

AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR SON

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

The need for continuous and inspired parent-child dialogue is about as deep a Jewish value as you will find. For millennia, we have used such communication as a means of inculcating within our offspring a deep sense of religious connection and understanding, while also keeping them focused on proper behaviors and values. In fact, the concept dates back to our national inception, and has served as a basic charge in terms of how we recount our exodus from Egyptian bondage. "And you shall tell your child on this day..." (Shemos 13:8)

In the words of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch:

Tell it to your child... We are asked to accompany the practical observance of every religious precept, which our children see us perform and which we seek to teach them to perform in their turn, with a verbal explanation of its substance and significance. Through our words, our children should learn what these practices and observances mean to us so that they, too, may perceive them with their hearts and minds. (Collected Writings, Vol. VII, pp. 360-361)

That obligation, says Rav Hirsch, begins in a child's earliest days, when his world is filled with immense curiosity and the need for answers. To support his point, Rav Hirsch references the clear, visible distinction between children who are fortunate to enter their first classroom having been raised in a home environment that encourages and properly responds to the simple, oft-repeated question of "mah zos" (what is this?), and those who were reared in an environment that thwarted such interest, and relied on the school to provide answers and motivation due to their own limitations (real or imagined) of time, insight or desire.

If there is ever a moment in our lives that clearly underscores the crucial role that parents play in the development of their children, it is the Pesach Seder. At the Seder, we cease to discuss the divine as an abstract concept, somewhat removed from our practical reality. It is there, as we sit together surrounded by the many mitzvos of the evening, that we deeply impress upon the inquiring child that "by strength of hand did G-d take us out of Egypt, from the house of bondage." It was not due to our strength or skills that we achieved our freedom; only through Hashem's direct intervention could we witness salvation.

Moreover, it is at the Seder that we solidify the nexus of thought and action. We do not simply recount what occurred to our forefathers three thousand years ago. Rather, we aim to relive that

experience through the reenactment of their glorious experiences, and draw a personal connection to ourselves and our present realities. "A man is obligated to view himself (at the Seder) as if he himself was leaving Egypt." (Pesachim 116b)

One could express understandable concern about this obligation. After all, is it truly fair and realistic to expect parents to achieve things that even the most seasoned and accomplished educator cannot? This question is strengthened further in contemporary society, with the proliferation of observant parents who were themselves deprived of a foundational Jewish education. How can they be expected to provide so many core values and religious building blocks to their children? Moreover, on what basis can we assume that every father and mother, even the most educated amongst them, are well equipped to make the proper connection with their children?

Naturally, it is expected of each of us to become as learned as possible, not only for our own growth, but also to be able to properly answer our children's questions. But we should also be aware that the Torah sees in each of us the ability to reach out to and connect deeply with all of our children, regardless of which of the four famous categories that they belong to. Again, in the words of Rav Hirsch (pp. 364-365):

But just as every father is expected to perform this educational function for his child, so, too, the Law has made certain that every type of child will be able to benefit from parental instruction. The Word of G-d has made allowance for all children with their infinite variety of intellectual and emotional tendencies. The Law speaks of a child whose desire for knowledge is still altogether dormant; what goes on around him still leaves him indifferent... The Law also speaks of the simple son, whose desire for knowledge has already been awakened... The Law further speaks of the wise son, who already shows signs of that dutiful attitude toward G-d... and of the wicked son, who, even at an early age, demonstrates the contempt for duty.

The Seder provides us with a unique opportunity to connect deeply with our children, each on their own level, and to inspire them to new levels of greatness. Let us hope that we can each make proper use of this special occasion, so that our children will grasp that their own future survival derives from that redemption long ago. "It was because of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt."