 491c. Keser Shem Tov Hosafos section 155-157. Sichas Shabbos Parshas Shemos 5725.

⁷ Mishlei 14:15.

⁸ Midrash Rabbah, Shemos 3:1. The Midrashic commentaries (Yefei Toar, Maharzav) explain the connection in various ways: 1) G-d appeared to Moshe in the image of his father (Amrom) so as not to startle or frighten the young Moshe, who was a child (*pesi*) at the time. 2) *Pesi* also comes from the word *pitui*, to entice or seduce. G-d enticed the young Moshe by appearing to him as his father. “*Pesi* – a person seduced (*pesi*) – believes everything” he sees and hears. Once Moshe was engaged, G-d said to him “I am not your father, but the G-d of your father,” as the Midrash continues.

⁹ Yesod HaAvodah (by Rabbi Avrohom of Slonim, who writes that he heard this from the mouth of the tzaddik Rabbi Noach Milechvitz) Letter 24.

I attained in the supernal roots of the Torah and the mitzvos, and after all the spiritual pleasure that I experienced, I put everything aside to serve G-d in simple faith. *Ich bin a na'ar un gleib* – I am a child/fool¹⁰ and believe! And¹¹ even though it is written: “A fool believes everything,” it is also written:¹² “G-d protects the fools.”

What does this mean?

4. Freedom Time

Rabbi Shmuel Kaminka related the following story with the Baal Shem Tov: In the city Satinov there was a scholar who once, on a Friday following the prayers, immersed himself in deep contemplation on the existence of G-d. Poring over different philosophical texts from the early philosophers, the scholar could not reach any clarity, to the point that he remained perplexed and confused in his ponderings.

Sensing the scholar’s predicament, the Baal Shem Tov came from Medzibush to see the scholar. The Baal Shem Tov approached him and said (in Yiddish): “*Thr klert tzi es iz doh a G-t. Ich bin a na'ar un gloib* – You are wondering whether there is a G-d. I am a child/fool and believe.”

With these words the Baal Shem Tov left him and returned to Medzibush. The scholar thought to himself: “who revealed to this man [the Baal Shem Tov] this secret of what I was thinking? Clearly this is a proof and a sign that there is a one and only Creator, Who reveals secrets to those that fear Him.”

5. Story: The Aristocrat and the Pauper

We can appreciate this child-like innocence with a beautiful and profound analogy offered to us by the Baal Shem Tov to explain King David’s words in Psalms:¹³ “A prayer of the pauper when he enwraps himself and pours out his words before G-d.”¹⁴

Two people were invited to see the great king with the opportunity to ask for whatever they wish. One, an educated, sophisticated aristocrat. The other, a poor, illiterate pauper. The aristocrat was the first one to arrive

10 Na'ar means both a child and a fool, like *pesi*, which literally means fool but also means child, as the Midrash explains. In this context fool is not used in a derogatory way (as someone who is beneath and lacks intelligence), but as someone who suspends all his faculties to connect through simple faith to the Divine that is beyond intelligence and knowledge. See Tanya ch. 18: “In relation to the Almighty, Who is beyond intelligence and knowledge, and Who can in no way be comprehended by any thought — all men are like fools before Him,” and they can therefore grasp Him only through faith.

11 Rabbi Avrohom of Slonim writes that he heard this addition from the tzaddik “R’ M” (he does not write out the full name, only the acronym). Some say that this is referring to Reb Mordechai, the tzaddik Rabbi Mordechai of Lechovitz. But others feel that is more likely Reb Moshe, referring to Rabbi Mosh’ke of Kabrin, the teacher of Rabbi Avrohom of Slonim (from a footnote in *Sefer Baal Shem Tov*, where this insight is cited).

12 Psalms 116:6.

13 102:1.

14 See, with variations, *Keser Shem Tov* section 97.

for his appointment. As he entered the magnificent palace, he was taken by all the beautiful architecture and furnishings, the exquisite collections of art and literature, the wide variety of exotic fruit, spices and wines from around the world, the sheer majesty of the king's glorious domain. As he made his way from chamber to chamber, he became completely mesmerized by all the surroundings. In fact, because of his excellent education and sophisticated taste, his deep appreciation for all these treasures completely seduced him, to the point that he lost sense of time and... missed his appointment with the king!

Then came the pauper. With no education, no taste, no etiquette, he walked through all the beautiful chambers, oblivious to the magnificence around him, and went straight into the king's inner sanctum. There he asked the king for everything – for wisdom, riches, beauty and the ability to appreciate and acquire the majestic treasures of the king.

Says the Baal Shem Tov: When you stand before the Heavenly King pray like a pauper. Suspend all your faculties, your sophistication, your intelligence and knowledge. And just stand “naked” and innocent before the King, enwrap yourself and pour out your words before G-d. Then you will get all your wishes fulfilled, including all the Divine revelations.

6. The Power of Innocence

The Baal Shem Tov is obviously not advocating illiteracy. He is teaching us an invaluable life lesson.

Each of us has two dimensions to our being – mirroring two dimensions in the Divine experience:

1. Our expression. The way we express and reveal ourselves through our faculties. In Chassidic language this is called “giluim,” literally revelations, defined expressions – which includes all the ways we manifest in this world. These expressions all have distinct parameters and limits.
2. Our essence, which is beyond any form of defined expression and limited parameters.

As human created in the Divine Image, these two dimensions within us is rooted in and evolved from two dimensions of the Divine:

1. Giluim. Divine expressions. How G-d expresses Himself through wisdom, majesty, beauty and all the Divine emanations and attributes in the cosmic order. Though they are all expressions and extensions of the Divine, each has its own definitions and parameters.
2. Atzmus. The Divine Essence, which is beyond any form of expression and definition.

7. Touching the Essence

There are times – and perhaps this defines most of our lives – when we experience and relate to the “revealed” expressions of the Divine. Just as most of the time we engage life through our own defined expressions. This is clearly a very important part of our lives – the way we interact with each other and with G-d in a defined expressive fashion.

But, when you want to connect with the Essence of G-d, with G-d Himself as he stands in His pure and innocent Essence, beyond any form of expression, then you need to suspend your defined “giluim” and stand like a “pauper,” stripped of all sophistication, knowledge and taste, and pour your soul out to G-d the King.

If you allow your aristocratic attainments and your sophisticated appreciations to control you, then you may reach great heights, but you will only be able to access and relate to the Divine revelations. And as such, you will be seduced by the magnificent manifestations at each station of the journey, but you will miss your destination – your appointment with the King Himself, the Divine Essence, as He stands in His own inner sanctum.

The only way to access *Atzmut*, the Essence, is to suspend your faculties and stand like an empty-handed pauper, like an innocent child, and pour your heart out to the King.

8. The Power of the Child

This is what the Baal Shem Tov told his students: “After all the profound levels of understanding that I attained in the supernal roots of the Torah and the mitzvos, and after all the spiritual pleasure that I experienced” – after all the *giluim* – “I put everything aside to serve G-d in simple faith. *Ich bin a na'ar un gleib* – I am a child and believe! And even though it is written: “A fool believes everything,” it is also written: “G-d protects the fools.”

Based on this, let us now revisit the psyche of the child and that of the adult. The innocent child, precisely because his faculties are not yet developed, is the closest we will ever be to the truth – to our own essence and to the Essence of G-d.

The simplicity of the child and his innocent faith touches – far more than any adult – the simplicity of the Essence of all existence! While the developed mind of the adult, may experience great revelations, but at the same time it conceals and blocks the experience of pure truth.

The sophisticated adult can miss his appointment with the King. The child will not.

No matter how old you are, each of us has our inner child intact. Nothing can be healthier than getting – and staying – in touch with your child, with your own innocent essence, and allowing it to inform all your *giluim*, your defined experiences, expressions and faculties.

Learn from the Baal Shem Tov – a scholar far greater than any one of us – how to suspend our intelligence

for something far greater:

I am a child and I believe!

Sometimes, the wisest one of them all is the fool...

9. Conclusion: Nurture Our Children and Inner Children

Pesach is less about adult sophistication, complexity and neurosis and more about innocence, freedom, and wonder.

As the Torah in a number of places associates Pesach with wonders. And as we read in the Haggadah: G-d brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand...with great visions, signs and wonders.¹⁵ And As in the days of your exodus from the land of Egypt, I will show him wonders.¹⁶

Wonder is a childlike quality. And Passover is all about wonder, all about our children and inner childlike qualities that may be concealed but never disappear.

Adults become immune and callous and indifferent to wonder, everything is blasé and rote. For the child, all of life is wondrous, fascinating, miraculous, and therefore the child asks questions.

At the Seder, right before we began reciting the concluding Hallel and blessing of the story, of Maggid, we recited a paragraph:

In every generation a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt, as it is said: You shall tell your child on that day, it is because of this that the L-rd did for me when I left Egypt.¹⁷ The Holy One, blessed be He, redeemed not only our fathers from Egypt, but He redeemed also us with them, as it is said: It was us that He brought out from there, so that He might bring us to give us the land that He swore to our fathers.¹⁸

Tell your child that day that, in addition to his father, or grandfather, going out of Egypt, he himself went out that day!

This applies to your children, certainly; but perhaps we may say that it applies no less to your inner child, to your inner innocence and wonder and faith.

Pesach is a time to reclaim our own inner child – our sense of enchantment and wonder. To reconnect to the feeling – as the Baal Shem Tov said it best: *Ich bin a na'ar un gleib* – I am a child/fool and believe!

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 26:8.

¹⁶ Micha 7:15.

¹⁷ Exodus 13:8.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 7:23.

The best way to do this is to connect and bond with our actual children; they give us a second chance – an opportunity to relive our childhoods, inspired by our own children.

Discover the child in you is one of the most exhilarating things you can do. It is connecting to your essence – beyond your structured life, your *etzem*, beyond your *giluiim*.

Some may call this “foolish.” Just as some may claim that eating only unleavened product or dipping twice, or eating bitter herb, or reclining, is foolish.

For us, the Jewish people, it is simply reminding us of our true selves – of our innocence, our wonder, our inherent, non-complex, uncomplicated, seamless faith.

On Passover we are reminded that we are all children. And that is the least foolish thing alive.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Kosher v'Sameach!