



Authenticity: A (*Pesach*) Model for Better Teaching

Four times in the Torah we are commanded to relay our miraculous story of the Exodus. In the Haggadah the number four is a “magical” number. It materializes in the four cups of wine, the four expressions of redemption, the four questions, and **the four children**...

Who are these four children?

On a broad spectrum, we understand that they represent **different children with distinct attitudes**. They correspond to **diverse students with dissimilar learning styles**, like the ones competing for attention in our heterogeneous and multi-personality classrooms, whether here in Pardes or in any classroom in the world!

But zooming in on one individual, the ‘four children’ can also symbolize the evolving **developmental phases of any one child**, since all four times the Torah charges us: **“Tell your child...”** and not “Tell your children.”* If this is the case, then this fourfold charge lays out an educational guide, tracing the developmental stages of every person – from earliest childhood – “who doesn’t know how to ask” – to high school and beyond – where all grown children, ourselves included, would be considered “wise.”

What do these phases look like?

Let’s consider the matter of *matzah* at each phase:

1. **אינו יודע לשאול** – Hand a toddler a piece of matzah at the seder. They will bite it, poke it, crumble it, and scatter it all over the table and floor. They won’t have questions about it. They may not end up eating it, but they will definitely experience it.
2. **תם** – Years later, this young child is excited to be eating matzah. Why? Literally, it is because we were saved from Egypt and didn’t have time for our bread to rise and also because everyone around them at the seder is doing it. It’s that simple.
3. **רשע** – During their rebellious or cynical phase, the child says, “Who are you kidding? I’m not going to eat this whole matzah with nothing on it! They were slaves in Egypt, but I’m a free person. What does this have to do with me? Pass the charoset...”
4. **חכם** – Gaining maturity and perspective, the same child now asks for details. “How do I eat the matzah at the Seder in order to fulfill the mitzvah?”

It seems that these ‘four children’ are a fitting paradigm for the ascending and evolving stages of human development. But are they? When education is measured by points and grades, perhaps the answer is yes. When, however, we as educators address our students (and ourselves!) in all our human wholeness – **maybe not**.

Conventionally we think about developmental stages as something we grow out of, but perhaps as we move through each stage – like the oral stage of an infant, for example – we actually **retain** what we have learned in that stage and move on to **‘collect’** the experience of the next stage, and the next, **adding each one** to our human repertoire.

What do we do, then, when we reach the top of the ladder? Having attained the status of the ‘wise child,’ **we must next begin our “descent,”** as it were, revisiting our own “inner voice” of the wise, the cynical, the simple and the speechless, until we sense that our education is not only ‘stuck in our head,’ but rather flows through our hearts and is acquired through our senses as well.



This, in my mind, is the path to becoming a more authentic person and more authentic teacher. As teachers we are probably all aware that **authenticity inspires**. We know this from the lives of those who have inspired us. **The only way we can transmit this to our students is to model it ourselves.**

Most any topic can be adapted to this model, but we'll continue the theme of **matzah**:

4. **חכּם – Accepting our responsibility as transmitter of a tradition**, we as teachers must ask ourselves: Are we pursuing wisdom, in order to objectively 'lay out the complexities'? Or are we doing it to 'claim answers,' and in either case to be perceived by our students as clever? Or do we seek knowledge in order to become more committed to it? With this latter attitude, we can learn and teach the *Halachot* of how the matzah is to be eaten on Seder night with the **passion of one who wants to help preserve this knowledge forever.**

3. **רשע – Recognizing the value of the cynic within ourselves**, we cannot rely on what eating matzah meant to us last year! Our inner cynic won't let us get away with that. If we can admit to the spiritual emptiness we feel when we consider eating matzah once again, **we will be compelled to rediscover – before the Seder – if and how eating matzah is relevant to us this year.**

2. **תּם – Affirming the historicity of our unbroken tradition**, are we able to accept – without sinking into a quagmire of narratives and complexities – that we really were saved from the miserable experiences of bondage by the very G-d who created the world? Can we accept that this pitiful bread of affliction became for us, in one brilliant night, the bread of our long awaited redemption? What are we really doing here on this Seder night, in the company of our loved ones, and in the company of our entire nation worldwide? We are **bearing witness** for the 3,600th time to the source of our very existence – by holding our very own piece of matzah.

1. **אינו יודע לשאול – Can we become 100% alive in the moment, like a child**, for whom no words or questions surpass the need to kinesthetically experience the matzah? Closing our eyes for a moment as we chew, can we become fully present to experience, with our senses, the presence of G-d in this miraculous instant?

This is my vision of seeking authenticity as a teacher: **First I have to seek authenticity as a person** by listening to these four coexisting voices within myself. Then I can attempt to model this for my students and teach with more genuine passion in my desire for lasting effectiveness.

This is my daily struggle and challenge in a reality where, as a teacher and a person, a mother and a wife, a community member and a friend – there are simply never enough hours in my day! I welcome your thoughts and advice. ~TLN (tovahleah@pardes.org.il)

Questions for Educational and Pedagogic Reflection:

1. *Who is one of the most “authentic” people you know? In what way have they inspired you?*

2. *Choose a topic you are teaching. Could the following questions help you to more deeply engage with your topic before presenting it to your students?*

- *What does your ‘wise inner child’ want to know about it?*
- *How does your ‘healthy cynic’ challenge you to find meaning in it?*
- *In what way does your ‘simple child within’ feel connected to it historically or socially?*
- *How can you experience it kinesthetically in some way, with one or more of your senses?*



3. Think of a particular student who is challenging for you. Has wanting to stimulate this student ever forced you to address one of the four 'inner voices' within yourself? **Each student who challenges us in the classroom becomes our teacher, if we let them.** The more we are challenged by their needs, the more we must seek to satisfy our own needs. Raise some examples from your experience.

[This concept of the descending rungs on a ladder, as related to the Four Children, is inspired by *The Holistic Haggadah: How Will You Be Different This Passover Night*, by Michael Kagan.]

*Shemot 12:26; 13:8; 13:14; Devarim 6:20



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