



The Family Seder - A New Perspective

In the mid-1990s, Dr Marshall Duke of Emory University in Atlanta began a unique research programme into the key factors that hold families together.

At the time there were many existing studies that focused on what divided families and caused them to fall apart. But Duke wanted to find out what families could do to counteract those forces, what steps they could take to stay united.

The results of his study were fascinating. Duke found that the strongest and most resilient families when faced with challenges were the ones that had a strong knowledge of their family history.

Families that had worked on establishing and cementing a family narrative which carried through the generations tended to have much stronger familial ties.

According to the psychologists involved in the study, every family has a unifying narrative which can take one of three forms:

1.) The ascending narrative – we had nothing, but we worked hard, your grandfather went to school, your father to university – now you.....

2.) The descending narrative – we used to have it all in the wonderful old days, but sadly now we have nothing....

But the healthiest narrative is the ‘oscillating family narrative’:

3.) We’ve had ups and downs in our family. We built a business, your grandfather was a pillar of the community....but we also had setbacks. We experienced bankruptcy, you had an uncle who was arrested. But no matter what – we have always stuck together as a family.....

Even more importantly, according to Dr Duke, children with a strong intergenerational identity have more self-confidence than those who lack this identity. They know that they belong to something bigger than themselves.

The decades of research by people like Dr Duke show that successful, happy families tell a positive story about themselves. They refine and retell the story of their family’s positive moments –as well as their ability to bounce back from the difficult times.

Because successful, happy families don’t give up when faced with challenges. They simply add a new chapter to their family story that shows how they managed to overcome that hardship. [1]

With this in mind, if we take a close look at Moses’ first major communication to the Jewish people from God prior to the Exodus, we notice something quite remarkable.

He does not address them as individuals, nor as a single indivisible communal body. But as households, as family units - ‘Each one shall take for themselves a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household’ (Exodus 12:3)

These are the very beginnings of the Pesach Seder – and especially the **family** Seder.

Crucially, lest we mistakenly think that people who are on their own, those who may for whatever reason not be part of a larger family unit are neglected, the very next verse discusses the joining together of two households where necessary. No-one is to be left alone on Pesach – a critical



instruction for our own times as well.

But the thrust of the underlying message here is unmistakeable.

The supreme responsibility of shaping the perspective of future generations about their own Jewish identity (an identity which although clearly having its beginnings much earlier with the Patriarchs, to a large degree began on that first night of freedom in Egypt) does not lie with me, says Moses – or my inheritors, the future Rabbis and communal leaders of the Jewish people.

It lies with **you**, within your own homes and family units, as you conduct the Seder for generations to come.

It is your *sacred responsibility* to inspire the next generation, to retell and relive the story – to help your children, grandchildren and great grandchildren take ownership of it as their own family narrative, *their* own tradition – *their* own family story, which like the strongest and best of family stories – has many ups and downs, but always a continuity.

A story which contains within it the immortal words of '*vehi shemda*' – 'in every generation they arise to destroy us.....'

But in the next breath – '*veHakadosh Baruch Hu matzilainu miyadam*' – but Hashem saves us from their hand. Our very existence, the fact that we are sitting around this table on this night, retelling this very story, is the greatest testament to the eternal survival of the Jewish people – and the greatest proof that it yet has a bright future.

The responsibility rests heavily upon each and every one of us.

As we turn the pages of the Haggadah we begin to realise that unless we seize the moment, unless we utilise to the fullest extent this once-yearly opportunity to inspire our own family, to do what we can to cement their Jewish identity, to create that sense of a strong family narrative – then it will float away along with the fleeting memory of the warm chicken soup for another year.

And who knows whether those who need that inspiration the most, those who deeply require that sense of connection and creation of a shared identity – *will still want to listen come next year*.

Most importantly of all, this is a task that no-one can do for anyone else.

One of the greatest educational lessons of the Seder service – the entire thrust of the 'Four Sons' piece – is that people and especially young people are so different from each other.

But you know your own family.

You know what makes them tick. Perhaps this is the moment to share with them something that inspires you about your heritage, perhaps a story of a family member from the Holocaust, or a memory of dedication to their faith that you recall from your own grandparents and great grandparents.

Crucially, these moments don't have to be earth-shattering.

So many times I have been hugely inspired by the stories people from my community have told me about their own families. Their dedication to Judaism in moments of trial, the acts of selfless kindness they have performed, or the way in which they overcame obstacles in life.

Use those precious moments on Seder night with your own families, use them as a way to connect and inspire those around you at the table, young and old, with the story of Pesach and to cement it as their *own* family narrative, their *own* responsibility as Jews to carry forward into the future.

Because nothing less than the future of our people, Jewish continuity itself, depends upon it.



And it lies not in the hands of any rabbi, nor within the walls of a shul building – but around your own tables, in your own homes. Because from time immemorial, since that very first Seder night in Egypt, this has always been the Jewish way.

Judaism may take inspiration from the synagogue, but it lives and breathes in the home.

We will conclude with one final thought.

There is only one verse in the Torah that provides us with a clue as to why Abraham was chosen to found the Jewish people. Why he of all people living in Ancient Mesopotamia was spoken to by G-d and commanded '*lech lecha*', 'go for yourself' – go on a unique and very different journey to the rest of mankind.

Only one verse that provides something of a clue, a mere hint as to what it was about he and his wife Sarah's personalities that made them unique.

Just after they are given a promise of continuity, that they would at long last have a son, God says:

'For I have chosen him [Abraham] because he commands his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just' (Genesis 18:19).

In these short few lines lies the secret to Jewish continuity.

Abraham and Sarah were chosen – not because they were righteous, or great leaders, or people who showed exemplary kindness to others – although they clearly were all these things.

But because they would teach their children to follow in their footsteps.

Because they would sit around the Seder table in their own home – in a figurative sense – no matter the obstacles, no matter the challenges, no matter how far their children had drifted (remember that Abraham did not only have an Isaac – he also had the immense challenge of a Ishmael) – and do whatever they could to inspire them about their Jewish heritage, 'to keep the way of God by doing what is right and just'.

That is the central task of a Jew, and it is my fervent prayer and hope that these thoughts will inspire you to utilise the precious moments of your own Sedarim to bind your families to the preciousness of their own Jewish family story.

[1] Source: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-u...> [1]

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