

# THE QUESTION/ANSWER DYNAMIC

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

## **Gut Ge-fregt! - The Question/Answer Dynamic**

Hear the word of Hashem, O House of Jacob and all families of the House of Israel. So says Hashem: What wrong did your forefathers find in Me, that they distanced themselves from Me, and pursued futility, becoming empty? Yet they did not say, "Where is Hashem, Who brought us out of Egypt..." The Kohanim did not say, "Where is Hashem?" Those charged with teaching the Torah did not know me! (Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 2:6-8)

The above passage, found in this week's Haftorah reading, is critical of the Jews for not asking, "Where is Hashem?" It is likewise critical of the Kohanim, Israel's teachers, for not asking, "Where is Hashem?" Upon consideration, this critique requires clarification. That Israel is chastised for not asking seems reasonable. The role of a "student" is to ask, not to have the answers. Were they at least to have tried to seek out Hashem, to give voice to the questions that perplexed them, and have sincerely looked for meaning in their lives - then they would be free of blame. What more can Hashem ask but that a Jew seek him out with a serious and earnest desire to come close, as we say each day in our prayers, "Seek Hashem and His might, desire His Presence always! (Divrei Ha-yamim/Chronicles 1:16:11)"

But why is the Prophet critical of the Kohanim, the "teachers," for not asking? The role of a teacher is to provide the answers - to allay the doubts of an anxious student and clarify the subject matter - in this case the word of Hashem. The Kohanim should be telling people where Hashem is, not asking!

In the Haggada shel Pesach we read:

Rabban Gamliel used to say: Whoever doesn't recite the following three things on Pesach has not fulfilled his obligation: Pesach, matzah, and maror... What is the meaning of Pesach?... What is the meaning of matzah?... What is the meaning of maror?

Why does the author of the Haggada not simply explain what Pesach, matzah, and maror are, instead of introducing each one by questioning its meaning? R' Yitzchak Elchanan Waldshein zt"l explains that both the Haggada and the verse in the Haftorah are teaching us a fundamental lesson about education. The Kohanim are not criticised for not lecturing the people about Hashem, Torah, and mitzvos. Indeed, they most likely did lecture and propound. But lecturing is not sufficient. Questions open the mind and cause people to think. Thus, the answer that follows a deeply pondered question stays with the listener longer and engrains itself deeply into his mind and his

heart. It is precisely because Pesach, matzah, and maror are so crucial to the Seder message that they are presented as questions and answers. Similarly, the Kohanim are blamed not for not lecturing, but for not stimulating their students with questions. They taught, but not in a way that made a lasting impression on their students. (Haggada shel Pesach Baranovitch p. 137 - quoted by R' Shlomo Katz in HaMayan, Matos/Masei 5760)

According to this, it seems that when we reach the critical stage of the "three items that must be explained at the Seder," the idea is not simply to recite, "Why do we eat the korban Pesach? Why do we eat matzah? etc." but rather to actually pose the question to our children and families, and allow them a chance to answer themselves, before we proceed to explain the ba'al Haggadah's answer. By doing so, we challenge them intellectually, and after having voiced their opinion and understanding, they are far more likely to actually pay attention to the precise answer the Haggadah gives. It would be interesting next year at the Seder to tell everyone to close up their Haggadahs and go around the table soliciting answers to the questions. If an argument breaks out - all the better! Once you give the command to "open up your Haggadahs," you can be sure their interest level will have been piqued, and everyone will want to know just who succeeded in portraying the most accurate answer.

I was recently learning with my class (grade 8) the laws of netilas yadayim (washing one's hands) in the morning. I was quite astonished to discover that more than half of the class mistakenly thought that one recited the beracha of Asher yatzar twice in the morning, once after using the washroom, and a second time together with Birkas Ha-Torah. I explained to them that in fact you only say it once - either immediately after using the washroom, or together with Birkas Ha-Torah, but not twice (unless, of course, you have used the washroom in between).

Feeling I had come across a major misconception here, I felt I should make other Rebbeim in the Yeshiva aware of the mistake. They acknowledged that it was likely many of their students had the same misunderstanding. "But," one colleague asked, "what should I do to correct it? Even if I tell them the right way of doing it, I doubt they'll pay enough attention to what I'm saying to realize they haven't been doing it right until now!"

Gut ge-fregt (Well asked!). I answered him like this: "Go into your class and ask them: 'You get up in the morning and use the washroom. You wash your hands and make Asher Yatzar. Then you come to Yeshiva, open up your siddur, and begin saying berachos with your class. Should you say Asher Yatzar again?' I guarantee you an argument will break out; some will say yes, others no. Open up a Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) and show them the answer, and you'll have a class full of students who will never forget this halacha!"

Does anyone besides myself find his dvar-Torah at the Shabbos table has a sedating effect on his family and guests? Here's a suggestion: Instead of delivering a sermon (think for a moment of how captive an audience you are when you hear the word 'speech'), try challenging your family and

guests with questions relating to the weekly parsha, the time of year, or even just general Torah trivia. Once you've got everyone's attention, you might try pushing in a few words of your own, a dvar-Torah, etc. Or perhaps you'll find that, when following the question-and-answer strategy, the discussion begins to take on a life of its own.

So critical was the process of question/answer to Chazal, our Sages, that (again referencing the Haggadah) they begin the Seder with the Four Questions. "Even two learned scholars," say Chazal, "and even a person conducting a Seder on his own must still ask the four questions."

At times, questions make a teacher - or anyone who finds himself expected to know the answer - uncomfortable. This can cause us to avoid or shun questions, especially when we're not confident that we have a satisfactory answer. I recently met a young man who, as a young yeshiva bachur, had an inquisitive mind, and often asked questions which made his teachers uncomfortable. He felt their discomfort, and was in turn made to feel wrong for even having asked such questions. Most boys didn't ask - they accepted unquestioningly. He couldn't accept without some level of comprehension - and he couldn't find anyone willing to help him understand the answers to questions that bothered him. Ultimately, he left yeshiva and abandoned a Torah life.

While there are most certainly two sides to every story, and I am by no means casting aspersions on the conduct of his rebbeim etc. (nor do I know who they were), this example still serves as a reminder of how important it is for every adult (especially those in education) to know that questions and inquisitiveness should generally be encouraged. If you don't know the answer, be honest and say, "I really don't know, but that's a great question. Why don't we look into it together!" Perhaps you'll gain something from the process too!

Have a good Shabbos.

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