

Three Steps to Seder Success

Rabbi Levi Lebovits March 31, 2020

Step 1: What's the Seder All About?

If you were thinking about the Coronavirus while you opened this article, you're in good company. At the risk of stating the obvious, the pandemic is the first thought on all of our minds. The second thought is probably something like: why? What does Hashem want from us?

It's impossible to answer that with certainty. But one thing we *can* say is that it's no coincidence this "plague" entered our lives in the month before Pesach (Passover). Pesach, and specifically the Seder, are mainstays of every Jew. They are opportunities to draw strength and direction for the entire year. So let's put the current situation to good use – motivating us to utilize the Seder to its fullest.

But how to do that? Preparing effectively for Seder night can be overwhelming. The Seder is an incredibly powerful time – our once-a-year opportunity to strengthen the foundation of our family's emunah. It's a daunting task – and a puzzling one. We flip through our Haggadahs, looking for a clue, but that just leaves us with more questions.

Want answers? Keep reading. Join us as we tune into the true message of the Haggadah. We'll clarify our goals for Seder night and how we can use the Haggadah to achieve them – and to change our lives.

Where do we start? A helpful first step might be to pinpoint what it is that we're trying to accomplish. Defining our goal will help us move our Seder in the right direction.

The very first of the Ten Commandments tells us: "I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Egypt." Yetzias Mitzrayim (the Exodus from Egypt) is the cornerstone of every Jew's emunah. The goal of the Seder, our annual recounting of the Exodus, is to deepen our emunah.

What is "emunah?" People like to translate it loosely as "faith" or "belief" – a woefully one-dimensional definition for an extremely multi-faceted concept. Emunah, in essence, means understanding that Hashem has a plan for our lives. He's assigned each of us a unique purpose, and He custom-designs every aspect of our lives to help us succeed in our missions.

Emunah means living life through that perspective. If we can develop an unwavering belief in Hashem's plan, we'll change the way we look at life. We'll change the way we act and the choices we make. That's the goal of the Seder – to turn us into different people than we were when we started.

That might sound like a lofty goal, but our path to achieving it couldn't be more down-to-earth. We're not being asked to cram our heads with novel information. We're not expected to chase after dazzling new insights. Our only task on Seder night is to tell a story – the story of G-d's plan for us. The story of Yetzias Mitzrayim.

Stories are incredibly powerful. Told well, a story draws us into a different world. We get absorbed, we identify with it – and suddenly we're living it. The story becomes **our** story, the background for our life.

We all live life through the lens of our 'stories' – whatever they might be. Building emunah means letting Hashem's story become the story of our lives. So let's think 'emunah' and let's think 'story' – and the pieces of the night will begin to fall into place.

Step 2: What's the Story All About?

We've mapped out our goal for Seder night – to develop a new dimension of emunah by retelling and reliving the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim (the Exodus). So we open our Haggadahs to brush up on our knowledge of the story – and suddenly we're confused. Why are we finding references to our forefather Avraham... to our evil cousin Lavan... and to the building of the Holy Temple, even further away on the timeline? If the mitzvah du jour is to retell the story of the Exodus, why does the Haggadah feel the need to pack in almost 1000 years of Jewish history alongside it?

We'll answer this question, in classic Jewish style, with another question.

In the first of the Ten Commandments, Hashem officially "introduces" Himself to His people and instructs us to believe in Him. How does He choose to present Himself? Not with the seemingly obvious title of the Hashem who created the world. Instead, He tells us, "I am Hashem, your G-d, who took you out of the land of Egypt."

Why does Hashem wish us to base our faith on the Exodus? Isn't Creation a bit more basic?

Believing in a Creator of the world is indeed a crucial first step – but it remains a first step. Emunah is so much more than a cerebral understanding. It is the guiding force that enables us to live our lives according to Hashem's will, no matter what challenges we face.

How do we access that force? By doing a bit of review about a concept called *hashgacha pratit*.

As we mentioned earlier, Hashem places each and every one of us on this earth for a purpose. We've all been assigned a crucial mission that only we can fulfill. Yes, Hashem expects that much of us – but He also promises to stay with us every step of the way. He customizes every single moment of our lives to set us up for success in our mission. Every breath we take, every toe we stub, every joke we enjoy – He's orchestrating all of it. That is *hashgacha pratit* – Hashem's unflinching personal involvement in our lives.

Ideally, we're supposed to make *hashgacha pratit* the lens through which we view life. We're supposed to recognize every challenge, every difficulty, as a growth opportunity designed just for us by our loving Father. Instead of allowing our human nature to dictate our reactions, we would ask ourselves: "Hashem sent this to me. Why? What is He asking of me? How can I grow closer to Him through this challenge?"

Knowledge alone can't create that level of loyalty and connection. For that, we need to access the power of *relationship*. So we turn to the Haggadah, our Sages' chronicle of the Exodus. Why? Because our Sages understood that the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim is so much larger than the tale of a bunch of slaves going free. It's the story of the establishment of our relationship with Hashem.

To get a proper feel for the story of that relationship, we need to travel through a timespan of close to a thousand years – back to the time of our forefather Avraham, and forward to the era of the Holy Temple.

Once again, we open our Haggadahs. We start with the section that illustrates the first step Hashem took in building His relationship with us – drawing our forefather Avraham close to Him. We then read about how He protected and nourished Avraham’s family, miraculously granting children first to him and then to his son Yitzchak. Hashem protected the next generation, Yaakov’s family, from annihilation at the hands of the evil Lavan. When the Egyptians sought to crush Yaakov’s descendants, Hashem heeded their prayers and sent ten fearsome plagues to subdue the Egyptians. He then entered the scene in His full glory to rescue His beloved people from Pharaoh, personally striking down the firstborns of Egypt and sweeping His nation out of bondage with unprecedented miracles.

Once we were redeemed, He gifted us with the Torah, granting us the key to fulfilling our purpose in this world. He lovingly cared for us on our journey through the Wilderness, providing us a supernatural existence through the manna. That journey led us to His supernatural land of Eretz Yisrael, another gift to His People. It was there that He built for us the Bais Hamikdash (Holy Temple) where we could cleanse ourselves of our sins, helping us restore our relationship with Him on a constant basis. (See the *Dayeinu* section of the Haggadah.)

The picture that emerges from the Haggadah helps us view ourselves as *His*. He formed us. He nurtured our growth. He tied us to Him with a bond of eternal love and primed us to be the nation that embodies His mission in this world.

This is what makes the story of the Yetzias Mitzrayim the perfect basis for our faith. Witnessing Hashem’s steadfast commitment to us over hundreds of years enables us to become people who filter their lives through emunah and *hashgacha pratis*.

This is the essence of the Haggadah’s story. This is the message to let into our hearts on Seder night.

This year, let’s keep our focus where it’s meant to be. Let’s avoid getting stuck on the details of each paragraph and instead allow the greater picture of the Haggadah to open our eyes. We’ll see with more clarity than ever that we’re here for a purpose – and that Hashem has gifted us with everything we need to succeed in fulfilling that purpose. All we have to do is tune into the loving relationship He stands ready and yearning to build with us.

Step 3: Ma Nishtana - What Difference Does it Make?

We’ve now been able to touch the true scope of the Seder’s story. If we can let Yetzias Mitzrayim become the foundation of our lives, we’ll be on our way to greatness. Emunah will slip into place as the filter through which we experience life. With this knowledge in mind, we’re set for success.

So why is that little voice of doubt still niggling at us?

Perhaps because... we've tried this already. Each Seder night, we retell the story with all the zeal we can muster – and we haven't yet found ourselves suddenly bursting with renewed zest for Judaism. Why does it seem each year that we come right back to where we started?

The problem is that every year we come to the Seder with “baggage” – we feel like we've already heard whatever the Haggadah has to tell us. If it hasn't worked magic on us yet, who's to say it will this year?

That's another facet of what's holding us back – we're waiting for inspiration to somehow strike us. Of course we'd love to be uplifted by something at the Seder, but we're not in action mode. So the Seder becomes just another routine obligation to check off. We focus our attention on our children, on our guests, on everyone but ourselves.

This attitude doesn't make for a very productive Seder. If we truly want to tap into the magic of the night, we need to rethink our approach.

A good place to start might be Chazal's instruction to tell the story of Yetzias Mitzrayim in a question-and-answer format. To see this idea in action, we need look no further than the famous Four Questions - the “Ma Nishtana.”

We're used to viewing the Ma Nishtana as the “kids' zone” of the Seder – the little ones' opportunity to have fun and show off how cute they are. But the Ma Nishtana is just as important for the adults at the table. It's actually our ticket to a truly transformative Seder experience.

Picture that innocent five year old reciting the Ma Nishtana. His eyes are wide and sparkling. There's real wonder in his voice as he asks, “What *is* so different about tonight?”

On Seder night, it's our job to step into that role. It's our job to develop a “Ma Nishtana mindset” – to come to the Seder table with real interest, curious about each aspect and how it can change our lives. We aren't only asking what's different about the Seder night, but *what difference does this night make?*

This “Ma Nishtana mindset” can be applied to any passage in the Haggadah. Take, for example, the section describing the Four Sons. By customizing the Seder's message to suit each son's style, the Haggadah teaches us a crucial lesson about the nature of the Torah. Some might see the Torah as a book of ideals that only the holiest, most righteous among us can possibly reach. The opposite is true; the Torah has a personalized message for every single Jew. It speaks to each of us on our own level, taking into account our personalities, our upbringings, our life circumstances, our experiences, our level of commitment – everything that makes us who we are.

Viewing that idea through the prism of our “Ma Nishtana mindset,” we find ourselves wondering: Where in my life can I hear the Torah speaking to me? Where am I being asked to stretch myself for the Torah's ideals? Is it in a relationship? In a family or community matter? A health issue? A financial concern?

With the Ma Nishtana mindset, every aspect of the Seder becomes acutely relevant to us.

Another example: Reading the passage “V'hi She'amda” calls to mind Rav Yaakov Emden's reflections about the improbability of the Jewish Nation's survival. A tiny people constantly targeted by history's greatest powers, we owe our survival completely to Hashem's miraculous protection.

Our Ma Nishtana mindset turns our thoughts inwards: what would our lives look like if we realized how incredibly unique we are as a people – and as individuals? If we understood that our existence is a miracle, that life isn't our right, but a precious gift from Hashem?

Paragraph by paragraph, idea by idea, it's this mindset that's our true key to unlocking the magic of the Seder.

This year, let's forget our past experiences and wipe the slate clean. Let's imagine that we're attending our very first Seder, that we're reading the Haggadah for the first time. And with every idea that we encounter, let's turn the message inward – and allow the Seder to touch the deepest parts of us.

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